

LENT 2010

Ash Wednesday, 17 February 2010

To all Members of the Vincentian Family

*My grace is sufficient for you;
my power is made perfect in weakness.*

The Lenten Season has once again come upon us and in order to help us as a Vincentian Family to enter deeply into this time of grace, I propose to you the following reflection.

Shortly after the publication of my Advent letter, in which one of the main topics was peace as a significant aspect of Christian life, I had a fruitful dialog with a friend of mine from my Central American experience as a missionary. This friend is very committed to the poor, and considers herself to be a Catholic Christian. One of her distinguishing characteristics is that she is in favor of revolution, including armed revolution, especially in and for developing countries that are struggling to progress in this world today. Our discussion obviously centered on the question of peace and non-violence. My position is totally opposed to armed revolution and more open to, as I consider it, an evangelical approach to non-violent revolution that Jesus Christ proposed in and through the different examples that He gives us for the transformation of society, not through force but through love.

My friend sent me an article that she had come across on non-violence. Even though perhaps she was not fully in agreement with its content, it made her think about the value that non-violence has in the world today. For me, it showed a very deep reflection and basis on non-violence from our Christian tradition from the very life example of Jesus Christ Himself.

The author of the very brief reflection on non-violence begins by noting that we are part of a culture that has historically justified the use of violence. As history has developed, progressed and become so sophisticated even with its use of modern technological means of producing arms, it has constructed a cultural paradigm that, in one sense, we can say, has put the human race and the whole life of the planet on the border of extinction. But at the same time, parallel to this cultural proposal that we have lived for centuries, new ways of acting are emerging that begin by dismantling the justification of the

methods of violence, of all types of violence. They propose that in the diversity of expressions of human life, life in itself can be enriched rather than destroyed. In other words, it is possible to build a world in which people of different backgrounds and cultural expressions can learn to live together and therefore create harmony based on diversity rather than diversity being the justification for violence and therefore destruction.

Among the different creative ways of resisting violence in our world today, the author puts forth fragility as an essential. At the same time he proposes the strength of horizontal dimensions in the organization of society as a solution, rather than hierarchical structures. In other words, the basis of solutions is achieved in a circular fashion, a sort of “around the table” type of discussion where all those who are at the table, including the poor and the marginalized, are given the opportunity to express themselves as equals in the discussions.

The article further shows that the image of the enemy has to be deconstructed by recognizing that those who have a contrary opinion also may be able to contribute in a significant way to the construction of the truth. In other words, all those who sit at the table, even if their opinion is different one from the other, have a part of the truth and can contribute to the construction of the whole of the truth. We as Christians, see the truth being constructed in the values that are contained in the richness of the life of Jesus Christ. It goes without saying that war in itself, in these days, is an illegitimate way of achieving harmony in the human society.

Furthermore, humanity, throughout its history, has dominated the planet to the point that now the planet is beginning to show its wear and tear. Harmony with nature is an alternative to the need to harness and dominate nature.

If we neglect to care for our planet, there is greater likelihood that the poor will suffer the most. Care for the planet is one of the signs of the times that we as people of the 21st century ought to respond to as a Vincentian Family. To quote Pope Benedict XVI, “Today the great gift of God’s creation is exposed to serious dangers and life-styles which can degrade it. Environmental pollution is making particularly unsustainable the lives of the poor of the world. We must pledge ourselves to the care of creation and to share its resources in solidarity.” (Angelus for 27 August 2006 at Castle Gandolfo prior to the celebration of the Day for the Protection of Creation)

Care for creation also is an issue of systemic change. There is an enormous system that is prevalent throughout the world that focuses far too much on efficiency and economic good without sufficiently considering the impact of our choices on the planet, particularly on

the poor. It would be good for us as a Vincentian Family to involve ourselves with other organizations seeking to change this destructive system by getting to the root causes of it.

These presuppositions are put forth as different elements involved in the transformation and cultural reconstruction of our world. A key element in making that possible is non-violence. It involves an unconditional protection of life in all its forms, protection that is promoted through concrete actions. These actions move us towards a greater attempt to understand one another and our relationships as human beings in the political, social and economic fields. The basic understanding is that as human beings, we share with others this planet which God has graciously provided for us.

For some, non-violence is considered to be utopian, unrealistic. As Christians and as followers of Jesus Christ evangelizing and serving the poor, we know that such is not the case, and in many places around the globe non-violence succeeds.

My brothers and sisters, the reflection on non-violence is very much a part of our tradition as Catholic Christians and very much at the heart of what Lent means to us. We focus on the need to change our attitudes in order to live more deeply the life that has been given us in the person of Jesus Christ and through his passion, his death and his resurrection. At the very heart of that gift of new life is fragility.

Let us reflect this Lenten season on the fragility of Jesus Christ and on our own fragility to see it not as a limitation but rather as a means of building a new life for ourselves and others and the world in which we live. Jesus' fragility is most concretely expressed as he gives up his spirit after the experience of his own passion prior to and on the cross itself. St. Paul's letter to the Philippians expresses the deep theological reflection in the Christological hymn which says that Jesus emptied himself becoming nothing in order to make of us something through the fullness of life in the resurrection. Prior to this complete gift of himself on the cross, Jesus shows how fragility has its place in the transformation of society. The night before his death, Jesus showed us the way to be, the way to act. He washed the feet of his disciples, an act that would only be carried out in his time by slaves. He became the servant of the servants.

Saint Vincent, in his writings to both the confreres and the Daughters of Charity called us to be unworthy servants, seeking lowly places. This reflection of Saint Vincent de Paul is simply yet eloquently reflected in the article written by Father Jean Pierre Renouard as the 5th theme reflected on as part of our on-going formation during our 350th anniversary year. In Father Renouard's

article, "Who was Jesus for Vincent," he quotes Saint Vincent de Paul, and I include part of that quote here:

"What touched me the most is what has been told about Our Lord, who was the natural Master of everyone, and yet made himself the least of all, the disgrace and abjection of men, always taking the last place wherever he went. Perhaps, my dear confreres, you think that a man is truly humble and has really abased himself when he has taken the last place. Does a man humble himself when he takes the place of our Lord? Yes, brothers, the place of our Lord is the last place" (SV XI, 124).

Is there any more humble place to be taken at this time in history than to be at the service of the poor in Haiti? The Haitians are said to be an incredible people whose power to resist suffering has been proven time and time again throughout the history of their country, considered to be the poorest of the poor in the western hemisphere. Today, after the most destructive earthquake that they have seen in more than 200 years, they are in an even lower place. I have been edified by the response of the entire Vincentian Family to this immediate crisis and tragedy of Haiti. It has been written in different reflections relating what has happened in Haiti, that the world has taken the opportunity of this tragedy that we could never consider less than the most horrible and horrendous experience of the loss of human life, and has transformed it into a masterpiece, a work of all humanity, a work of our world today, prompted by the love of God that has been poured out in all our hearts. The response on the part of the world to this tragedy, as to many other tragedies that are made known throughout the world, is certainly uplifting and shows that as a world we do have possibilities. As people of this world, we can work together, putting aside our differences in order that the most fragile among us might be cared for, and love may be shown and given to them. In the spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, we are called to put ourselves below them and at their service.

Such a presence to our brothers and sisters who live in poverty in places such as Haiti, can be seen as a symbolic representation of the resurrected Lord Jesus. In the midst of the ashes of death He rises up and gives new life. Such experiences are witnessed in many places throughout the world where the Vincentian Family is present. Places that otherwise would have no hope, find hope in the followers of Jesus Christ, evangelizing and serving the poor. In situations like Haiti, where much of what people would consider their security has

disappeared, it is the presence of caring people giving of their lives to others that remains a sign of the resurrection, a sign of hope and life.

My brothers and sisters, I bring this reflection to a conclusion, but not to a close, for I hope it will open further personal reflection as well as reflection and discussion among yourselves. At the heart of our Christian faith is the reality of fragility in which new life came to be. We, as followers of Jesus Christ and faithful to his call, recognize our fragility and that of others, and we promote new life whether through non-violent means or through the care of our planet. Through our fragility we respond to the fragile state of the world and of all creation.

Our God, the God of Jesus Christ, is a God of Life and a God of Love. God pours out that love continually in and through the gift of his resurrection which we celebrate at the culmination of the Lenten Season. Let us never forget that the resurrection is who we are. We are a resurrection people, and Alleluia is our song. So let us sing, and let us do so as a family, together with our brothers and sisters who are poor.

Your brother in Saint Vincent

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "G. Gregory Gay, C.M." The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally on the page.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General