

6. The Vincentian Family

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE POOR

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Introduction

Almost six years ago when Father General offered me to work with him for the Vincentian Family, I hesitated for several reasons. Primarily I did not consider myself sufficiently experienced in these matters. Others I thought would be more credible because they had better knowledge, deeper spirituality and extensive exposure, particularly those from countries where the VF has been active, organized and widely accepted. Despite these misgivings, in faith I agreed to help him in the service of the VF worldwide. Five and a half years later, I feel that what I have offered was far less than what I have received. The lessons I learned and the inspiration they gave me are much more than the little service I rendered. As the end of my mandate approaches, I wish to share with you some of these lessons, realizations and inspiration. I also wish, with your permission, to pose some challenges for the Congregation in light of these lessons. To Father General and his previous Council I remain ever grateful for this privilege of a life-time to work for the poor through the family we call Vincentian.

Global Appeal of the Vincentian charism

One thing I discovered these past six years is the fact that the Vincentian charism has global appeal. This is not some original discovery, you may say, but these past years have shown me that it is one thing to read about more than 260 groups claiming membership in the Vincentian Family, it is altogether another to come face to face with some of them. Allow me to illustrate this point with two stories from concrete experience. Some years back, I was visiting a group of Sisters in South Korea. As I was ushered to their vestibule, one Sister said very plainly, "these are our founders," pointing to the pictures of

St. Vincent and St. Louise. I smiled, somewhat amused because as far as I knew these Sisters were neither Daughters of Charity nor Ladies or women members of the Confraternities of Charity, least of all Vincentian priests or brothers — these are the only groups I know that St. Vincent himself founded. But, nonetheless, God bless them! God bless their founding Sisters from Paderborn, Germany who, when they started this mission in Korea, gave them not only the pictures of those who inspired their congregation, but also their spirit, their commitment to the service of the poor. These are the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul of Suwon, South Korea, proud members of the Strasbourg Federation of the Sisters of Charity.

In 2005 when I visited Ethiopia, a Daughter of Charity requested me to give an inspirational talk to members of her staff who assist her in building bridges and houses for poor communities in Addis Ababa. The first question they asked me — “are we members of the Vincentian Family?” I asked them, why not? “We are Orthodox, Muslims, non-Catholics?” I followed up by asking them, “what do you think of St. Vincent? Does he inspire you to work for the poor?” They answered, “St. Vincent is very special to us, he is our model, he is the best.” With that kind of an answer, I could only respond, “and who am I to say you are not members of the Vincentian Family?”

There are other stories but these two sufficiently point to the extensive appeal of St. Vincent de Paul and his charism of service of the poor, an attraction that crosses national and religious boundaries. Many of these groups consider being Vincentian not simply as a badge of honor or another club membership, but more importantly as a serious summons to act concretely here and now on behalf of and with the millions who continue to live in extreme poverty.

I came away from these visits and contacts wishing to take this inspiration to the international level. Thankfully, we have started to do that. To the annual meeting of the VF International Superiors and Presidents we have invited groups other than those we are familiar with, like:

- Sisters of Charity Federations: Strasbourg, North America
- Sisters of Charity of Jean-Antide Thouret
- De Paul International
- Brothers of Our Lady Mother of Mercy (CMM)
- Sisters of Our Lady Mother of Mercy (SCMM), and the
- Brothers of Charity (FC)

From them I personally have learned that belonging to the Vincentian Family is not so much a matter of historical origin or close links with the original foundations — these are important, mind you — but most especially one of living the charism in the service of the poor as fully, creatively, and unreservedly as possible. From them I learned how even a small team can effect a change in the lives of prisoners in Kenya, how even an aging congregation can pass on the charism to the younger members in countries other than the country of their origin, and how one can have the courage to work for the poorest of the poor in places like Sudan, even without the assurance of security from religious persecution. All these have inspired me and have imparted a deeper appreciation of my sense of belonging to the worldwide Vincentian Family.

Call to Collaboration, Partnership and Networking

The second lesson I learned is connected with the first. It is about collaboration, partnership and networking. Many in the Vincentian Family consider collaboration and partnership as an essential component in Vincentian pastoral methodology. Many want to serve the poor, but they want to do so with others, as a team, in a Family.

The present generation appreciates the importance of partnership and networking, after all it is immersed in it.¹ For many young people, networking is the good news that they are able to connect with, because it resonates with their dreams and their aspirations for themselves as well as for the poor. This was what I heard in 2008 in Sydney when the young people of our Vincentian Family gathered to share their dreams for the undeveloped and the forgotten. This was the same message I heard last May from the young people in the Ukraine, some of whom were African students in Kharkiv recently introduced to the Vincentian charism by our enterprising young confreres there. This was the same enthusiasm and resolve I saw just last month at the National Vincentian Young Adults Convention held at De Paul University, Chicago, some of whom, interestingly enough, find no difficulty in proclaiming themselves Vincentian even though they are Jewish, Muslim, or non-practicing Catholic.

This past decade the Vincentian Family has attempted a number of collaborative projects on the international level, like the Globalization of Charity — Fight Against Hunger in 2001, the more modest

¹ “Networks (are) where the coming generations live and love.” ROGER COHEN, “A World of Hope,” in the *International Herald Tribune* (Global Edition of New York Times), July 6, 2010, p. 7.

Fight Against Malaria in 2003, and this year, on the occasion of the 350th anniversaries, the Haiti Micro-Finance Project. The success of this last or the lack of it lies still in the future. But the first two projects have met with mixed results. If for nothing else, the lack of tangible and long-lasting positive effects of these projects point to the inherent difficulty of collaboration on the world-wide level. To ask some 200 groups to adopt a common project remains a formidable task, no matter the high level of enthusiasm for collaboration. But in other areas, the Vincentian Family has been somewhat successful — the area of common formation in the charism, and the area of communication. Still there is much that needs to be done in these fields, but for now we can rest assured that, at the very least, we are going in the right direction.

Young people in the Family are well aware of the difficulties in the area of collaboration. They who have taught me the value of networking have no illusions about what can be realistically achieved on this matter. They understand that there will be snags, some will attempt to prioritize their preferred projects, there will be misunderstanding, tensions, etc. But they think these are not insurmountable obstacles. Confidently they say, if one avenue is closed, look for another. If one network is clogged, find one that is free and more accessible. This is what they have taught me — never to give up, never to think that we have reached a point of no return. It is one lesson we need to learn, those of us who have become so used to our ways, our traditional methods, and the boundaries of our countries and provinces.

For effective collaboration and partnership, certain structures need to be established. On this matter, I wish to acknowledge the example of Latin America. They have formed not only a national coordinating Councils for the Vincentian Family, they also have one on the continental level. Inspired by their efforts and their experience, we are now in the process of forming similar Coordinating Councils, for Africa-Madagascar, Asia-Oceania, and hopefully for US-Canada and Europe. These Councils will not solve all problems relative to collaboration and partnership, but at least we have a framework to use in order to address these problems and move our common agenda together as a Family.

One final thing about partnership. People of this generation are not shy about seeking collaboration with whoever is interested. Partnership with other groups outside of our Vincentian Family is something that has been done in the past and is something worth exploring further. After all, St. Vincent was a pioneer in this and had shown us how helpful it could be. If it will promote a systemic change in the condition of the poor people, why not!

Vincentian Spirituality: Buried Treasure, Pearl of Great Price

A third lesson I learned from the Vincentian Family has to do with what we term “Vincentian spirituality.” Like some people I used to think that there was nothing particularly distinctive about Vincent’s way when compared to the more famous and dominant Benedictine, Augustinian, Carmelite, Franciscan, and Ignatian spiritualities. But these past years have made me appreciate the scriptural moorings, the depth and breadth of Vincentian spirituality. Grounded on the concrete experience of and with the poor, our spirituality, although deceptively simple, goes right to the very heart of the Incarnation of one who chose to be poor, who throughout his life consistently opted for the poor, and who in his death as a poor person revealed to us the transformative power of poverty.

I have heard many lay people speak about how working for the poor has transformed them, has made them better human beings and more caring for those whom the Lord call “blessed in the kingdom of God.” We all heard St. Vincent say that the poor showed him the way to the mission God had intended for him. Time and again Vincent showed us that direct and concrete contact with the poor has a way of solving some seemingly intractable problems, whether those of the Ladies of the court during his time, or even those of confreres with problems. We heard him say “let the poor evangelize us” or “the poor are our lords and masters.”

Members of the Vincentian Family made me realize that when we allow the poor to come into our lives, we begin to understand the real meaning of what it means to be human and to be so loved by the Divine. When faced with extreme need, we dig deep down into what is noblest, most precious about being human — that ability to care, to sacrifice, to give of oneself so others may live, that original dignity of human beings who are capable of unrestricted self-gift for the other — that part of ourselves that goes beyond the narcissism, the materialism and consumerism with which human beings are characterized nowadays. And to think, it is the poor that gives us the opportunity to see the best part of ourselves! With St. Vincent, we of the Christian faith call this “seeing the poor with the eyes of Christ” — our Christ experience. I venture to say that the Muslims, the Buddhists, and those of other faiths, who count themselves as Family members because Vincent’s charism inspires them, can and do connect also with this spirituality because it touches the most human, the noblest and the best quality in them. This sense of fulfillment, I dare say, is what ultimately keeps those initially drawn by the philanthropy to come back again and again to lend their hand

in the service of God's poor. It is this sense of well-being, and the prospect of sharing it with many like-minded souls, that urges members of the Vincentian Family not only to remain faithful and creative, but to seek collaboration and partnership. We will do well to share this at times buried treasure, this pearl of great price.

The C.M.'s Role in the Vincentian Family: Some Challenges

Finally, allow me the next few minutes to address an important concern for all of us who belong to the Congregation of the Mission. Father General in his initial report, and you yourselves — members of this General Assembly, have reflected on the many challenges facing our Congregation in light of increasing poverty, aging population and diminishing numbers in some areas, as well as growth, development and promise in newer territories. I speak now about the challenges that we in the C.M. face in relation to the rest of the Vincentian Family, or more succinctly, about the role I perceive the CM can play in the Vincentian Family.

Our invited speakers from some branches of the VF have already spoken on this matter. Here I will add my two cents worth of ideas. I sincerely believe that in generations to come, the C.M. will have an important role in the VF in two areas: leadership and formation.

But before speaking about these two areas, let me be clear about one thing. The perspective we take in regard to the VF is of paramount importance. I see two possible perspectives. One is when the CM views the Family as an assistant in extending help to the poor, much like the view we take in relation to other groups or associations that partner with us. This perspective implies that the CM is at the center. The other perspective is when we see the Vincentian charism of service of the poor as the center, the focus of all the collaborative efforts of the different branches of the Vincentian Family. While it is to be expected that a CM General Assembly puts the Congregation and its needs at the center, and equally understandable that other branches of the VF do not necessarily do so, placing the service of the poor as that to which all of us as Vincentians are being summoned to effective and concrete action may make us perceive better the future relations we will have with each other. The perspective we in the CM take has implications on what we can do concerning leadership or animation and on formation in the Vincentian charism.

Leadership and Animation

Relative to the first, you well know about the esteem, respect and honor that members of the VF give to our Superior General. He is the reference point in matters of projects, activities, and all things “Vincentian.” As one often asked to chair the meeting of VF International Leaders, he is in a privileged position to determine the agenda of these meetings. Also, we know that the CM Visitors in many countries hold a similar distinctive place in the VF coordinating groups on the national level, and even the CM local superior is likewise treated with equal dignity.

But it is good for us to know that there are also a number of exemplary leaders in the different branches of the Vincentian Family who may be just as outstanding, if not more so, as our own leaders — outstanding in their commitment to the poor, in their expertise on matters relating to poverty and administration, in their life-witness, in their evangelical spirit, etc. These leaders have one thing in common — a passion for the poor. From my limited lens, future leaders in the Vincentian Family will be judged and recognized not principally by historical pedigree and connection but by the spirit, the passion, the life-testimony, and yes, the expertise in the service of the poor.

Formation

The other area where the CM could play a significant role is in the formation of our Family members. This was the constant clamor I heard — help us deepen our spirituality, assist us in being rooted in Vincent’s ways, show us the way to fruitful and effective partnership, encourage us to remain faithful to the charism, etc. Many VF lay leaders of whom I earlier spoke, leaders who distinguish themselves by combining total dedication to the poor and their daily responsibilities of being father, mother, breadwinner, teacher, banker, businesswomen, etc., are one in saying that the Vincentian Family needs the Fathers and Brothers of the Mission, as well as the Daughters of Charity, more than ever, precisely for the matter of formation in Vincent’s spirit. God bless them! They have faith in us, they trust that we in the CM can help them in these things.

And truth to tell, their confidence is not ill-placed. Our history throughout has demonstrated the Congregation’s capacity to form leaders — whether among the clergy or within the ranks of lay people. I have always thought it a Congregational principle that if and when we are not able to do direct work for the poor, we can always help form those persons who will do direct service of the poor

on our behalf. Nowadays, there are millions who are eager to dirty their hands, to soil their feet, in order to extend a helping hand to the oppressed, the migrants, and those imprisoned by drugs, disease, ignorance and wars. But there are not enough men and women who will “waste their time” to make sure that those who do all that service for the poor do so from the noblest of motivations, from the promptings of the Spirit that moves mountains and hearts, from the authentic depth of one’s charism and giftedness. The work of formation transcends aging and the restrictions of space and time. It is a ministry that an 80 year old somewhere in Nijmegen, Toulouse, St. Louis or the Solomons, as well as a young confrere in Karnataka, Kenya, Curitiba and Cracow can perform. But, only if they have the one pre-requisite — that the passion with which they entered the Internal Seminary remains inflamed by the contemplative spirit of missionaries, and the humility to learn from their experience with the poor.

Members of the CM will be leaders and formators in the Vincentian Family when these requisite dispositions are present and remain alive. A tall order, certainly, but one that we do well to heed! And, if for one reason or another, we cannot live up to these expectations, we could at least be gracious and humble enough to pass the torch on to more capable and more worthy hands.

Conclusion

Nelson Mandela once said “there is no shortcut to the country of our dreams.”² Whatever dreams we may have for the Vincentian Family need to be rooted in the lessons we learn as we welcome one another into Vincent’s family, as we inspire each other in his spirit, and as we seek to work together and to be partners for and with the poor. As I close, allow me to tell another story, this time from the time of St. Vincent.

During the war years of 1640s in Lorraine and ten years later in Picardy, Champagne, and even here in Paris, Vincent mobilized the response to such a situation in an organized and creative way, covering all aspects of the devastation and involving a whole range of the “army of charity” — from a publicity campaign, ‘charity warehouse,’ soup kitchen, education of poor village girls and even country priests, to tools for various trades, farming implements and grain for sowing, etc. In all this Vincent was not alone. As J.M. Roman puts it:

² Quoted in Cohen’s article cited above.

“Not just Vincent de Paul but all the religious orders as well, the civil and ecclesiastical bodies, the religious associations, the merchant and craftsmen’s guilds, as well as private individuals, all collaborated in the work of relieving the catastrophe. The Company of the Blessed Sacrament and the Jansenists played an important part in this work. The archbishop took over-all command of the movement, but Vincent, because of his experience and his many resources, played a very important part in it, together with his priests, the ladies and the Daughters of Charity. There was bound to be friction and jealousy among such a wide variety of workers, some of whom were deeply divided on religious grounds. There was a misunderstanding between the ladies of Charity and the religious of Port Royal over a donation sent by the queen of Poland. Vincent was quick to clear up the matter. What interested him was that the poor should be helped, not who did the work.”³

What was important for Vincent was not who did the work, but that the poor were served. Certainly, a formidable challenge to us, members of the Vincentian Family!

³ J.M. ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, pp. 584-585.