

MIND, SWEAT, SOUL: IN WHICH ORDER?

EDUARDO MARQUES ALMEIDA

Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Dear friends from the Vincentian Family, particularly, from the Congregation of the Mission,

I have been invited to represent the SVdP in this panel. As a matter of introduction, I have been a member of the Society for 40 years and was introduced to a Conference by my father.

I have started in Brazil, and met my wife within the Society, when she and I were youth coordinators. After 20 years of marriage and 13 moves to different cities and countries (Paris, Boston, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Washington-DC, Port-au-Prince in Haiti, Santo Domingo), we have been able to experience the Society in many instances and cultures. However, we have always been impressed by the miracle of similarity: how can a Society be present in 140 countries, for almost 180 years and keep the same spirit: a member of the Society can be recognized at the first words; a Conference is similar everywhere. As in Ozanam's time, the Conference is a sort of sacred place, where you can be what you are, share your vocation, serve genuinely and be very comfortable to expose the Lord, who resides in each one of its members.

I think this miracle is what makes the Society unique: the conference becomes for us the temple of comfort, where you do not need to show that you are clever, or that you are successful in all instances. On the contrary, the only thing you have to share is your will to serve, trusting Providence to give you the necessary competence, as well as all other means.

Andrea and I have been trying for the last 20 years to make our family, our home, a place like this. In the last four years, we have lived in four different countries and have lost all our belongings in the Haiti earthquake. You can imagine what this can represent in the minds of a 19 year old boy and a 16 year old girl. The lessons we learned were the same we have learned in the conference: our home is not what we have bought or the walls we have built, but the Lord we carry in our hearts and the temple of the Holy Spirit we can form not only within ourselves, but among ourselves as a family, in search of the holiness.

I would very much like that the Society and the Vincentian Family as a whole would be such a sacred place and environment and that we could attract more and more leaders, with the same vocation as the ones of the first conference. People who are convinced that in their families, in their professions, in their social life, no matter what the measures of success are, no matter what the difficulties are, they always respond with Grace and not with Human Nature (Imitation of Christ).

I wanted to focus my last 7 minutes of this talk on this specific issue: how can we, as a Vincentian Family, generate the means to recruit and form leaders, who can transform their neighborhood (and, ultimately, the world), through the Vincentian virtues.

Let me say a few words on my experience in Haiti. Living the last three years in Haiti, and, more particularly, the last five months, has been an enormous source of learning and inspiration for me. A couple of months ago, in a TV program, I was asked if I don't feel frustrated and disappointed with the fact that the disaster recovery is so slow in Haiti. I said no, I have no time for that. However, in a more restricted, and, as I mentioned before, more sacred forum, I must say yes, my learning experience starts with frustration and disappointment. Three years ago, my family and I were living in Bethesda, Maryland (a paradise), and I was invited to work in Haiti. My son was the first to say that we should go ahead and accept: "if we are to work for the poor, this should be the right place to live," he said. So, this collective decision was made to enhance our Vincentian vocation by a personal service to the poor. Now, when such a disaster occurs, even being the head of the most respected and impactful development institution in Haiti, I cannot solve the whole problem. I cannot rapidly feed the 1 million homeless population, or build the 250,000 homes needed to shelter them before the hurricane season starts. This feeling led me to reflect on two fundamental questions:

First, **what has been really effective to accomplish some important results on disaster relief, over the last five months in Haiti?** This question should come together with another more particular one: **what difference can we, men and women, with the Vincentian vocation make in such situations?**

The second question is, **what replenishes our spiritual, mental and physical forces, when disappointment and frustration come every day, every hour, every minute?** I am sure this is a common feeling with anyone who works in public service. I am sure this is the same feeling Vincent de Paul had, when he became a pastor in the poor countryside of France, or when he was a slave in Africa.

My reading of what has made a difference in Haiti, over the last three months is **leadership**. Leadership of genuine public servants, private entrepreneurs and members of the civil society, who have left their comfort zone to make a difference.

I am not talking about the people, who went to Haiti to be on TV. The essence of the leadership I am referring to is the one that is free from the TVs, the need to show-off, to grow in careers, to accomplish political success, to get better salaries through hardship payment.

This leadership is moved by faith. I do not want to teach the teachers here, but ethnologically, faith comes from *fidem* (from Latin), or the thing or person we can trust. In other words, it is something or a person I can believe. Evidently, my faith is my truth. So, we can accept that faith and truth are the same: faith, at the end, is the truth that I believe.

The Gospel, as well as tradition shows us that the truth gives us freedom, so, the faith is the truth that makes me free. In fact, analyzing the last five months, impact came from leaders, who were in Haiti for their faith, free from the slavery of the need for power, for glory and for money: the ordinary doctors, nurses, food distribution volunteers.

This leads to the reflection about our own value added as Vincentians. I am convinced that our difference is not related to **WHAT** we do (sometimes, others can do what we do, more effectively). Our difference is related to **HOW** we do (how we can transform the others' hearts and how we can transform our own hearts). This last point is very important, because, as mentioned earlier, the SVdP has been created to generate holy people, to primarily convert people, and, secondarily, to do it through service to the poor.

Now, the issue which should worry us as educators, policy makers and social entrepreneurs is how to enhance the sense that true leadership should be based on faith and freedom. In other words, **how to generate an army of these leaders, who are prepared to change the world, with a vision which is larger than themselves and a genuine vocation to serve and to transform**. I firmly believe that this century will be the time for social change makers, as the first half of the last century was the time for technology scientists and the second half was the time of the economists.

I think the answer to this question leads us to the link between history and faith.

History derives from *hístōr*, or the **one who knows or the one who sees**. These two aspects of history are equally important. In fact, history is "the record of past events and times." But the same

ethnological source presents history as “acts, ideas, or events that can shape the course of the future.”

Taking the **past perspective** of History and, with a little bit of exaggeration, my history makes me a slave: “Each person is a hostage of his or her own history” (a quote from Pope John Paul II). If all we learn is a result of the history, our history is our truth, or our history derives our faith. No discussion about it, I think. The consequence, I think is more important than the concept: how difficult it is to transform ourselves, to convert, to make us free! Not an simple task!

Now, taking the **future perspective** of the History definition, or, the “acts, ideas, or events that can shape the course of the future,” we can infer that my past history, or my faith allows me to build my own future history, as well as the future history of the ones we should impact. I think this is why Ozanam continuously taught us to fix our eyes in the future, and not waste time with the past!

Putting all this in Catholic terms, the only truth or faith that can make me build my own, as well as others’ history is my “**self**,” or the Lord, who is present in me. This is, indeed, what, in the midst of disappointment and frustration, makes me wake up every day and restart again and again. This is what makes us react to the devil with grace, instead of human nature. This feeling for me, comes with a special relief of freedom and joy, I should mention.

I firmly believe that this is what we, members of the Vincentian Family, should focus on today. To generate mechanisms to identify, recruit and enhance leaders and entrepreneurs, who are freely moved by the truth that exists in each one’s self, and change the History with innovation and persistence, no matter where they are at the moment: either in an extreme situation such as the Haiti earthquake, or, in the ordinary professional and family environment.

Father Maloney has presented to you the ZAFEN project. This project is all about identifying business and social entrepreneurs in Haiti, and about connecting them with individual and institutional supporters all over the world. We are confident that the partnership between local entrepreneurs and global promoters will put an important stone into the reconstruction of Haiti, generating job opportunities and social infrastructure improvement. This is a good example of innovation, transformation, and service to the poor.

Now, what would be the concrete and practical result of this discussion? I would like to propose that, starting over the year of the 350th anniversary of the death of Vincent and Louise, we join forces to create a common and benchmarking program to recruit and form transformational leaders within the Vincentian Family: people who can dream and realize a different way of doing development, through

the faith that they will transform minds and hearts, sweat into jobs, desperation into self-steam, personal interest into love.

The **Center for Vincentian and Transformational Leadership** should be a think tank, but speak the language of the assisted families; should attract the intellectuals (such as Ozanam), but attract train and touch the simplest; should form future Presidents of companies, but also their most humble server.

I think we have lost a little bit the miracle of the first Conference, in the higher levels of decision at our Society (not speaking about the other branches of the Vincentian Family). How difficult it is to attract intellectuals, change leaders and business leaders to take higher level responsibilities in our Society! Unfortunately, we do not have time to get into the details of how the **Center for Vincentian and Transformational Leadership** should be, but, ultimately, like the first Conference, it should be a sacred place, where either these people, or the very simple members could work together to dream of a future without poverty, to design frameworks to make this happen, to serve and to motivate others for holiness.

I am convinced that the SVdP is more and more opened to work with the Vincentian Family at all levels. We just need to identify concrete common and sustainable programs and the leaders to make them happen.

Thank you!