

## AN ACCOUNT FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF VMY

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International President VMY

Dear members of the XLI General Assembly.

It is somewhat difficult to address you as you conclude the XLI General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission. During these days of the Assembly you have had the opportunity to reflect in depth on the present situation of the Congregation, to pray and discern the new calls of the poor and to make decisions that will help you carry out the Mission with creative fidelity. What more can we add? In light of this challenge I propose something very simple: I want to speak with you from the perspective of my own experience as a young adult, a lay woman, a Vincentian, an international representative who has had the great privilege of sharing with confreres on different levels of concern. Today I want to share with the members of this Assembly some of my experiences of the Congregation, but I want to address each Vincentian Missionary so that you will understand my concerns and my hopes, and with these, the concerns and hopes of thousands of young people.

I will speak with you about three specific things: the task of the Congregation with regard to youth ministry; your mission with the Vincentian Family and the VMY; your vocation as Missionaries, followers of Saint Vincent de Paul.

### **1. The Congregation of the Mission and youth ministry**

You will forgive me I am a young person and I cannot avoid speaking from my youthful heart. If after 350 years the Mission continues, it is because others who came before you and now you, yourselves, have been able to communicate the beauty of the Vincentian charism to others, the majority of whom are young. Through your life and your ministry you tell us that it is worthwhile consuming one's life on behalf of the poor, evangelizing them and building with them the Kingdom of God. I invite each one of you to return to your first encounter with this Family and with Saint Vincent and to recall those persons who created a favorable atmosphere that enabled you to fall in love with this mission; remember those individuals who over the course of many years

formed you and led you to this affirmative stance in the Congregation. Today, many young people await from you the same presence, the same witness, the same invitation to discover Christ as the center of their life, to recognize Christ's presence in the faces of the most poor and to embrace the cause of the Kingdom with all their soul and body. I am very grateful because in my path I encountered the Vincentians (Priests, Brothers, Sisters and lay men and women) who broadened the horizon of my life to this ideal which today gives meaning to my life.

What is the Congregation of the Mission doing with and for young people? My service as International President of the VMY has allowed me to know up close your work with so many young people on different continents. It is a difficult work that requires perseverance and continual renewal, but it is also a very necessary work. Through youth ministry you are enabling thousands of young people to proclaim the gospel and to commit themselves to the poor as they follow in the footsteps of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise.

You will forgive me but I believe even more can be done. Today I have not come here to just tell you about the good things you do but also to create in you new dreams so that Christ might be better loved and served by these young woman and men.

Thinking about the multiple activities that you are engaged in on behalf of young people, I realize that few people are aware of the scope of this activity. Do not worry, I am not going to propose some mega publicity campaign about the activities of the Congregation with young people. No, I am simply saying that the Congregation itself, the confreres involved in youth ministry, could create channels or make use of existing structures to share their experience of youth ministry and reflect on their positive experience and the teachings of their failures. From this perspective they could then reflect on what the Congregation is doing with and for young people, they could discover original paths and new methods that respond to the present challenges of youth ministry (not the challenges of some past era). This is the experience we had in Venezuela in 2007 when the International VMY, the Latin American team of the VMY and CLAPVI organized the First Latin American Encounter of Vincentian Youth Ministry. Hopefully this was the first of many similar experiences in different parts of the world and on an international level. In summary I would invite the Congregation to evaluate its action on behalf of youth and with the infinite creativity that is so proper to the Vincentians, to adapt styles suited for young people of the twenty-first century that will allow them to communicate to other young people this heritage which is our responsibility.

## **2. The mission of the Congregation of the Mission with the Vincentian Family and the Vincentian Marian Youth**

In the second place I want to speak to you about your mission with the Vincentian Family in general and then more specifically with regard to the Vincentian Marian Youth. I begin by placing before you a commitment undertaken by the VMY and expressed in the Final Document of the Second General Assembly celebrated in this very city in 2005: *We will suggest that in the initial formation programs of the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian Missionaries, the knowledge about the Association and the roles that they will have in it shall be deepened* (Final Document 2.3.5). I would add that this knowledge should include practical and theoretical knowledge. Today it is very difficult for a member of the Congregation not to know the Vincentian Family, its principal components and specific information about each branch. What tremendous strides have been made since the initiation of this dream of the Vincentian Family! Nevertheless, it is sad to point out that some confreres have not taken up this dream and at times see this new reality as a disturbance in their missionary life and ministry.

We can affirm that today there is a greater awareness within the Vincentian Family, so what is the next step? A greater and better collaboration in formation and in service to the less favored in society. This is where the Congregation is called to play a pivotal role: in the spiritual and Vincentian formation of lay leaders who assume the role of co-responsibility in the Church and in society. I dare to say that this responsibility cannot be viewed as one more option among many others, a task that we assume according to circumstances. At this time of the celebration of the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of our Founders it is necessary to return to our origins in order to discover that the first work of Saint Vincent was the Ladies of Charity (a group of lay women that is known today as the AIC). From the beginning Saint Louise collaborated in the formation of these women. In remembering this reality I extend to you a twofold invitation: first, be concerned about the integral formation of the members of the Vincentian Family, a formation that includes knowledge based on the concrete experience of service toward the marginalized, knowledge that enables the members of the Vincentian Family to respond effectively to the new forms of poverty and that stirs up in the heart of everyone this indispensable creativity that is so necessary in the complex world of poverty. Second, this integral formation should be done in close collaboration with the Daughters of Charity, following the example of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. Concretely, what specific formation, proper to the Congregation,

can be opened to lay Vincentians and thus become part of the process for the formation of lay leaders? Can we dream of specific service projects of the Vincentian Family that will involve all the branches on an equal level? Can we hope that each member of the Congregation, in whatever place, will take seriously the role of accompanying the Vincentian Family? Are we willing to learn from one another, to form one another and be formed by one another?

More specifically, I want to mention here the role of the advisors in the VMY, what we receive from the Congregation and what we hope for. I believe in Providence and I hope you do also. I see that God, in his Providence, saw to it that from the beginning the VMY (at that time, the Daughters of Mary), would be guided by the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian Missionaries. Mary said to Saint Catherine: *I want an association of young people*, and Father Aladel was asked to be the director of this Association. The wisdom of a Mother! Thus I summarize the 1830 request of the Virgin Mary: an association of young people accompanied by the sons and daughters of Saint Vincent. In the practical order, I am embarrassed at times when I see that in some places the VMY is a pastoral ministry of the Daughters or the Missionaries, but not both. I have the joy of knowing that when this ministry is undertaken with the collaboration of the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian Missionaries, beside giving witness to the reality of unity, there is also better listening, better formation of the young people, service with the poor that is filled with meaning, adequate accompaniment in the process of faith formation that leads to the discovery of the young person's vocation-mission and a life plan. As President, but above all as a young woman who has been a member of VMY for fifteen years, I feel an urgent need to offer good advisors to the VMY because we are the present and the future of the Church and the Vincentian Family, the present and the future of society, potential agents of systemic change that the poor, our lords and masters, yearn for. This is not a financial burden or a loss of time; it is not a waste of one's energies. It is an investment in the future; it is to plant with the hope that fruit will be produced, fruit that is not always produced when and how we hope but rather when and how Providence desires, when one ministers with young people, what one does is never lost.

### **3. Let us live who we are**

These words are the motto that in 2009 the International Council of the VMY proposed to the Association on an international level and it seems to me to be appropriate for this last part of my presentation, perhaps the most complicated part because it is a call to make expli-

cit who you are and I know that this is risky because it is possible that all the Vincentian periti who are present here could gang up on me, pointing out one or another aspect that I have not mentioned. I will be careful and do not pretend to know better than you what you should be. I will speak about basic things, all of which we need in order to continue to live the mission with creative fidelity.

*Fidelity and creativity in prayer: Give me a man of prayer, and he will be able to do anything* (CCD, XI: 76). These simple words of Saint Vincent will always inspire me. I am convinced that an intense life of true prayer, the daily encounter with the gospel and reflection on life before God are the ways to remain faithful to evangelization and service to the poor. The people whom you serve as priests and Missionaries need you to be men of prayer, profoundly in love with Jesus Christ, capable of seeing and explaining everything with the eyes of faith. One of you said: *I cannot begin the day without my personal encounter with Jesus in the morning*. Hopefully this thirst for the encounter with God will be a reality for everyone because then I am sure that this Little Company will live their vocation with conviction and will know how to remain faithful to the Gospel and attentive to the acute cries of the poor.

*Faithful and creative in community life*. If the encounter with God is essential to live the Mission, it is also important to be able to rely on a community that accompanies and supports. I believe that unity is the best reflection of the image of God and I want to see the communities of the Congregation of the Mission be a reflection of the Trinity places where individuals love one another as dear brothers. I believe that it is especially necessary to support the vocation of each confrere, value their qualities and pastoral initiatives. Above all I believe that it is urgent to become aware of the task and the mission that ought to be accomplished in common; the Vincentian charism is not for lone-rangers and in our society that is so individualistic, this becomes more difficult to accomplish.

*Faithful and creative in the mission*. Always honor your name, Missionaries. Allow me to remind you about the beginnings of this Little Company. Everything began with one question: what should be done? And everything began with an initiative: a popular mission. Thus the Congregation of the Mission was born. And today? I want the urgency of integral evangelization of the poor to continue to be your concern and the popular mission to continue to be your priority even though it must be adapted to the present reality. May the missions *ad gentes* be the natural desire of every member of the Congregation! May no Vincentian missionary feel satisfied with what they have done or what they are doing but rather may they be

willing to leave behind their usual pastoral ministry in order to respond with originality and effectiveness to the needs of the most poor. May the Congregation, as a whole, go to those places where no one else is willing to go, to those places where the poorest of the poor are found.

#### **4. By way of conclusion**

When the Superior General asked me to participate in this forum, he wanted me to speak from the perspective of a young lay woman (because the vision of one person can enlighten the life of another) and from the perspective of my experience (Vincentians are not good theorists). I have done what he asked, but I do not want to go without speaking some words of gratitude on behalf of many other young people whose lives, like mine, have been touched by God as members of this Vincentian Family. Despite the shadows that might have created anxiety during this Assembly, the mission continues. We, Vincentian lay men and lay women, continue to rely on you, as our older brothers, to walk together toward this new world where the last will be first and where we will truly be in the midst of the poor as people whom we serve and who allow themselves to be served by the poor.

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