

Reflection 11

THE WAYS THE CHARISM OF SAINT VINCENT AND SAINT LOUISE IS LIVED IN THE VARIOUS BRANCHES OF THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Introduction

A charism is alive and relevant when through time it is accepted and adopted by many people. In the 350 years since the death of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac, the “Vincentian charism” has proven to be this kind of charism as it inspired numerous followers through these years. To this day it continues to be embraced, adopted and lived by numerous groups, associations, institutes and movements. Its vitality and relevance to our times is shown in various ways: in the profound consciousness of being a Family sharing a charism; in the projects and programs that address the multiple needs of today’s poor; in the pastoral approach that emphasizes solidarity, collaboration and partnership; and in the continued reflection on its distinctive spiritual moorings.

A Family Sharing a Charism

Living a charism starts with a deep consciousness and appreciation of its meaning and importance. Urged on by Vatican II’s call on religious groups to return to their original charism and mission, the followers of St. Vincent and St. Louise were among those congregations and associations that responded with enthusiasm to the re-examination and updating of their distinctive charism’s expressions. In the process and along the way, they came to realize that they were not alone in carrying on the Vincentian charism. Now, an entire spiritual Family is rediscovering the links that connect and bring them together in the evangelization and service of the poor.

Where before the 1980’s we spoke of a double family of St. Vincent, referring to the two original and direct foundations of the Congregation of the Mission (CM) and the Company of the Daughters of Charity (DC), nowadays we speak about a Vincentian Family that consists of more than 260 groups, institutes and movements sharing in the charism of Vincent and Louise. Aside from

the two mentioned above, among the more international groups in this Family are two lay groups: the Confraternities of Charities – Ladies of Charity, in fact Vincent’s first foundation (1617) and now known as the International Association of Charities (AIC); and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SSVP), the most numerous branch in the Family. Other international groups in the Family today include the many congregations of Sisters of Charity (notably those in the two Federations — in Strasbourg and North America — and that of St. Jean-Antide Thouret), the Brothers of Charity, Brothers and Sisters of Mercy, Vincentian Marian Youth (VMY), Association of the Miraculous Medal (AMM), Religious of St. Vincent (RSV), Vincentian Lay Missionaries (MISEVI), etc.

These varied groups are either directly founded by St. Vincent and St. Louise, or founded subsequently by some members of the CM or DC, or follow the Rules of the Priests of the Mission or of the Daughters, or simply hold the two saints as patron saints. What unites and brings them together is the one mission of loving and serving those persons living in various forms of poverty and marginalization. The Vincentian Family today count among its members lay people and consecrated/ordained persons, men and women, young and elderly, rich and poor, Catholics and even non-Catholics. They feel called to act together in overcoming extreme poverty, malnutrition, poor health, illiteracy, migration, gender inequality, injustice, oppression, etc. While its more than one million members, a large majority of whom are lay volunteers, may not be able to eliminate all forms of poverty, they nevertheless represent a formidable and genuine force that could make a difference in the lives of the poor.

Charities and Missions Today: Programs that Empower the Poor

The Vincentian charism, moreover, is being lived out today in the many concrete projects and programs in direct service of the poor. Since the 1600’s, the twin pillars of Vincent’s and Louise’s interventions on behalf of the poor — missions or evangelization and works of charity (for the poor, elderly, children, handicapped, etc.) — have remained the principal commitments of various branches of the Vincentian Family. Thus, the CM Fathers and Brothers continue to conduct popular missions, work in seminaries and houses of formation for future priests, while the Daughters of Charity, Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Mercy, among others, are engaged in clinics, hospitals and health-related facilities, orphanages, food-distribution programs, etc. Several groups in the Family help the poor as they administer schools, colleges and even universities, and are involved in other forms of training and education. Many groups work with the

elderly, the youth, the handicapped, the street children, as well as persons in prisons, detention centers, etc. A good number of our predominantly women groups, like the AIC, DC, SC, work with poor women, either in improving maternal health, caring for their children, or in literacy and livelihood programs. Some of these projects that directly and concretely impact the lives of the poor have recently been duly recognized and awarded by governments and other institutions.

But besides these time-proven services, many of our VF branches have undertaken projects that assist those persons caught in “new forms of poverty,” like HIV-AIDS patients and the drug-dependent, refugees, migrants, victims of war, and those culturally segregated. Furthermore, inspired in no small way by Vatican II’s wider vision, our fellow “Vincentians” have been immersed in works for justice and peace, political education, community development, income-generating and micro-financing programs, housing and infrastructures projects, etc. Following the intuition of St. Vincent and St. Louise on an integrated perspective on poverty — as both material and spiritual — and recognizing the inter-working of various factors in society, the Vincentian Family has launched the program of “systemic change.” This represents a prophetic step and a major re-thinking of its interventions in the lives of the poor. As Family we are not only called to provide the evident but temporary solace of food, shelter, clothing, health-care, etc., but most importantly we are to fight for the poor, defend their rights so as to bring about a change in those poverty-perpetuating structures, to harness their own involvement in this change, and thus create situations for sustainable development. Our works in Akamasoa (Madagascar), Payatas (Philippines) and Haiti are but a few of the many projects of this kind.

Solidarity, Collaboration and Partnership

A most characteristic way by which the branches of our Family embody the Vincentian charism at present is the positive attitude towards solidarity, collaboration and partnership, particularly with the poor. Taking the cue from St. Vincent himself and his organizational skills, the Vincentian Family today seeks to involve various sectors of Church and society in the service of the poor. Present-day collaboration and partnership is taking place in our Family on various levels.

Within each branch, twinning programs either in projects for the poor or in formation sessions of members have become a very effective way of exercising correponsibility between those with means and those with urgent needs. Among lay associations for example,

the SSVP and the AIC have fine-tuned this strategy, resulting into a broadened knowledge of world-wide poverty, a realistic awareness of available resources, as well as greater appreciation of institutional mission and of our Vincentian charism.

Among branches on the national level, various countries and even continents have organized VF Coordinating Councils for the purpose of synchronizing projects and activities. In Ireland, the CM, DC, SSVP have formed a “Millennium Partnership for Social Justice” to work for social and economic change as it tackles poverty and exclusion. On the international level, the Superiors General and international Presidents of various branches have met annually for the last 16 years to provide guidance to our common activities and international projects related to the fight against hunger, the annual observance of the feasts of St. Vincent and St. Louise, as well as the plans for extraordinary events like the 350th anniversary celebration, the 200th anniversary of Mother Seton’s foundation, etc.

Partnership is being promoted also between our Vincentian Family branches and the other sectors of the Church and society. The AIC, for example, is represented in the Conference of Catholic Organizations, the Pontifical Council of the Laity, etc. The DC have taken on the DREAM project for HIV-AIDS victims in partnership with the Community of St. Egidio. The SSVP is coordinating with various chemical companies in order to produce a more affordable medicine for malaria. Many of our Family groups work closely with local parishes and their social arms, with some national branches of CARITAS, as well as with other religious congregations that minister also to the poor. Furthermore, several branches enjoy NGO representation before the United Nations and its various organs like the UNESCO, UNICEF, etc. In fact, many projects of the Vincentian Family address the UN’s “Millennium Development Goal,” especially those on reducing extreme poverty, empowering women, and developing global partnership. All this is becoming almost second nature to our Vincentian Family as it tries to do what St. Vincent and St. Louise did in the seventeenth century — raise the level of commitment on the part of the rich and the powerful to the plight of the poor. In promoting solidarity, partnership and collaboration without boundaries, our Family brings about change in the lives of the poor in an organized way.

Continuing Reflection on the “Vincentian Spirit”

A fourth significant way of living out and embodying the Vincentian charism today is through a continuing reflection on the distinctive “spirituality” that undergirds our projects and programs.

Our Family has been single-minded in the belief that genuine formation in the spirit has to go in tandem with our projects and programs for the poor.

This spiritual vision is anchored on St. Vincent's seminal ideas: the discernment of and faithfulness to God's will, the identification of the poor with Christ, effective and affective charity, holistic service of body and soul, integral evangelization, the view of the poor as our "lords and masters," etc. Studies on these and other themes have helped deepen our understanding of and motivations in our work with the poor. Thus, formation sessions in the Vincentian "spirit and charism" continue to be a regular component of our gatherings and meetings, whether it is the annual Vincentian Studies session in Spain, the school of Vincentian Spirituality in Curitiba (Brazil), the session for Vincentian formators in Asia and Africa, the Vincentian Family Gathering in the US, the Continental Sessions for VF Advisors and Leaders (in Mexico, Brazil, Cameroon, Thailand, Europe and US-Canada) on Systemic Change, or the annual meeting of VF Superiors and International Heads. These formation sessions enable us to imbibe the richness of our fundamental vision and to inculcate and operationalize it in a given context of poverty and need.

Rooted in our life and experience with the poor, they especially lead us to enter into the revered place of encounter between the poor, God and ourselves, affording us the opportunity to become the simple, humble, and loving servants of the poor. In the process, like Mary, we give to the world a shining witness to God's love for all of humanity.

FAMVIN and the Website

Finally, a creative and updated way of embodying our Vincentian charism is precisely through the diverse means of communication available today. Practically every branch of the Family maintains a website which is linked and connected to those of other branches. The Family website, FAMVIN, has served as the central information network by which Family members and those otherwise interested are able to grow in their knowledge of the Family's history, present activities and programs, and future plans. And to think that this is all taking place in English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German, Indonesian, etc.!

These different ways illustrate the vitality and validity of the Vincentian charism in many parts of the world today. Further, they confirm that not only has the Vincentian Family remained

faithful to the spirit and methodology of St. Vincent and St. Louise but that also it continually seeks to renew itself in that spirit while being open to new possibilities and strategies. Likewise they confirm us in our belief that the best way to respond to global poverty is with an equally global form of solidarity, collaboration and partnership.

In conclusion, it is good to be reminded of what St. Vincent told the Daughters of Charity concerning the origin of our charism. *“And that, (Sisters,) was the beginning of your Company. As it was not then what it is now, there is reason to believe that it is still not now what it will be later when God has perfected it as He wants it; for Sisters, do not think Communities are formed all at once. Saint Benedict, Saint Augustine, Saint Dominic, and all those great servants of God, whose Orders are so flourishing, never in the least dreamed of doing what they actually accomplished. But God acted through them”* (Vincent de Paul, 13 February 1646, CCD, 9:194).

St. Louise also shows us how we may imbibe this special charism given by God to us. *“‘Blessed are they who....’ Hunger and thirst are two urgent needs of nature, especially in strong bodies.... If our souls are healthy, they should have the same urges, not as passions, but as desires for justice.... It seems to me that justice consists of the general renunciation of all my passions which are contrary to the commandments of God and to the perfection that He expects of me, as well as that charity which in words, actions and attitudes I am obliged to render to my neighbor.... Thirst for justice... must lead us to desire greater things. We must long for union with God and the disposition and means to attain it. We must ardently desire that the effects of his holy will reign in us; and we must do all in our power to bring about this reign in others...”* (SLM, SW 733-734).

Questions for Reflections

1. In your experience, what has inspired you to embrace the Vincentian charism?
2. What demands does this have on you and on your work with the poor?
3. What should you do to promote collaboration and partnership in the Vincentian Family, first in your country, and then, throughout the world?

Written by
Father MANUEL GINETE C.M., Delegate for the Vincentian Family