

Welcoming the Stranger Saint Vincent de Paul and the Homeless

Robert Maloney, CM

“There was no room for them in the inn.”¹ Those stark words dampen the joy of Luke’s infancy narrative, which we read aloud every Christmas. No room for a young carpenter and his pregnant wife? Was it because they asked for help with a Galilean accent that identified them as strangers?² Was there no room for the long-awaited child at whose birth angels proclaimed “good news of great joy that will be for all people”?³ No, there was no room. Their own people turned Mary and Joseph away. Their newborn child’s first bed was a feeding trough for animals.

Matthew, in his infancy narrative, recounts another episode in the story of Jesus’ birth, where once again joy gives way to sorrow.⁴ He describes the death-threatening circumstances that drove Joseph and Mary from their homeland with Jesus. Reflecting on this account in Matthew’s gospel, Pius XII once stated, “The émigré Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, is the archetype of every refugee family.”⁵ Quoting those words, Pope Francis has referred to the plight of the homeless and refugees again and again and has proclaimed their right to the “3 Ls”: land, labor, and lodging.⁶

¹ Luke 2:7.

² People from Galilee had a clearly recognizable accent. Cf. Matthew 26:73: “A little later the bystanders came over and said to Peter, “Surely you too are one of them; even your accent gives you away.”

³ Luke 2:10.

⁴ Matthew 2:13-15.

⁵ These are the opening words of the Apostolic Constitution *Exsul Familia* (1 August 1952).

⁶ In Spanish, Pope Francis uses “3 Ts”: tierra, trabajo y techo.

Today, in one way or another, 1.2 billion people share in the lot of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. Can our Vincentian Family have a significant impact on their lives?

In this article, I propose to examine the theme in three steps:

1. Vincent and the homeless
2. The Vincentian Family Global Initiative against Homelessness
3. Blending systemic change and a “culture of encounter” in serving the homeless

1. VINCENT AND THE HOMELESS

The homeless ranked high on Vincent’s agenda. A careful analysis of his life, writings, and conferences produces a very concrete picture of his works on their behalf.

The “13 houses” – Vincent’s efforts to provide a home for foundling children.

In 1638, Vincent took up the work of the foundlings. Initially, the children stayed with Louise de Marillac and the sisters. Then Vincent rented a house for them on the rue des Boulangers.⁷

Between 1638 and 1644, the number of children “found” grew to 1200. One can imagine all the problems involved in lodging, staffing, and financing this work. Vincent was quite inventive in that regard. In fact, his creative arrangement for housing the foundlings illustrates what a shrewd businessperson he was.

When Louis XIII died in 1643, a provision in his will permitted Queen Anne of Austria to assign a million dollars to Vincent as a stable endowment for his Congregation’s missions in Sedan. Vincent chose to use the money to build 13 small houses close to

⁷ In 1647, the Ladies of Charity acquired the Château de Bicêtre, where weaned babies were taken. Then, in 1651, all recognized that Bicêtre was harmful to the children’s health, so they returned to Paris and were housed at the far end of the Saint-Denis suburb. In 1670, they were in two houses, one opposite Notre-Dame and the other in the Saint-Antoine suburb.

Saint-Lazare, the Motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission. He then rented them to the Ladies of Charity to use for lodging the foundlings. The regular rent money became the stable endowment to support the missions in Sedan. Notice how Vincent got two for one on the deal! The money from the king's bequest bought the houses for the foundlings, and the rent money from the Ladies of Charity supported the missions in Sedan.

But the number of foundlings continued to grow and funds to provide for them were difficult to find. In 1647, the Ladies of Charity considered abandoning the work. Vincent saved it by making an impassioned appeal to them, calling the foundlings their children:

*Well then, Ladies, compassion and charity have led you to adopt these little creatures as your own children; you have been their mothers according to grace since the time their mothers according to nature abandoned them. See now whether you, too, want to abandon them. Stop being their mothers to be their judges at present; their life and death are in your hands. I am going to take the vote; it is time to pass sentence on them and to find out whether you are no longer willing to have pity on them. If you continue to take charitable care of them, they will live; if, on the contrary, you abandon them, they will most certainly perish and die; experience does not allow you to doubt that.*⁸

Eventually, Vincent assigned numerous Daughters of Charity to care for the foundlings. He wrote a special rule for the Daughters who were working in the Foundling Hospital.⁹ It is touching in its practicality and its spirituality. Describing the sisters' vocation, he wrote,

⁸ CCD:XIIIb:423-434; IX:165-166. CCD refers to the English translation of *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014. On occasion, to fit the context, I have changed the translation slightly, in light of the original text.

⁹ CCD:XIIIb:209.

They will reflect that their ministry is to serve the Infant Jesus in the person of each baby they are raising, and in this they have the honor of doing what the Blessed Virgin did to her dear Son, since He affirms that the service rendered to the least of His people is rendered to Himself. In accordance with that, they will do their utmost to raise these poor children with as much attention and respect as if it were to the very person of Our Lord.¹⁰

He descended into numerous practical details about the children's meals, their nap time and play time, their cleanliness, the washing of their diapers, their prayer, their learning to read and write, etc. It is a document remarkable for its concreteness and its gentle approach toward disciplining the children.

Apparently, the sisters were quite successful in raising and educating the foundlings. At a Council meeting of the Daughters of Charity held on 13 August 1656, Vincent wanted some of the foundlings to be admitted to the community. The sister in charge of the Foundling Hospital opposed the idea (she wondered what people would think!).¹¹ It is not clear whether the Daughters at that time accepted Vincent's recommendation. Over the years, however, attitudes toward foundlings and orphans changed significantly. Today, many wonderful Daughters of Charity are proud to say that they were raised in homes run by the sisters.

Housing for refugees – Vincent's efforts to find lodging and assistance for thousands of displaced men, women, and children during the wars in Lorraine.

Beginning in 1639, Vincent began organizing campaigns for the relief of those suffering from war, plague, and famine. This work went on for ten years. During that time, Vincent succeeded in supplying Lorraine with help amounting to more than 60 million

¹⁰ CCD:XIIIb:209.

¹¹ CCD:XIIIb:353.

dollars and more than 38,000 yards of various fabrics.¹² He raised funds initially from the Ladies of Charity and eventually obtained contributions from the highest authorities. King Louis XIII made a gift of \$1,800,000.¹³

One of Vincent's assistants, Brother Mathieu Regnard, made 53 trips, crossing enemy lines in disguise, carrying money from Vincent for the relief of those in war zones.¹⁴ On his return trip, he often brought with him a number of people whom he had found in dire circumstances. In October 1639, Vincent wrote of him, "He brought in a hundred last month, among whom were forty-six young women ... He fed them and accompanied them right into this city where the greater number have already been placed."¹⁵

Vincent demanded strict accountability. He insisted that he receive regular reports on how relief money was being spent, so that benefactors would know how their donations were used and would be encouraged to give even more. He wrote to his confrere François du Coudray,

*... obtain a receipt for everything they give, because we must keep an account of it so that, whatever the pretext may be, not a speck of it is diverted or applied elsewhere. And please send me by way of Brother Mathieu a copy of the accounts, signed by M. de Villarceaux, and a copy of his orders, if there is one. Also send me every month the amounts you have given out or ordered to be distributed in other places.*¹⁶

¹² Bernard Pujo, *Vincent DePaul, the Trailblazer*, translated by Gertrud Graubart Champe (University of Notre Dame Press, 2003) 131.

¹³ For the reader's convenience, I have converted the *livres* of Saint Vincent's time into dollars today, but I must candidly admit that this is a precarious process. For further information on the relative values of the currencies, cf. John Rybolt, "Saint Vincent de Paul and Money," *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 26 (2005) 92; cf. also, Gerry Lalonde, "Monetary Values in 1650 – 1750 in New France Compared to Today," which can be found at: <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~unclefred/MONETARY.htm>

¹⁴ Dodin, *op. cit.*, p. 45, states that Brother Mathieu carried \$1,000,000 to \$1,200,000 a trip!

¹⁵ CCD:I:582.

¹⁶ CCD:II:75.

As he did throughout his life, Vincent told the members of his family that they should not only offer material help, but also provide spiritual assistance to those who were fleeing to the towns and cities. In a letter written on 12 October 1639, after describing the displacement of the population in Lorraine and the material help that was being provided, he stated: “We are assisting them spiritually by teaching them everything necessary for salvation. We have them begin by making a general confession of their entire past life and then continue to confess every two or three months.”¹⁷

Reflecting on Vincent’s accomplishments in Lorraine, the historian Bernard Pujó concluded:

*This support for Lorraine is remarkable for more than the amount of aid distributed and the number of suffering people helped. It was the first attempt at organized assistance for a whole endangered region. Without having received any specific charge, Vincent de Paul assumed the role of a secretary of state for refugees and war victims. Going far beyond the responsibilities expected of him as superior of the Congregation of the Mission, he placed himself, on his own initiative, in a national role.*¹⁸

The “Name of Jesus Hospice” – Vincent’s efforts to shelter, clothe, and feed those living on the streets of Paris.

By 1652, as poverty enveloped Paris during the civil war,¹⁹ Vincent, at the age of 72, was running massive relief programs, providing soup twice a day for thousands of poor people at Saint-Lazare and feeding thousands of others at the houses of the Daughters of Charity. He organized collections, gathering each week 5-6 thousand pounds of meat, 2-3 thousand eggs, and provisions of clothing and utensils.²⁰

¹⁷ CCD:I:582.

¹⁸ Pujó, *op. cit.*, 134.

¹⁹ Usually called “the Fronde,” this war lasted from 1648 to 1652.

²⁰ For many interesting details on Saint Vincent’s handling of money and his administration of charitable works, cf. René Wulfman *Charité Publique et Finances Privées : Monsieur Vincent, Gestionnaire et Saint* (Villeneuve d’Ascq, France: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998).

He provided lodging for the displaced. For instance, when a wealthy anonymous merchant in Paris gave Vincent four million dollars to be used in some good work, he founded a hospice called “The Name of Jesus.” After discussing his plan with the benefactor, he earmarked \$440,000 for the purchase of the house. He also allotted money for its enlargement and furnishings and provided it with a substantial annual income. It was already in operation in March 1653. Saint Vincent chose as its first inhabitants 20 male and 20 female artisans who were without work, and he provided them with looms and other tools. Louise de Marillac mentions that, over the years, the residents were bootmakers, shoemakers, button makers, muslin workers, lace makers, glove makers, tailors, and pin makers. The Daughters of Charity worked closely with them. A Priest of the Mission, in accord with the terms of the contract, acted as chaplain. Saint Vincent often came to visit and instruct them.²¹

Vincent wrote to one of his priests, describing the situation, “We have more troubles here than ever. Paris is swarming with poor persons because the armies have forced the poor country folk to seek refuge here. Meetings are held daily to see how they can be helped. A few houses have been rented in the outlying districts where some of them have been housed, particularly poor girls.”²²

He added, “In addition, about eight to nine hundred girls have been placed in private homes, and all the refugee nuns living in the city – some of them in questionable places, so it is said – will be housed in a monastery prepared for this purpose.”²³ Vincent and

²¹ CCD:XI:184. The Name of Jesus hospice later became the municipal health center. Its buildings were on the site now occupied by the offices of the Gare de l’Est. There are many references to this hospice in the writings of Vincent and Louise de Marillac. Cf. *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, edited and translated from the French by Sister Louise Sullivan, DC (New York; New City Press, 1991), 794-795.

²² CCD:IV:386-387.

²³ CCD:IV:396.

Louise de Marillac often put up young girls initially in the homes for the foundlings; later, they were placed in better-off households as maids. Young boys were housed at Saint-Lazare until work could be found for them.

To feed the hungry, all the parishes organized soup kitchens. The parish of Saint-Hippolyte served 900 people; the parish of Saint-Laurent, 600; the parish of Saint-Martin, 300. Vincent wrote that at Saint-Lazare “soup is distributed daily to 14 or 15 thousand persons, who would die of hunger without this assistance.”

The Daughters of Charity worked tirelessly. Vincent wrote to Lambert aux Couteaux, the superior in Warsaw, describing the situation,

This is how God chooses to have us participate in so many holy projects. The poor Daughters of Charity are more involved than we in the corporal assistance of the poor. They prepare and distribute soup daily for thirteen hundred poor, humiliated people at the home of Mademoiselle Le Gras and for eight hundred refugees in the Saint-Denis area. In Saint-Paul parish alone, four or five Sisters make the distribution to five thousand poor persons, in addition to the sixty to eighty patients they have on their hands. Other Sisters are doing the same elsewhere.²⁴

The “Little Schools” – Vincent’s efforts to organize educational programs for teaching job skills and for catechizing those living in desperate circumstances.

Though the terminology “systemic change” was unknown to Vincent and Louise, they both recognized, on a seminal level, that education and job training were extremely important in transforming the lives of the homeless and the poor.²⁵

²⁴ CCD:IV:400.

²⁵ In *Populorum Progressio*, 35, Pope Paul VI wrote: “Lack of education is as serious as lack of food; the illiterate person is a starved spirit.”

Vincent and Louise de Marillac were deeply committed to the education and moral formation of young people living on the streets or in dire conditions. They wanted them to develop the skills needed to get jobs. For that reason, with Vincent's support, Louise founded the "petites écoles" (little schools) and made the instruction of poor young people one of the principal works of the first Daughters of Charity.²⁶

The task was not easy. First of all, since families often regarded children as part of the work force, the sisters had to convince parents to send the children to school. On top of that, sickness was rampant, so absences were frequent. In addition, the children themselves were often truant, wandering off on the streets to play or to beg. When they came knocking on the school door at mealtime, the sisters used the occasion to teach them how "to pray, read, and write; in a word, (to do) every good work in which they may be useful."²⁷

Louise taught in these schools herself. She wrote a catechism for the sisters to use in teaching young children. She insisted that instruction given in the schools should be clear and practical.²⁸ Knitting, sewing, and embroidering were among the skills taught to young women.

The sisters also organized education programs in their hospitals²⁹ to teach children between seven and 11 years of age to learn how to earn a living.³⁰

²⁶ Cf. Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, *Histoire des Filles de la Charité* (Fayard, Paris, 2011) 493-498.

²⁷ CCD:XIIIb:145, 211.

²⁸ Today, the schools of the Vincentian Family have over a million members. Beyond the schools, the Vincentian Marian Youth groups offer formation to more than 120,000 young people.

²⁹ It is easy to forget that, etymologically, *hospital* is related to *hospitality*, as well as to *hospice* and *hostel* (shelter for the needy). It is also related to the Latin *hospes*, meaning "guest" or "host."

³⁰ Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, *op. cit.*, 498.

II. THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

For its 400th anniversary, the worldwide Vincentian Family has chosen a theme with deep biblical roots: “Welcoming the Stranger.”

a. **Biblical roots**

The Hebrew Scriptures, especially Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, often exhort the Israelites to cherish “the alien in the land,” reminding God’s people that they too were once “aliens” in the Land of Egypt.³¹ Most striking of all is Deuteronomy 10:18-19, “God executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the resident alien, giving them food and clothing. So you too should love the resident alien, for that is what you were in the land of Egypt.” The frequent repetition of this theme is an indication that resident aliens were often treated badly.

The New Testament continues the theme. In Matthew’s gospel, among the criteria by which we shall be judged, Jesus lists, “When I was a stranger, you welcomed me.”³² The author of Hebrews accents the same point: “Do not neglect hospitality to strangers, for, in doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it.”³³ Given this scriptural background, sheltering the homeless quickly found a place on Christianity’s list of corporal works of mercy.

Matthew 25:31-46, describing the last judgment, influenced Vincent de Paul profoundly. In his conferences, he often referred to the climax of the scene, in which Christ identified himself with the poor person: “As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.” Seeing Christ in the poor person, Vincent felt a gnawing concern to do the works of mercy listed in the judgment scene, particularly caring for the homeless.

³¹ Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34; Deuteronomy 10:17-19; 14:28-29; 16:9-12.

³² Matthew 25:35.

³³ Hebrews 13:2.

Reflecting on this biblical data at its meeting on January 6-7, 2017, the Executive Committee of the International Leaders of the Vincentian Family approved a proposal to launch, as a Family, a megaproject focusing on homelessness. Father Tomaz Mavrič announced, “We would hope to begin this project by July 1, 2017, to celebrate our Jubilee Year, and we envision that it will continue at least until 2030, so that it will coincide with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.”

b. Steps leading to the decision

In order to determine what type of megaproject might best fit our Family, last autumn a small group visited the European Union in Brussels, the United Nations in New York, and Catholic Charities in Baltimore and asked representatives and experts in those places for suggestions. Gradually, they came to the conviction that two criteria should guide the Family’s choice: 1) that the project would be of genuine service to the poor in as many countries as possible and 2) that it would enable numerous branches of the worldwide Vincentian Family to work together.

In the end, after reviewing a list of possibilities, the International Vincentian Family’s Executive Committee decided on a megaproject directed toward homelessness, encompassing three dimensions:

1. people without accommodations; e.g. street sleepers
2. people living in temporary accommodations; e.g. refugee camps or internally displaced people
3. people living in inadequate/insecure accommodations; e.g. slums and favelas, hostels.

This three-dimensional definition, carefully formulated by the Institute of Global Homelessness, has been accepted by the United Nations as a standard for measuring and combatting homelessness.

The Executive Committee felt that, of all the issues proposed as possible megaprojects, this would be the one that we could best address as a worldwide Family. Homelessness, in one form or another, exists everywhere, so we hope that it will be possible for us to address it in all the countries where our Vincentian Family exists.

At present, we have identified 225 branches of the Family. These branches work in more than 150 countries. If we work together in the service of the homeless, our efforts could have an enormous impact.

c. The megaproject

The Executive Committee sees this megaproject as one of the most significant ways of celebrating the 400th anniversary of the birth of our Vincentian charism.

Depaul International, one of the newest branches of our Family, has offered to administer the project. Founded in 1989, Depaul International specializes in homelessness. It has spread rapidly from England to Ireland, Slovakia, Ukraine, the United States, and France.

The Institute of Global Homelessness, which began two years ago at DePaul University in Chicago, will assist Depaul International actively. Over the past two years, the Institute has been gathering the latest information on the topic and has been bringing together experts to address it. It has formulated a definition of homelessness, described above, which the United Nations has accepted. As a result, for the first time in history, we have the opportunity to gather accurate statistics about homelessness and attempts to eliminate it. The UN estimates that over 1.2 billion of the earth's seven billion inhabitants are homeless in one form or other. This number continues to grow because of conflicts, natural disasters, and urbanization.

All the branches represented at the January meeting of the Executive Committee have already expressed a commitment to join actively in this project: the AIC; the Congregation of the Mission; the Daughters of Charity; the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul; the

Sisters of Charity Federation of the United States and Canada; the Sisters of Charity Federation in France, Germany and Austria; and the CMM Brothers. All 225 branches of the Family are being invited to join in the project.

Of those served already by the Vincentian Family, many fall within the broader definition of being homeless – those living on the streets or in shelters, refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, or those living in temporary settlements such as slums or favelas.

d. Some of the strategies being developed

Depaul International is already developing a series of strategies for moving forward. Below, I have listed these under five headings. As time goes on, others undoubtedly will be added.

1. Measuring and Gathering Data

- Create, with the help of the Vincentian Family Office, a global map of existing Vincentian Family projects directed at homelessness.
- Build a dynamic database which will allow us to analyze our current investment of people, time, and finances in this area and to plan how to measure the impact of the Vincentian Family's work with homeless people.

Planning

- Host a planning conference for members of the Vincentian Family working in homelessness in order to build networks, share best practices, and develop a work plan in the three areas of street homelessness, refugees, and slum dwellers.
- Name a commission of thought-leaders in homelessness from across the Vincentian Family to advise on the delivery of specified work plans.

3. *Building Capacity*

- Appoint an Operations Manager to oversee this project within Depaul International.
- Produce a short film, in multiple languages, showcasing best practices of the Vincentian Family in the three different aspects of homelessness.
- Create an online toolkit.
- Provide a consultancy service encouraging groups to develop new works for the homeless at an international, regional, national, or local level.
- In consultation with leaders of the Global Vincentian Family, agree on a protocol and delivery mechanism to help the Vincentian Family respond to global humanitarian crises, with a particular focus on the provision of shelter and primary services such as healthcare.
- Align the resources of the Institute of Global Homelessness to serve this Vincentian Family initiative by providing training for emerging and existing leaders, giving access to a planned Online Homelessness Hub (focusing on research and best practices) and offering invitations to issue-based (e.g., on advocacy or fundraising) and/or geographically-focused symposiums.

4. *Working toward Structural Change*

- Host an event at the EU to launch the homeless initiative and begin to develop lobbying capacity in this forum.
- Plan and deliver a Symposium on Street Homelessness and Catholic Social Teaching at the Vatican³⁴ to promote debate and action within faith groups and beyond.

³⁴ Until recently, for some reason, Catholic Social Teaching, which addresses so many topics, has said little explicitly about homelessness. Over the last several years, Pope Francis has addressed the question frequently when speaking about the 3 Ls: land, labor, and lodging. In 2000, the United States Catholic Conference treated the matter in “Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity.” In 2011, the same Conference published “Welcoming Christ in the Migrant.”

- In consultation with the existing Vincentian delegations at the UN, agree on a work plan in the area of global homelessness linked to concrete outcomes; e.g., measuring street homelessness as part of the Sustainable Development Goals.

5. Building a Communications Network

- Appoint a Communications Manager and develop a communications strategy.
- Create a portal within the Depaul International website (using key languages of the family) as the focal point for the project and linking this closely to the famvin website.
- Produce a quarterly newsletter.
- Produce materials for leaders of the Vincentian Family on the initiative.
- Attend global gatherings of the Vincentian Family to promote the project.
- Produce an annual report for the international leaders of the Vincentian Family.

In this context, it is important to note that over the last 20 years, the Vincentian Family has strongly emphasized Systemic Change and Collaboration. The megaproject will highlight both emphases.

Systemic change lies at the root of what Frédéric Ozanam longed for: the ability not just to offer charity to those most in need, but also to strive for justice by analyzing why people are needy and by advocating with and for them to change the systems that trap them in poverty. For more than a decade now, the Vincentian Family Commission for Systemic Change has been offering workshops throughout the world to foster a systemic-change mentality.

Collaboration is not a new concept within the Vincentian Family. It was the model that Vincent proposed from the very beginning. Throughout his lifetime, the close partnership between the

Confraternities of Charity, the Ladies of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity maximized the impact that Vincent's Family had on the lives of the poor at a local, national, and international level. Recently, academics at Stanford University have begun to call this "collective impact."

An ongoing question for the Vincentian Family is this: having fostered formation in a systemic-change methodology and having encouraged collaboration, how will we move forward? How will we balance the autonomy of each branch with the solidarity that comes from being part of the Vincentian Family? The megaproject aims at uniting the energies of autonomous branches, so that they might collaborate in working toward a common goal in the service of the homeless.

III. BLENDING SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND A "CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER" IN SERVING THE HOMELESS

Over the last several years, Pope Francis has highlighted three themes that have enormous relevance for the Vincentian Family.

First, he has stated repeatedly, as Saint Vincent did, that the poor are a gift to us and that we need to let them evangelize us.³⁵ In celebrating this 400th anniversary year, it will be important for the Family to thank God for this gift and to listen to the poor well, so that, by uniting our energies, we might be able to serve them more effectively. They are – to use the phrase Saint Vincent uttered so often – "our Lords and Masters."³⁶

Secondly, Pope Francis has often emphasized the need for structural or systemic change. In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, he underlined repeatedly how "everything in the world is connected,"³⁷

³⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 198. Cf. Jubilee Audience, 22 October 2016.

³⁶ CCD:II:140; X:215, 268; XI:297, 349; XII:4; XIIIb:196.

³⁷ *Laudato Si'*, 16, 42, 51, 70, 91, 111, 117, 138, 162, 240.

a theme that the Vincentian Family Commission for Promoting Systemic Change has been stressing in all its workshops. Speaking in Bolivia in July 2015, Pope Francis made a dramatic appeal for systemic change.

There is an invisible thread joining every one of those forms of exclusion: can we recognize it? These are not isolated issues.

... let us not be afraid to say it: we want change, real change, structural change. This system is by now intolerable.

... there is a widespread sense of dissatisfaction and even despondency. Many people are hoping for a change capable of releasing them from the bondage of individualism and the despondency it spawns.³⁸

Thirdly, Pope Francis has urged contemporary society to create a “culture of encounter” and a “culture of dialogue,” in which we are prepared not only to give, but also to receive from others.³⁹ Hospitality, he says, grows from both giving and receiving.⁴⁰ He warns against the “globalization of indifference.”⁴¹

In order to serve the poor with a love that is “affective and effective,” as Saint Vincent puts it,⁴² below I offer a series of reflections. I hope that they will be helpful to those engaged in the megaproject, so that we might work together for systemic change and, at the same time, create a “culture of encounter” in our work with the homeless.

³⁸ World Meeting of Popular Movements, 10 July 2015.

³⁹ Address to Migrants, 12 September 2015.

⁴⁰ At a meeting with alumni from Jesuit schools in Europe on 17 September 2016, Pope Francis stated that “authentic hospitality is our greatest security against hateful acts of terrorism.”

⁴¹ Cf. Message for World Food Day, 16 October 2013, 2.

⁴² CCD:IX:467.

1. Listening to the homeless

Listening is the foundation of all spirituality.⁴³ If we do not listen, nothing enters our minds and hearts. The scriptures tell us that listening is crucial. “Blessed are those who hear the word of God,” Jesus says, “and act on it” (Luke 11:28). On the other hand, he bemoans, “Seeing, they did not see and hearing, they did not hear” (Mark 4:12).

My experience, I regret to say, is that, while some are good listeners, many are not. Some, unfortunately, are so filled with technical knowledge and skills, or with their own goals, that they cannot hear the voice of the person in need who is crying out for help. How many people really listen to the homeless?

Listening is essential in bringing about systemic change. The first two principles that the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change teaches are:

- a. Listen carefully and seek to understand the needs and aspirations of the poor, creating an atmosphere of respect and mutual confidence, and fostering self-esteem among the people.
- b. Involve the poor themselves, including the young and women, at all stages: identification of needs, planning, implementation, evaluation, and revision.

In his wonderful book on community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The first service that one owes to others in the community consists in listening to them.”

2. Seeing and serving Christ in the homeless

Following Jesus’ lead in the 25th chapter of Matthew’s gospel, Vincent continually urged his followers to see the face of Christ in the face of those in need. He said to the Daughters of Charity:

⁴³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954) 75.

*You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. That is as true as our being here. Ten times a day a sister will go out to visit the sick, and ten times a day she will find God there ... O my Daughters, how wonderful that is! God graciously accepts the service you render to the sick and he considers it done to himself.*⁴⁴

Using terminology resonant of Vincent's, Mother Theresa of Calcutta spoke of the real presence of Christ not just in the Eucharist, but also in the suffering.⁴⁵

Many other religious traditions have a similar emphasis, asking, "Where do we find God?" and responding, "We meet God in our needy brothers and sisters."⁴⁶

In practice, this means treating the homeless (and all those we serve) with dignity. Recently, John Rybolt has reminded us of the "white tablecloth," a charming detail that accents dignity. In the rule that Vincent wrote in 1617 for the first Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon, he stated:

Then, after preparing their dinner, they will take them, at nine o'clock, some soup and meat in a pot, some bread in a white cloth, and some wine in a bottle. They will do the same for supper around four o'clock in the afternoon. When they enter the patient's room, they will greet him or her in a friendly way; then, drawing near to the bed with a cheerful expression, they will encourage him to eat, raising the head of the bed, arranging the cover, setting up the little tray, the white tablecloth, plate, and spoon, rinsing out the glass, pouring some soup on the bread, putting the meat on a small plate, saying grace with him and

⁴⁴ CCD IX, 190-201.

⁴⁵ Along the same lines, Jon Sobrino, a noted Latin American theologian, has entitled a book *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People Down from the Cross* (Orbis Books, 1994).

⁴⁶ Jews, Christians, and Muslims all refer to Abraham as a model for hospitality. Much more could be said about hospitality and various religious traditions.

*feeding him the soup. They will cut up the meat and help him to eat it, while saying some little light-hearted, consoling word in an effort to cheer him up. They will also pour him something to drink, inviting him once again to eat. Lastly, when he has finished eating and the dishes have been washed, the tablecloth folded, and the tray removed, they will say grace with the patient, and leave him right away in order to go serve someone else.*⁴⁷

Vincent's words make it evident that "seeing and serving Christ in the homeless" entails, to use today's terminology, providing quality care that meets professional standards.

3. *Offering friendship*

Friendship lies at the heart of Jesus' relationship with his followers. He says to them, "I no longer call you servants. I call you friends."⁴⁸ The relationship of friendship is characterized by warmth, conversation, sharing, service, sacrifice, and forgiveness.

One of the principal gifts we can give others is friendship. It is integral to the spirituality of mercy that Jesus outlines in the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46.

In our Family, Vincent calls us to treat those we serve not as "the poor" but as persons. He asks us to treat them not as clients but as friends for whom we care deeply.

In the end, all good care is relational. We offer people not just lodging, but hospitality. We visit them in their homes. We reach out to them in friendship.

4. *Providing holistic service*

Homelessness affects the whole person, physically, psychologically, emotionally, and relationally. We have all

⁴⁷ CCD:XIIIb:40; also CCD:XIIIb:12 and 13. Cf. a brief video on the topic: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CgJVAC7Na8>.

⁴⁸ John 15:15.

experienced how deep the wounds of the marginalized are. Many homeless people suffer the stigma of prejudice within their own country or in a foreign land. Many find themselves isolated and lonely. Some struggle with psychological or drug or alcohol problems. Some do not speak the local language well. Many have legal or medical problems. Many suffer from depression and have lost joy in life.⁴⁹

Holistic service is fundamental to systemic change. Everything is connected to everything else. When any single element in a system breaks down, everything else is affected.

5. *Serving as advocates*

Psalm 85:10 tells us that in God “Mercy and truth have met each other: justice and peace have kissed.” Mercy, truth, justice, and peace are all linked. None of these qualities is self-standing. Mercy seasons justice.⁵⁰ Peace without truth and justice cannot last. The works of mercy are only a palliative solution if the works of justice do not accompany them.

A systemic approach calls us to stand at the side of the homeless as their advocates: advocates striving to wipe out prejudice, advocates striving to win the support of governments and foundations, advocates striving to reunite them with their families and with communities which may have isolated them. Here, let me simply note that many of strategies formulated by the Vincentian Family Commission for Promoting Systemic Change coincide with the best practices formulated by organizations that are successful in advocating with and for the homelessness.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Romans 12:8 urges the caregiver, “If you do acts of mercy, (do them) with cheerfulness.”

⁵⁰ Cf. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene 1.

⁵¹ Cf. Louise Sullivan, DC, *Vincentian Mission in Health Care* (Daughters of Charity National Health System, 1997). It is available at: http://famvin.org/wiki/Vincentian_Mission_in_Health_Care. She describes eight essential

For the homeless, of course, finding a home is a fundamental. Adequate housing is a basic human right.⁵² Pope Francis has often spoken of the “3 Ls”: land, labor, and lodging.⁵³ The 13 houses that Vincent purchased near Saint-Lazare symbolize his awareness of how important for human dignity a home is.

CONCLUSION

In 1823, John Howard Payne wrote the lyrics for a song destined for his opera, *Clari, or the Maid of Milan*. Eventually, he decided to publish the song separately, entitling it “Home! Sweet Home!” It became immensely popular, quickly selling 100,000 copies. The song contained a famous line, “Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home.” Little by little, many other cultures assimilated Payne’s song and its sentiments.⁵⁴

attributes of the Vincentian mission in healthcare. They are quite relevant for a Vincentian Family approach toward homelessness: 1) spiritually rooted; 2) holistic; 3) integrated; 4) excellent; 5) collaborative; 6) flexible; 7) creative; 8) focused.

⁵² Cf. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, art. 25. Many other international declarations list adequate housing as one of the basic human rights.

⁵³ *Laudato Si’*, 152. Cf., also, Address at Expo Fair in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, on Thursday, 9 July 2015; Address in Nairobi, Kenya, on Friday, 27 November 2015; Address at Bachilleres College, State of Chihuahua, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, on Wednesday, 17 February 2016.

⁵⁴ In 1827, the Swedish composer Franz Berwald quoted Payne’s song in his *Konzerstück for Bassoon and Orchestra* (middle section, marked Andante). In Italy, Gaetano Donizetti used the theme in his Opera, *Anna Bolena* (1830), Act 2, Scene 3, as part of Anna’s Mad Scene to underscore her longing for her childhood home. In England, Sir Henry Wood used it in his “Fantasia on British Sea Songs.” The French organist and composer Alexandre Guilmant used it in his “Fantasy for Organ,” Op. 43, and in the « Fantaisie sur deux mélodies anglaises. » In 1857, the Swiss composer/pianist Sigismond Thalberg wrote a series of variations for piano (op. 72) on the theme of “Home! Sweet Home!” In Japan, it became famous as “*Hanyū no Yado*” or “My Humble Cottage.” In 1909, the silent film “The House of Cards” featured it. Subsequently, it was

The English word “home” has strong emotional connotations. A “house” is a structure with walls, windows, floors, and ceilings, but a “home” is a place where we feel at ease, secure, and peaceful.⁵⁵ “House” serves as a noun and a verb, while “home” is simply a noun. We can “house” people, but we cannot “home” them. Many other languages have words or expressions for “house” and “home” with various connotations.⁵⁶

Will our worldwide Vincentian Family, working together, have a significant impact on the lives of the homeless, bringing them a sense of security, peace, and a viable future, in the 150 countries where we live and serve? That is the goal of the megaproject we are launching to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the birth of Saint Vincent’s charism.

used in many movies.

⁵⁵ Henry David Thoreau expressed this quite eloquently: “The place which you have selected for your camp, though never so rough and grim, begins at once to have its attractions, and becomes a very center of civilization to you: ‘Home is home, be it never so homely.’” Cf. Henry David Thoreau, *Canoeing in the Wilderness*, published posthumously and edited by Clifton Johnson (Houghton Mifflin, 1916) chapter 9.

⁵⁶ *Casa* and *hogar*, *Haus* and *Heimat*, *maison* and *chez moi*, *casa* and *da me*, etc. I am sure that others can add to this list and can identify various nuances better than I.