

Revitalization of Vincentian Identity An African Perspective: The Case of Cameroon

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The Vincentian Family still recalls the 400th anniversary of the origin of its charism. Indeed, 400 years ago, Vincent de Paul became a gift from God to the world. In Cameroon, the Congregation of the Mission celebrates forty years of presence (1980-2020). As a Vice-Province, it is important to interpret, in a retrospective manner, this presence in order to consider future possibilities. In other words, where are we today? What inspirations and impulses are necessary in order to revitalize charity and the mission?

Attempting to balance the situation, we note that the Congregation of the Mission in Cameroon applies the Vincentian charism in several areas. We are very involved in parish ministry, the formation of the clergy and other ministries. The Vice-Province of Cameroon is present in two countries of Central Africa and in five dioceses in Cameroon: two parishes in the Archdiocese of Yaoundé (Mvog Betsi and Psing Melen), the Diocese of Buca (Batoké), the Archdiocese of Douala (Mabanda and Uansuki), the Diocese of Batouri (Belita II), the Diocese of Kribi (Nyamfende); in central Africa we are in the Diocese of Mbaïki (Boganagone). We attempt to instill the Vincentian charism in our parishes through the establishment of other branches of the Vincentian Family (AIC, SSVP, AMM, VMY). The establishment of these groups reflect, in general, the spirit of our Founder, that is, a preferential option for the poor country people. While our spiritual activity is carried out well, the material assistance that we offer to *our lords and masters* is not always fruitful (here there is a question with regard the means that should be utilized). The confreres, on both a personal and community level, attempt to reach out to all people but that is not always possible. In the area of formation, the confreres are involved not only in forming candidates for the Congregation (philosophy and theology) but are also involved in various Institutes where they offer courses, conferences, spiritual retreats, and spiritual accompaniment.

Similarly, through other activities such as popular missions and the missionary song festival in the neighborhoods (with street children) and occasionally in prisons ... through these activities we make our Vincentian identity visible as we draw closer to people who are disadvantaged, elderly and/or in precarious life situations. We often find ourselves overwhelmed by the situation of extreme poverty. We find ourselves limited as we attempt to change those situations and the little that we are able to do often feels as though we are providing people with "palliative care". This challenges us to be inventive with regard to discovering and utilizing new strategies for sustainable development. When we analyze in depth the multiple situations of poverty, we find that the cause of this poverty is structures of social injustice which seem to worsen people's already precarious living situation. Our charitable service takes the form of visiting people in their homes (offering them some corn, a bar of soap, etc.) ... but most importantly, we offer them our time. We need to find other ways of reaching out to those who poor. In other words, we have to move from situations in which charity is viewed as some form of assistance to inventive and creative forms of charity ... or to paraphrase the words of our Founder, we have to look for ways to make *sustainable charity* real. This is the paradigm that concerns us at the beginning of the 21st century, at the dawning of

the fifth century of the origin of the Vincentian charism and as we move into the 41st year of our presence here in this country.

The first avenue to investigate is that of humanizing our society, that is, to find a dynamism that enables us to change the present situation. The poor must be empowered to move beyond their precarious inhuman situation in order to become more human and able to live a better life. In other words, we want people to be able to enter into more human situations. So many people live in landfills and “slum” cities and we want to provide people with a healthier environment.

We must come to understand that we cannot serve the poor without becoming involved in the struggle for the dignity of the human person. People can be happy only when living conditions are healthy and when they experience a certain degree of security. Thus, we must become involved in people’s material, spiritual and political well-being and we must become their partner in the struggle for human dignity. Human dignity encompasses everything that enables people to live as human beings (this includes the right to education, health care and overall general well-being). *Rerum Novarum* speaks about respect for the human person and states: *No man may with impunity outrage that human dignity which God Himself treats with great reverence, nor stand in the way of that higher life which is the preparation of the eternal life of heaven (Rerum Novarum, #40)*. In our society, where mistreatment, abuse of power, confusion between the common and personal good, corruption, tribalism and commercialism of every kind reign supreme ... in the midst of this situation we discover the emergence of new forms of poverty and also we see that the poor are becoming more numerous.

Therefore, the practice of Vincentian charity needs to be updated and this, in turn, must take into consideration the various changes that are occurring in the world. As we engage in this process we must be careful so as not to dilute the charism. This is what we refer to as “the revitalization of the Vincentian charism”. Vincent de Paul stated that *love is inventive unto infinity*. That is the key to the spirit of creativity and adaptation that should be applied to our charism. The revitalization that we want to put into practice in order to serve the poor as heirs of the Vincentian identity cannot be accomplished apart from the insights of our Holy Founder and the spiritual heritage that he has bequeathed to us (a heritage that has a 400 year history). It will also be necessary to enter into a dynamic of sustainable development that will allow us to move from “assistance” to permanent action on behalf of those who are poor. Our involvement in putting into practice a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, an initiative of the Superior General, is a manifestation of our willingness to alleviate the suffering of humankind. Our response, coordinated by the Visitor, Father Guémolé Feugand, CM, has mobilized all the branches of the Vincentian Family present in Cameroon. We see this mobilization of the Vincentian Family as a willingness to serve those who are poor in a more effective manner.

Finally ...

... service on behalf of the poor must take on a new form. While affirming the on-going need for assistance, we must consider methods to implement a sustainable development approach. One of the ways to update and revitalize the Vincentian charism as we reach out to those who are poor is to keep before us the social question, namely, the questions of human dignity, social justice, peace and the common good. Indeed, without social justice there is no peace and, therefore, there is no

development (cf. *Populorum Progressio*, #76). Our Vincentian charism must not only take into consideration the human person as an ontological being but also as a social being (using the words of Merleau Ponty: the human person is a *network of relationships*). Thus, we have an obligation to participate in the process of healing humankind and restoring life to those who are broken. Indeed, engaging in the struggle against poverty and misery consists of opposing every form of injustice that oppresses and prevent human beings from being truly human.

Our future perspective as Vincentians must follow the action plan proposed by Pope Francis ... a proposal that is united to the dynamics of systemic change that is also very current in the Vincentian Family. According to Pope Francis: *The need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed, not only for the pragmatic reason of its urgency for the good order of society, but because society needs to be cured of a sickness which is weakening and frustrating it, and which can only lead to new crises. Welfare projects, which meet certain urgent needs, should be considered merely temporary responses. As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world's problems or, for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills* (Evangelii Gaudium, #202).

Thus, as Vincentian we want to give people the opportunity to live better lives. With the help of the Lord of the harvest, we will be able to renew the face of the earth and this world will become the kingdom of God on earth.