

Toward What Future?

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"In the days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it; many people shall come and say: 'come, let us climb the Lord's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may instruct us in his ways and we may walk in his paths.'" For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord" (Isaiah 2:1-5).

Can we imagine any better future for Jerusalem? As members of the Vincentian Family, what is our place in this future that is in the process of being born?

The Bible often refers to the future: the future world, the future century, the future salvation, eternal life, etc. When speaking about the future this is not a reference to "tomorrow." The future begins now and as such questions us.

Pierre Ganne, a Jesuit, writes, *"The future depends on the decision to love, with all that it implies and all that it requires"* (*Le pauvre et le prophète [The Poor and the Prophet]*, p. 32).

Saint Vincent made a decision to love and to serve. Together, following Vincent's example, let us decide to *"walk in the light of the Lord"* (Isaiah 2:5), because the future depends on our response today.

We are sent forth, as disciples-missionaries, to an encounter with those persons who must confront the frailty of their bodies, their minds, and their souls. Those sufferings should move us in the very depths of our being. Throughout the world, members of various associations, teams, communities, groups, etc., have mobilized themselves in order to provide those persons with care and love, in order to accompany those persons on their journey toward material, psychological, and spiritual autonomy. “The whole person and every person” (Paul VI).

“I was hungry ... I was thirsty ... I was a stranger ... I was naked ... I was sick ... I was in prison.”

Let us first examine three elements that ground our service as members of the Vincentian Family. Then I shall present, by way of conclusion, some simple invitations that will enable us to participate (together with others) in the building of a better future where *“there shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as waters cover the sea”* (Isaiah 11:9).

- **A fundamental conviction:** the poor are at the center of our lives
- **A call:** to overcome obstacles
- **A gospel attitude:** reciprocal welcoming

1. A fundamental conviction: the poor are at the center of our lives.

Allow me, as a Daughter of Charity, to begin with some words from our Constitutions, our Book of Life: *“The Sisters find Christ and contemplate Him in the heart and the life of those who are poor ... through faith they see Christ in those who are poor and they see those who are poor in Christ”* (Constitution 10).

The poor are at the center [heart] of our life. The heart is understood not only as some sentimental feeling but as the vital core, the place of reason, of our desires, of our action, and of faith. In fact, the poor have a central role in our missionary life, our community life, and our prayer life. Our whole life is organized around service on behalf of those who are poor.

An encounter with persons who have been wounded in any way is the place of our encounter with Christ. Such encounters open us up, transform us, and evangelize us, because they are authentic spiritual experiences that are rooted in sharing life with those persons who are most vulnerable.

In other words, we are dealing with a history of encounters: an encounter between God and us, between us and those persons who are poor, among all of us. Is this not the manner to enter into a Trinitarian relationship? Is this not a way to enter into the mystery of love *par excellence*, into the mystery of incarnate love?

Pope Francis, in his message on the occasion of the First World Day of the Poor insisted and repeated the fact that *poverty has the face of women, men and children exploited by base interests, crushed by the machinations of power and money* (19 November 2017, #5).

Jesus, by washing the feet of the disciples, points out another path; namely, caring for the whole person through basic human gestures, gestures of compassion and kindness. The members of the Vincentian Family, whatever the branch of their membership, know that all those gestures of closeness, solidarity, and communion enlighten humanity and participate in its healing.

Personally, we have nothing more to offer than our own vulnerability. Together, and thanks to our differences, these are all our skills, our energies, and our generosity that we, in hospitals, dispensaries, social services, associations, etc., place at the service

of our brothers and sisters. We do this also in places where we listen, are present, and accompany others, as during visits to people in their homes.

What is the greatest need? Let us listen to this cry (the prayer of a woman in a situation of poverty):

“I am alone and very often sad. I pray. No one speaks to me, no one looks at me. I have no one with whom I can speak. Wake up! Do not leave me alone and abandoned” (Gwennola Rimbaut, *Partager la Parole de Dieu avec les pauvres* [*Share the Word of God with the Poor*], p. 121).

Our Pope Francis awakens and challenges us: *We may think of the poor simply as the beneficiaries of our occasional volunteer work ... however good and useful such acts may be ... they ought to lead to a true encounter with the poor and a sharing that becomes a way of life* (First World Day of the Poor, 19 November 2017, #3).

“A sharing that becomes a way of life...” In accord with our own vocation, how can we live, with more integrity, this conviction that the poor are at the center of our lives? Are we not called, among other things, to change our lifestyle? A change of lifestyle based on the principle of the common good, which demands sharing, simplicity, and responsibility.

We are called to change our behavior, especially in our habits of consumption; to live better together; to engage in the struggle for peace and justice; and to draw ever closer to the most vulnerable, so that they are truly at the center of our lives and our faith. Everything goes together.

What do you think Saint Vincent? *Affective love must pass to effective love, which is to be engaged in the works of the Charity and the service of poor persons, undertaken with joy, courage, fidelity, and love* (CCD IX, 466; Conference 51, The Spirit of the Company, 9 February 1653).

2. A call: to overcome obstacles

Let us return, once again, to the message for the World Day of the Poor: *“Blessed, therefore, are the open hands that embrace the poor and help them: they are hands that bring hope. Blessed are the hands that reach beyond every barrier of culture, religion and nationality, and pour the balm of consolation over the wounds of humanity. Blessed are the open hands that ask nothing in exchange, with no “ifs” or “buts” or “maybes”:* they are hands that call down God’s blessing upon their brothers and sisters” (Pope Francis, 19 November 2017, #5).

Pope Francis provides us with a road map and invites us to continue what we all want to put in place on behalf of our brothers and sisters, migrants, who arrive every day to lands that are unknown to them. To be open, welcome, aid, overcome obstacles of all kinds ... an unconditional welcome ... Is this easy? Is it obvious?

The call to “overcome obstacles” of cultures, languages, religions, and nationalities surely resounds in each one of us. We are all very aware of the obstacles that exist within us, among us, and with regard to the other who is different.

We are fearful, especially of being too disturbed, fearful of our own limitations, fearful of being consumed by the other’s sufferings. Welcoming the stranger can produce mixed feelings of joy, anxiety, and mistrust. Up to what point does one extend a welcome? *“Make yourselves at home!”* Certainly, we have extended this invitation, but of what are we afraid? Let us break down these barriers!

There are many communalities among us and among the different branches of the Vincentian Family, but there is also much diversity. How do we accept them? How do we use that extraordinary and complementary richness for the common good, for those who are poorest? We must identify possible obstacles and tear down the barriers!

With regard to the other who is different: *“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”* The one who is different can disturb us greatly. He/she comes from elsewhere, is unknown, has other reference points, other lifestyle habits, other ways of living relationships ... expectations, many expectations. Welcoming is a way to go together, the other and me, the other and us, together. Come on, break down the barriers!

We are all strangers to one another and there will be no encounter, and therefore no true welcome, unless this reality is recognized and accepted. To love the other with his/her difference is the only possibility for true and long-term love. This is our common value, it is our faith, it is the gospel in action.

A new world arises whenever we take the risk to become a place of asylum for the most vulnerable (Véronique Margon, *La Parole tout près de ton cœur [The Word So Near Your Heart]*, p. 38).

With this prayer of Pope Francis in Lesbos in 2016, let us ask the Lord to help us overcome all obstacles:

*“Inspire us, as nations, communities and individuals,
to see that those who come to our shores are our
brothers and sisters.
May we share with them the blessings we have received
from your hand,
and recognize that together, as one human family,
we are all migrants, journeying in hope to you,
our true home,
where every tear will be wiped away,
where we will be at peace and safe in your embrace”*

(A Remembering of the Victims of Migration, 9 April 2016).

What do you think Saint Vincent? *To be a Christian and to see our brother suffering without weeping with him, without being sick with him! ... It's being a caricature of a Christian; it's inhuman* (CCD XII, 222; Conference 207, Charity (Common Rules, Chapter II, Article 12), 30 May 1659).

3. A gospel attitude: reciprocal welcoming

God became man, our brother. He did not bend down toward us. He settled with us, face-to-face, to speak to us, to listen to us, to lead us toward our brothers and sisters, to bring us to the Father. He gave us, gave everything and, at the same time, he did not want to be and do without us: *"I wish that where I am, they may also be with me"* (John 17:24).

And us? We want to give. We want to give effectively and generously, but what would we be without our sisters and brothers who are poor? What do they teach us?

Our Pope Francis uses an expression dear to Saint Vincent: *"They can be teachers who help us live the faith more consistently* (World Day of the Poor, 19 November 2017, #7).

Last May, when marking the 50th anniversary of the erection of the Diocese of Val d'Oise in France, "the more vulnerable" individuals were invited to distribute copies of the Gospel of Saint Luke and to participate in the celebration.

Let me share with you three things they said.

"First, I was filled with joy to have been called to this wonderful mission. When you asked me to come with you to distribute the Gospels, I said "yes" immediately ... I accepted even though it was early in the morning! I soon realized that we were not being asked to do some service, but that we were being given a gift! We were chosen, we, the most vulnerable individuals in the Val d'Oise! It is we who bring the Good News to the respectable people!"

"I liked it when they read the passage where Jesus spoke in the church and said that the Spirit of God was with him and that he came to bring the Good News to those persons who are poor. I told myself that we also received the Spirit of God when we had the baptism and that we too, when we arrive with the Gospel, bring, like Jesus, the Good News to the poor. We are poor, but Jesus needs us to bring the Gospel to the poor too."

"The priest said that he would pray for me and asked me to pray for him! Do you realize, he is counting on my prayer. So, I do not forget, I am obliged to pray for him, because he relies on me!"

So then, who gives and who receives?

Let us question ourselves and hear this call to live with an open heart, and in truth, the call to live a simple and humble companionship where, together, we can walk toward a new future because, that is how the Lord speaks to us:

"Lo, I will spread prosperity over her like a river and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing torrent. As nurslings, you shall be carried in her arms, and fondled in her lap; as a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you; in Jerusalem, you shall find your comfort. When you see this, your heart shall rejoice" (Isaiah 66:12-14).

Yes, Lord, truly *"We are all the work of your hands"* (Isaiah 64:7), brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, men and women who are alike in their thirst to be recognized and to be loved.

For this reason, our different commitments lead us to put all our strength enthusiastically in the gift of ourselves in order to respond to the cries of those who are poor, through concrete gestures of solidarity and communion, and require us to give priority to the dimension of sharing, participation, and reciprocal welcoming.

“No one is so poor that he/she has nothing to share” (Bishop Bernard Housset, final message of the Diaconia gathering, 2013).

Giving and receiving can become a way of being, a way of living in communion in order to *“protect our common home”* (*Laudato Si’*, #13), thus bringing about the coming of God’s kingdom now. It is a sign of gospel communion that highlights the equal dignity of the children of God.

What do you think Saint Vincent? *“You must treat poor persons with great gentleness and respect: with gentleness, reflecting that they have to open heaven for you; for the poor have that advantage of opening heaven* (CCD X, 545; Conference 115, Rules for the Sisters in Parishes (Articles 12-18 and Appendix), 25 November 1659).

Conclusion

I believe it important to repeat here that, in all our branches, we are particularly sensitive to the dimension of caring, of taking care of others. We also know that this involves looking at the person in every dimension, the meaning of real charity as understood by the Church and by our Family.

I am going to read for you a short extract from an article by Father Thomasset (A Jesuit at the Centre Sèvres in Paris), who associated the notion of “taking care” to the dimension of “charity”:

“The word “charity” should be understood as a concern to provide for the needs of others, but also as the need to manifest to all the love with which God loves us. Charity is the love of God in action, the expression of faith in the One who, like the Good Samaritan, came to the aid of wounded humanity, took care of it, and took it to the inn of reconciliation and rest” (*Christus* #234, April 2012, p. 194).

Charity is a dimension that is bound up intimately with all our actions, our thoughts, and our spirituality, that of Saint Vincent. The only challenge that I dare express is perhaps the following: take time, in our different meeting places, to reflect on our way of thinking and, above all, to live charity, that received from Christ.

I have been asked to present challenges for the whole Vincentian Family. I renounced this challenge, because we are such a large Family with so many branches and ramifications, so many different contexts, different stories, that it would be risky to become too concrete.

I tried, rather, to highlight **seven invitations**, which take up the essential points addressed, or which are their logical consequences.

Perhaps these can be deepened and, especially, reinforced in the practical order, in your places of mission and where you live. Reinforced, because it is obvious that these invitations are not new. However, as sons and daughters of Saint Vincent, we are called to “more”:

- Integrating people living in poverty situations ever better into projects, their planning, their evaluation. We believe that the Kingdom is theirs.
- Living in communion with our sisters and brothers who are poorest, reaching out in friendship, being evangelized and sharing the word of God together.
- Learning to know each other better among the various branches, being happy to enrich one another and work together more where we are.
- Pursuing with conviction ongoing formation within our different branches, studying Saint Vincent’s thought in depth in light of the gospel and the Church’s social teaching.

- Responding dynamically to the calls of the excluded, impelling us to take initiatives on behalf of peace and justice, committing ourselves simply with our sisters and brothers who suffer.
- Changing our behavior with regard to the use of common goods and the earth's resources, being convinced that the future depends on us today.
- Preserving the simplicity and humility so desired by Saint Vincent, so that our daily encounters are characterized by respect, gentleness, and compassion, living the gospel ever more.

Isaiah has accompanied us from the beginning and shows us how much the future depends on us now. Therefore, let us conclude with him, because

If we place the poor at the center of our lives, if we overcome the obstacles, if we live reciprocal welcoming then ...

“Light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday; then the Lord will guide you always ... You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose water never fails. The ancient ruins shall be rebuilt for your sake, and the foundations from ages past you shall raise up; ‘repairer of the breach,’ they shall call you, ‘restorer of ruined homesteads’” (Isaiah 58:10-12).

Toward what future? *“The future depends on the decision to love, with all that it implies and all that it requires” (Pierre Ganne, *Le pauvre et le prophète [The Poor and the Prophet]*, p. 32).*

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