

A Frank Look at the Present: Our Vincentian Identity Today

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The second part of the *Final Document* asks us to take “a close look at the present.” This expression compels us to avoid concentrating our energy on dwelling on a mythic past and to use it for discovering our identity in the midst of the phenomenon of globalization in which we are actually living.

Our Founding Father gives us a model for living on this point. If his time is rich in masters of spiritual writing (the period of the French School), St. Vincent is above all a man of action, and it is life and experience which “teach” him what is good to undertake.

*Let us love God, confreres, let us love God but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.... **For there are several who, having achieved an external equilibrium and a mind filled with lovely thoughts about God, stop there; and when this comes to reality and they find themselves needing to do something, they fall short.** They flatter themselves with their over-heated imagination; they are satisfied with the nice conversations they have with God at prayer; they even speak about him like angels, but emerging from that if there is a question of working for God, suffering, mortifying themselves, teaching the poor, going in search of the lost sheep, liking being without something, dealing with the sick or some other calamity, alas!, there is no one there, they lack the courage. No, no, let us not deceive ourselves.¹*

Can we also be like him, starting from experience and life in order to “seize” our identity at the start of this third millennium?

¹ COSTE XI, 40-41.

The “present”

This little word at the end of the title shows that there is no question of studying our identity as it existed in the past, nor will it cover how it will be in the future, even the near future, but what interests us above all is the identity which should animate us “today.” Since it is a Malagasy Vincentian who is writing, and to be more correct in the approach to the subject proposed, he prefers to engage with the subject from the perspective of the situation in his own country. We are not, however, going to confine our “look” only to the situation in Madagascar, because as the discussion develops we will realise that the important questions which challenge us arise everywhere, with some differences but basically the same.

Here in Madagascar these important questions are summarised by an expression which is very dear to the province: how to be “fully Vincentian and fully Malagasy?” (*sady vensanianina no malagasy*). We must not reverse the two components of the expression; the first one makes the basic point and initiates a descriptive movement in which the second, drawn on by a natural linkage, attaches a supplementary specification which is to some extent new.² This is the incarnation process. Jesus, the Son of God, is *sady Andriamanitra no olombelona* (fully God and fully man): “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). This should also be the process of all evangelization.

From this fact one is tempted to conclude that it is inculturation which will be dealt with in this article, all the more so since this has more or less become the “fashion.” But that is not exactly what is intended. I realise that that is an urgent problem,³ but, in order to get there, there has to be more in-depth research. But the time limit imposed on me for teasing out “the present” does not permit me to do this. This will be just a quick glance at the question. I expect that other studies will follow.

It is for these different reasons that I propose to reword the question like this: “*How would St. Vincent act in Madagascar at this beginning of the third millennium?*”⁴ But I want immediately to give assurance that this will not be fiction, because, following the lead of our Founding Father, we are starting from the concrete situation.

In order to answer this question it is important to revisit the “end” of the Congregation as St. Vincent wished it when starting.

² Cf. G. GIRAUDO, “Prière eucharistique et inculturation,” in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 116 (1994), p. 183.

³ Cf. B. RAMAROSON, “Fihavanana, Fianakaviana, vie communautaire,” in *Aspects du Christianisme*, Juillet-Août 1995, pp. 123-138.

⁴ Hence the subtitle which I have added to the title which was suggested to me.

The end of the Congregation: Vincentian charism, Vincentian identity

I deliberately emphasise that Vincentian spirituality is nothing other than the end of the Congregation of the Mission⁵ and one may even extend this equally to the other Vincentian foundations because the same spirit animated St. Vincent in organising them. It is true that in the context of the CM itself a lot of ink has flowed on the matter of this end. One can recall the long exciting, and excited, debates of the different assemblies. **But for St. Vincent it was clear right from the start: “The evangelization of the poor is not one of the reasons for being a Vincentian, but it is THE reason.”**⁶ It was what he had experienced in Folleville and Châtillon (1617) which pushed Vincent to initiate the various foundations whose end is single: “To bring the Good News to the abandoned and disinherited.” This very strong emphasis by the Congregation has been affirmed unequivocally in the very foundation contract,⁷ and repeated in all official documents. Later on it resurfaces in his letters and all through his conferences.⁸ For St. Vincent perfection lies in

⁵ I do not intend here raising the points made by R.P. Maloney when he speaks of the “virtues” as the basis of Vincentian spirituality. I wish, rather, to place the “end” of the Congregation at the centre of Vincentian spirituality and thus extend what he develops when he starts with the virtues, by bringing forward this charism. Fr. Maloney recognises this on p. 14: “The Vincentian spirit is the Spirit of Christ sent to preach the good news to the poor, which manifests itself in the gospel maxims explained in the Common Rules...”

⁶ (This or that) “[do] not matter; our VOCATION is *Evangelizare pauperibus!*” (COSTE XII, p. 90).

⁷ The contract of the CM (17 April 1625): “... devote themselves entirely and exclusively to the salvation of the poor common people” (COSTE XIII, 198; English Vol. 13a, 214). The act of approval by the Archbishop of Paris (24 April 1626) specifies the association as follows: “... some priests who are serving in the missions, catechizing, preaching, and encouraging the poor country people to make general confessions...” (COSTE XIII, 203; English Vol. 13a, 218). The Act of Association of the First Missionaries (4 September 1626) uses the same terms: “... to devote ourselves to the salvation of the poor country people” (COSTE XIII, 204; English Vol. 13a, 222). Finally, the Bull of Erection of the Congregation, *Salvatoris nostri*, of Urban VIII, well emphasises that “The principal purpose and special goal of this Congregation and its members is, by the grace of God, along with their own salvation, to dedicate themselves to the salvation of those who live on the estates, in the countryside, on farms, in hamlets, and in insignificant places” (COSTE XIII, 260; English Vol. 13a, 298).

⁸ We cannot go through all the conferences here. We will merely pick out certain ones: “Is there anything which more [resembles Christ’s mission] than going from village to village to help the poor people to save themselves” (COSTE XI, 1). “As God has destined us to serve the poor” (COSTE XI, 68-69). “The missionaries are obliged by their state, by their vocation, to serve the most wretched, the most abandoned and the most overwhelmed by bodily and

evangelizare pauperibus. That is why one can say, **without beating about the bush, that the Vincentian identity is based on *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*.**⁹

If we wish, then, to have a look at Vincentian spirituality today in Madagascar, we must do so by starting from this Vincentian heritage.

Malagasy reality

The Malagasy reality is something which will help us to focus on this spirituality. Without wishing to make a comparison or draw a parallel, the present-day situation in Madagascar in many ways reminds us of what St. Vincent experienced in France in the 17th century. This will enable us to emphasise that everything combines to make us conclude that this Vincentian charism must hold first place in the evangelization of the island.

The deprivation which the people are experiencing seems at present to be reaching crisis point. Anyone going through the different parts of Madagascar, the rural areas and, above all, the outskirts of the towns, which are growing enormously because of the drift from the countryside, can see for himself the reality of poverty. It shows itself mainly in the lack of the most basic necessities. Scarcity is widespread and, as always, it brings epidemics in its wake. There is an increase in the “4 Ms.”¹⁰ Moreover, lack of security is rife in the towns as well as in the countryside. This social degradation becomes a seedbed for sects.

Madeleine RAMAHOLIMIHASO, a Catholic action official who worked in the Pontifical Council for the Laity in Rome, ends up one of her talks on the situation in Madagascar:

The totalitarian temptation of Marxist ideology¹¹ which has created “the new man” has uprooted and depersonalised the

spiritual calamities” (COSTE XI, 77). In what is usually called his “innermost thought” (the conferences given in the two final years of his life) Vincent never tires of repeating that the end of the Company is *pauperibus evangelizare misit me* (Conference of 6 December 1658, COSTE XII, 73-94).

⁹ When St. Vincent organised the CM he added a fourth vow to the usual three, the vow of stability. This is a vow to devote oneself for all one’s life, not just to the Congregation but especially in the CM for the salvation of the rural poor according to the rules and regulations currently in force (COSTE XIII, 283-286; English Vol. 13a, 315-317).

¹⁰ This is the name given to the street children in Madagascar. Cf. DENISE GAULT, *Pedro ou les collines du courage*, p. 27. “In the town people call them the 4 Ms. because the local words which describe them begin with M: violence, drugs, alcohol, prostitution.”

¹¹ The author is here speaking of the *ancien régime* (the Second Republic) which was of a socialist tendency.

*Malagasy people who from now on have neither a past nor a future. Can we be surprised at the attraction of the sects or drugs, or the regarding as normal the riots and rural uprisings?*¹²

This grim picture recalls what St. Vincent experienced at the time he set up the various foundations. Here is how Dodin sums it up in his book *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité*:

*Wars and epidemics, invariably escorted by famine, methodically ravaged all the provinces.... This underfed, maltreated and often unsettled people cannot attain a better cultural level.... Similar economic and cultural conditions favour rapid and collective changes of opinion. In the space of a few weeks families, villages or districts abandon the Catholic faith or abjure Protestantism. Wandering prophets rouse up towns, bogus messiahs evoke enthusiasm and the following month they are totally forgotten....*¹³

If that is the way reality is, how can this charism be lived out? Let us try first of all to understand *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*.

Misit me

St. Vincent wanted to call the Congregation: **The Congregation of the Mission**. This was not by chance, but by design. Because of this, every Vincentian should be a missionary, that is to say an **envoy like Christ**. He must clothe himself in the Spirit of Christ who was sent by the Father:¹⁴ “As the Father has sent me I send you” (Jn 20:21). What is important for us in this saying of Christ is “**as the**

¹² M. RAMAHOLIMIHASO, *Qui montre le droit chemin communique la vie*, Ed. Foi et Justice, Antananarivo 1995. (Emphasis added by the author of this article).

¹³ A. DODIN, *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité*, Maîtres Spirituels, 1976, pp 6-7. Cf. also, L. MEZZADRI, *Vincent de Paul (1581-1660)*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1985, chapters 7-8, pp. 103-117. But for a more profound study we can refer to the article by RENOARD, “Les pauvres au temps de St Vincent,” in *Au temps de St Vincent... et aujourd’hui (1581-1981)*, Animation Vincentienne, Bordeaux 1981, pp. 17-36. An interesting bibliography is at the end of the article.

¹⁴ On 17 May 1658, after he had distributed the Rules, Vincent de Paul urged everyone to put them into practice because “they are drawn from the gospel and they tend to conform our life with that which our Lord lived while on earth. **Our Lord came, and was sent by his Father to evangelise the poor. Pauperibus evangelizare misit me (Lk 4:18). Pauperibus, to the poor! Fathers, to the poor, as if, by God’s grace, a task for the little Company to undertake.**” (Emphasis added by the author).

Father has sent me.” The Father sent Christ to reveal his love, and it is **this love which liberates and brings hope:** it is the Good News of Salvation. This is what Jesus stresses when he quotes the text from Isaiah (Is 61:1-11): “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor” (Lk 4:18). Other Isaian texts bring together in an admirable way the deep sense of the messianic activity of Jesus, and they inspired Vincent de Paul in everything he undertook and they should therefore animate each Vincentian: “On that day the deaf will hear the reading from a book and, emerging from the obscurity of darkness, the eyes of the blind will see. More and more the humble will rejoice in the Lord. And the poor will exult because of the Holy One of Israel” (Is 29:18-19). “Then the lame will leap like a deer and the mouth of the dumb will shout with joy” (Is 35:5-6).

Because of this, a Vincentian in the footsteps of Christ is someone who is sent to make God’s love known. **To be a missionary is to continue Jesus Christ sent by the Father:**¹⁵

*This is what the missionaries undertake to do; their speciality is to be dedicated to the poor, like Jesus Christ. Our vocation is, then, a continuation of his or, at least, related to his in the circumstances. What happiness, my brothers! But what obligations we have to appreciate this.*¹⁶

This “enterprise,” started by the Son of God, to which a Vincentian is called, is *Evangelizare pauperibus*.

Evangelizare pauperibus

A Vincentian, like Christ, is, then, an “envoy” to evangelise the poor. Evangelization was the main theme of the last Synod of Africa and Madagascar. Many of the points raised call for an in-depth study but this is not possible in the framework of our analysis.¹⁷

If one speaks of St. Vincent in the context of evangelization, one may bring up two guidelines which in fact are only one: human development and evangelization. When St. Vincent speaks of the poor he means principally the concrete human individually, a

¹⁵ J. MORIN, *Carnets Vincentiens*, No. 1, Dax, 1991.

¹⁶ COSTE XII, 80.

¹⁷ I draw your attention to an interesting article by a confrere-bishop who was present at this synod. He wanted to bring out the points which were of most interest to a Vincentian. Cf. GERMANO GRACHANE, “Reflections on the special session of the Synod of the African Bishops,” in *Vincentiana* (January-February 1995), pp. 21-26.

person in the full reality of his existence, in his longing for “a better deal,” in order “to be more fully human.”¹⁸

“To evangelize the poor person” means bringing the Good News, means first of all freeing him from the “evil” which oppresses him, in order to “make him fully human.” That is the basic relation of St. Vincent to the poor.¹⁹ He always views these latter as “victims” who need to be freed. This freeing is effective only in so far as it recognises Christ as the true man. As a matter of fact, the Council says:

... only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.... He Who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), is Himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam He restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too.²⁰

That is the route taken by St. Vincent. We are not going to speak here of the everyday practices of this Vincentian experience, but how can one understand this charism today in Madagascar?

Continuity and tradition

It is not surprising that in a continent where the majority lives below the threshold of extreme poverty the Symposium of the Bishops’ Conferences of Africa and Madagascar has chosen an option for the poor.²¹ In so far as we are Vincentian we cannot but be a party to that. We should even say that this is not, like some institutes, a preferential option. For us Vincentians it is our *raison d’être*, as we have already stressed.

The task of human development is an integral dimension, an internal demand, of evangelization,²² because the poor person to be

¹⁸ In his first encyclical *Redemptor hominis* the Pope reminds us that, for the Church, all ways lead to man.... He is the primary and fundamental way for the Church (cf. § 14).

¹⁹ We recall the different encounters of Vincent de Paul: those of Folleville and Châtillon. In Folleville spiritual misery was present, in Châtillon, physical. But both of them diminished the person, oppressed him.

²⁰ *Gaudium et spes*, No. 22.

²¹ Cf. “Déclaration du SCEAM” after the 7th plenary session, in *Documentation Catholique* 1913 (March 1996), pp. 263-268.

²² PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, No. 31: “Between evangelization and human advancement — development and liberation — there are in fact profound links. These include links of an anthropological order, because the man who is to be evangelized is not an abstract being but is subject to social

evangelised is not an abstract being, but a subject of social and economic questions. He therefore needs an integral development. This attitude is not, of course, something new in the Congregation. The starting point for our Founding Father was every form of material or spiritual poverty seen in its various forms in the actual lives of people: sickness, ignorance, need, rejection, loneliness, insecurity, discrimination or oppression.

But at the end of this second millennium, the situation which prevails in Madagascar urges (“the charity of Christ urges us” [2 Cor 5:14]) to discover a new “stimulant” for a life of communion with the disinherited on all sides. The Congregation, in reacting to this call, the fundamental option for the poor, and I would even say radical for the poor (it must be at the root of everything which the Vincentian takes on) answers also the call of Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the 1986 General Assembly: *Search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short and long-term solutions.... By doing so, you will work for the credibility of the Gospel and the Church.*²³

How can all that be lived out concretely today in Madagascar?

“Fihavanana,” the place and route of communion with the poor

It is well to emphasise right now that there is no “miracle solution” which would be applicable to all situations; love alone is the route to be travelled because it is “infinitely inventive” (COSTE XI, 146). However, as evangelization is the foundation of this liberation, I dare to say that **there is no evangelization outside a cultural framework.**²⁴ **Evangelization always develops within a language and culture.**

That is why I suggest that one should reflect on *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*, starting from the category of *Fihavanana* which impregnates and animates the everyday life of a Malagasy (this is a

and economic questions. They also include links in the theological order, since one cannot dissociate the plan of creation from the plan of Redemption. The latter plan touches the very concrete situations of injustice to be combated and of justice to be restored.”

²³ These words of John Paul II echo those spoken by his predecessor, Paul VI, on the occasion of the 1974 General Assembly: “You will continue to be the hope of the poor.”

²⁴ Cf. PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, No. 20: “The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures.”

strong sense of relationship, solidarity, communion).²⁵ This means that the poor should be considered as *havana*, members of the *fihavanana*, and not outsiders. A point which should be emphasised here is that there is no Malagasy word to translate “outsider”; the word *vahiny* is used, which also means “guest.” But the poor person should not be merely a *vahiny*; he must be considered a *havana*. For poor persons to be really *havana* they must retain their *hasina* (dignity), they must be reintegrated into the life of the community and not remain as persons who are permanently being helped.

This is true liberation, as Pope Paul VI teaches in his exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*:

*With regard to the liberation which evangelization proclaims and strives to put into practice one should rather say this: — it cannot be contained in the simple and restricted dimension of economics, politics, social or cultural life; it must envisage the whole man, in all his aspects, right up to and including his openness to the absolute, even the divine Absolute.*²⁶

For this to be effective, the Vincentians must not only be for the poor but primarily with the poor (our Superior General’s Advent letter of 2004 urges us in this direction). This is possible if we are always **attentive to the welcoming, the hospitality, which involve us in a real sharing of living.** And here we come back to what the Founding Father wanted from the start, **the secular character** of the Congregation so that it would always be near to people and to poor people.

This must begin inside the community. The community must be a real means and place of evangelization of the poor. So that it may really become this, community life must take family life as its model,²⁷ **a place of sharing and participation**, a place where persons become brothers and sisters.²⁸

²⁵ Cf. F. BENOLO, “Inculturation et identité vincentienne à Madagascar,” in *COVIAM*, 1994.

²⁶ PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, No. 33.

²⁷ Community living is an important part of the Vincentian charism. This deserves to be developed here, all the more so since community is doubly important. First of all, it was always wanted by St. Vincent as a “pillar” of all evangelization. Secondly, the sense of community is very strong in Madagascar.

²⁸ The latest document from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life is very rich on this point: *Fraternal Life in Community*.

Church-family, community-family

St. Vincent in his conferences on community life often borrowed from the vocabulary of family life to describe relationships in community and the role of community in mission.²⁹

This idea of family needs to be developed, all the more so since the last African Synod considered it to be the key concept of evangelization: "Church-family."³⁰ This is not really new, especially in Madagascar, but it must be rediscovered in depth in order to show what the Church is. In stressing this aspect, in fact, we should put in first place the idea of solidarity and communion so dear to the concept of *fihavanana*. And since in the great Malagasy family each one has his place and role, it will be the same in the Church-family.

The way for putting this key concept into practice runs through the creation of living and mature ecclesial communities³¹ (i.e., basic ecclesial communities). We cannot expand on this important aspect to pastoral ministry. That would come under a different heading. We are merely mentioning it. Here again St. Vincent was "revolutionary" because he always believed in lay involvement. In fact it was he who first dared to get involved in organising associations of lay people so that they could have a part in works of charity and therefore in evangelization. One could even say that what St. Vincent did for the laity was prophetic.³² And more especially in Madagascar, at the start of this third millennium of Christianity, lay people, following the example of their ancestor Blessed Victoire Rasoamanarivo, are more than asked to share in evangelization. There will be no real evangelization without their participation. It is the catechists who animate the bush parishes. They must be helped to push further ahead to really find their place, and the Congregation, endowed with the experiences of its Founding Father, can enable them.³³

²⁹ Cf. J. MORIN, *op. cit.*, No. 1, pp. 87-96.

³⁰ P.B. Nothomb has given a long theological and pastoral reflection on this key-concept in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* (1995), pp. 44-64.

³¹ John Paul II in his post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles laici* devotes whole paragraphs to explain the necessity of forming mature ecclesial communities "in which the faith might radiate and fulfill the basic meaning of adherence to the person of Christ and his Gospel, of an encounter and sacramental communion with him, and of an existence lived in charity and in service" (No. 34).

³² Cf. J. MORIN, *op. cit.*, No. 3, Dax, p. 46: "Without doubt it was St. Vincent who started the **apostolate of a group by the group**, because it was he who, in the 17th century, entrusted the task of serving and evangelising the poor to the poor." (Emphasis added by the present author).

³³ On this point I draw your attention to the interesting article "The impact of the African Synod on the Vincentians in Africa," by JEAN-BAPTISTE NSAMBI E MBULA in *Vincentiana* (January-February 1995), pp. 27-33.

In this context, what sort of formation?

We must get to a formation plan which meets this need: fully Vincentian and fully Malagasy, within the context of globalization. This calls for **a strong human formation which tends towards real maturity in order to meet this global culture, which causes the spread of ignorance of real human values, and then a deep spiritual formation which leads to the primacy of God.** This means that formators need to change their approach in their thinking and practice: real experience and contact with Christ, the poor, knowledge of doctrines, dogmas, spirituality is needed. This is obvious. But it calls for, and this is perhaps very urgent in the present-day context, an emphasis on experience. Personal intimate experience of Christ is primary in arriving at a real choice of life which leads you to a real state of living. That is what is lacking in our formation programmes. **The priesthood remains a job and not a state of life.**

It is one thing to know Jesus intellectually, but it is something else to follow him. This calls for a real personal encounter (cf. the rich young man in the gospel: he knew Jesus “intellectually” because he addressed him as “Master,” but when Jesus called him he did not wish to follow). We need to change from a too intellectual formation, which has been the arrangement up to now, to **an “experiential” formation.** (Forgive my use of this rather crude neologism, borrowed from the English). And this way of approaching what a formation should be is very close to our African and Malagasy mentality, which always puts contact in first place, something concrete, which is experience. It is in this sense that real inculturation is achieved.

A formation project

If we really get to grips with this necessity, not to say urgency, it is not so much formation programmes which we need (there are too many of them), **but new models which give priority to human development and spiritual development, which help young people to live this personal and intimate experience with Christ, so that they can make the choice.** Academic competence is important but it should be oriented towards this human and spiritual development. Intellectual results are certainly needed, but they should not be the only things looked at. We must look in depth at the progress towards a choice of life.

These models of formation should take into consideration the problems previously developed.

Evangelized by the poor (Mt 25:31-46)

An important point of Vincentian spirituality is that “as evangeliser of the poor a Vincentian is evangelized by the poor.” The radical option for the poor is not just this primary attention which we should bring to them. It is also our docility to the message of which they are carriers. In that way we allow ourselves to be evangelised because there is something evangelical in those whom Christ himself chose by preference. That is above all the significance of Mt 25:31-45,³⁴ on which St. Vincent loved to comment.

Let us return to this text as a conclusion, in order to understand certain expressions used by St. Vincent, such as “We must treat the poor with gentleness and respect, remembering that it is **to our Lord** that we render this service” (COSTE X, 680). “But turn the medal around and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is shown to us by these poor persons” (COSTE XI, 32). We know that St. Vincent reached these conclusions from Mt 25:40: “*Each time you have done this to a little one, to a poor person, it is to me that you have done it.*” What is the meaning of these words of Christ?

Without claiming to be an exegete,³⁵ it is interesting to look more closely at them so as not to fall into exactly the opposite sense.

This conclusion of Jesus comes after his declaration about what the “just” have achieved. These latter rightly claim that it is a gratuitous love, without asking questions about the identity of the person loved, which urged them to carry out these acts. That is what the Good Samaritan did in Lk 10:29-37: “Seek only to love.” When St. Vincent taught that we must turn the medal around, this does not mean merely seeing only Jesus in the person whom one is meeting. If it were merely that, that would be just a calculation and not genuine love! It is the love of Christ in us, the result of faith,³⁶ which urges us to love the other person just as he is, without asking his identity, to

³⁴ This text is proper to Matthew, as the Good Samaritan is proper to Luke (10:30-37). Both passages are often quoted by St. Vincent in his conferences. In fact one of the keys to getting at the sense of this teaching of Christ in Matthew is the parable from Luke.

³⁵ Many studies and commentaries have been written on this passage in Matthew. I point out one which seems to me to be very interesting, and very rich from the point of view of bibliographical references. A. FEUILLET, “Le caractère universel du jugement et la charité sans frontières,” in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 102 (March-April 1980), pp. 179-196.

³⁶ St. Vincent stresses this: “Turn the medal around and **you will see by the light of faith** that the Son of God, who wished to be poor, is present to us in these poor persons.” It is faith, then, that makes Christ present in the poor. (Emphasis added by the present author).

love him for himself. Like Christ, the Good Samaritan,³⁷ **to seek only to love**, is our sole aim. And that is the significance of “the charity of Christ which urges us” (2 Cor 5:14), the motto of the Daughters of Charity. Of course this will not be natural goodness, a humanitarianism, or some philosophy or other, but an authentic love rooted in faith, total communion with Jesus, such as lived by St. Paul and which made him say: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who is in me” (Gal 2:20). It is this Christ who is in me who therefore pushes me to serve no matter whom, and allows me to see in that person the face of Christ. In other words, it is Christ in me who reveals himself in the other person and who moves me to love him. That is why, when evangelising the poor, one is evangelised by them; one receives the Good News from them, the Person of Christ Himself.³⁸

This is why we can state that relationship with the poor person never has just one meaning. It makes us see another perspective, enriching and mystical: the meeting with Christ who calls us “to seek only to love like him, with no contamination, without expecting any other return.” (“*Love one another AS I have loved you,*” Jn 15:12).

(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)

³⁷ Broadly speaking, St. Vincent comments on this parable of Jesus every time he speaks of charity. We have an in-depth exegetical analysis done by L. RAMAROSON, “Comme le Bon Samaritain, ne chercher qu’à aimer,” in *Biblica* 56 (1975), pp. 533-536.

³⁸ John Paul II suggests this, when speaking to health workers in *Christifideles laici*, 53: “It is to just such people — doctors, nurses, other healthcare workers, volunteers — that **the call becomes the living sign of Jesus Christ and his Church in showing love towards the sick and suffering.** (Emphasis added by the present author).