

Rome, 25 January 2006

*Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul
and the Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission*

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

Dear Brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your heart now and forever!

I write to you today with great joy as we celebrate once again the Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission. I pray that God might give us the grace to continue to be a vibrant, prophetic presence in the world where we are called to serve and evangelize especially the most abandoned. To do so, I encourage you to continue to reflect in a prayerful way on our Constitutions and Statutes that clearly spell out who we are called to be in the 21st century. As Fr. McCullen pointed out in his letter of introduction to the Constitutions, "Within the covers of this book our identity as a Congregation in the Church is delineated. We must not be content to leave that delineation on paper alone. The text must now be imprinted on our hearts and lived out in our vocation to preach the gospel to the poor."

I certainly have confidence in the grace of God and the goodness of each and every one of the confreres of the Congregation that we will, on this occasion of the celebration of the Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, renew our faithfulness to Our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we encounter in the poor we are called to evangelize and serve.

At this time also, I would like to announce the recipients of the Systemic Change Award for 2006. They are from the Provinces of Madagascar, North India, Slovenia, Peru and Eastern USA. Below, I will give a brief description of these projects and how they hope to bring about systemic change in the lives of the oppressed poor. Each project recipient will receive US \$20,000. Because of the size and nature of the projects submitted, the General Council has decided that all the award money will be given to the recipients in 2006, instead of awarding the money over a two-year period as was described in the application form received by all the Visitors.

Province of Madagascar

Promotion and social integration of the rejected persons in the villages of Nohona and Tanantsara, near Vohipeno in Madagascar, presented by Emeric Amyot d'Inville.

There is in the region of Vohipeno, Diocese of Farafangana, in Madagascar, a clan of rejected persons, societal outcasts for several centuries. Their most important villages are Nohona and Tanantsara. They are considered as dogs by the other clans of the Antaimoro tribe, as well as by other tribes. They are deeply scorned and ostracized by society. They are victims of two fundamental taboos, still very alive today, which marginalize them and foster the rejection: 1) they are not permitted to marry persons outside their clan, hence the inbreeding, and 2) no one is allowed to eat meat from an animal which they have killed. If someone from another clan breaks one of these taboos, he will fall into the same rejection and he and his family will suffer serious harm.

My predecessor at Tanjomoha, Fr. Vincent Carme, tried to remedy this terrible situation of exclusion. He became one of them, defying the taboos, going to live among them and staying in the little huts in two of their principal villages. He worked at their promotion through education and evangelization.

I think that there are two levers which will make the barriers of exclusion fall:

1. The Gospel: I provide regular spiritual animation in these villages; moreover, I have preached short missions in these villages and in the neighboring villages. These bore



fruits of reconciliation and established connections among the opposing clans.

2. Education: I continue to support sewing classes in the villages, as well as the hostel for the young rejected



persons in Tanjomoha, who are studying in Vohipeno. We are ready to implement a new and important educational project, the creation of a private nursery and elementary school in Tanantsara, one of the principal villages of the rejected persons.

The purpose of the Tanantsara's primary school, like all the other educational projects mentioned above, is to make fall the barriers of exclusion and scorn, of which this clan of rejected persons is the victim:

1. by offering a good scholastic education to these rejected young persons;
2. by promoting, at the same time, the integration of these young people into the surrounding society.

Province of North India

Fr. Vincent loved children and cared much for them, especially foundlings and orphans. He would shake the consciousness of the Ladies of Charity saying: "You have become their mothers by adoption and by abandoning them you become their executioners." We, the Vincentians in India, have inherited his passion for the well being of children. They enjoy the highest priority in our evangelization efforts. We concentrate on their education. We do it by running schools and hostels.

Hostels are shelter homes for children for a specific purpose: their schooling. We work in rural areas, which are typically mountainous terrains. The villages are scattered in the jungles. Some



are too small to have a school and, in addition, there are no proper roads connecting these villages. Hence many children remain deprived of schooling. An alternative is to gather them in a place where there are schools. Right from the beginning our veteran missionaries did that. In fact, every mission station began with a small house by way of a shelter for the missionaries and a few children gathered from the villages for schooling. At present we have 21 hostels in which 1491 children stay and attend nearby schools. The children are provided with accommodation, food, clothing, etc. Obviously these children come from very poor families.

Ethnically 85% of them are tribal children and the others are Dalits, considered low castes. Both groups occupy the lowest rung of the social ladder economically, socially and politically.

Our hostels have positive effects on the poor segment of society in three ways:

1. The poor are powerless because of their lack of knowledge and awareness. Our hostels help to change this situation.
2. A Catholic atmosphere envelops the hostels and the residents learn the first lessons of Christian life there. They become catechists in their villages, thus opening the way for Christ. Understandably, the hostels have become an integral part of our evangelization work.
3. Hostels are our most cherished possessions for they link us directly with the poor.



A new venture we have initiated aims at creating leaders from the very poor segment of society. Students are not able to make it to the top since they come from a very poor educational background. As a result, there is very little influence and presence in the administrative level from the poor segment. This has opened our eyes recently. Hence we launched this ambitious project, giving the best education to a selected few children.

In 2004 we started a hostel for that purpose. Poor children who are exceptionally clever are selected from the villages and brought to our hostel at Gopalpur-on-sea. They study at our school, which is one of the best in the locality for academic excellence and discipline.

The goal of our new venture is to produce leaders to work for the poor segment of society.

Province of Slovenia

In May 2005, a new community was formed, caused by the necessity of circumstances. It gives young women the possibility of leaving their dysfunctional families to begin living a worthy life.

This community cropped up without foreseeing it; that is, without any special planning. But we see it as a new way of responding to the difficult situations of the present time. This work is an extension of the spiritual and therapeutic accompaniment carried out by Vincentian Father Dr. Peter Žakelj, as well as his efforts to work with youth.

Those in the community are all young women over 18 years of age. They come from families where there was very difficult physical





and psychic abuse (alcoholism, sexual violence, emotional negligence and low employment).

For these young women, the community represents a new home, a new beginning, where they can have lively relationships which orient them toward freedom.

The purpose of the project is to give the young women the possibility of going beyond the dysfunctional relationships in their families and begin living a free and responsible life.

Province of Peru

Brief history of the project: It refers to the formation of the Progressive Housing Development of Social Interest “El Huarango - Tierra Prometida (El Huarango - Promised Land),” considered of extreme poverty and situated in a desert area of the Province and Department of Ica, Peru. There are approximately 200 families coming from the resettlement of a sector of the population affected by the flooding of the Ica River in 1998 and who were totally helpless.

The accompaniment offered by the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian confreres of the Congregation of the Mission from the beginning of the formation of this village aroused hope in the middle of the desert.



Community evangelization is promoted and encouraged through the central committee, the mothers' club and the local meetings, using a methodology of participative work, which responds to basic necessities.

Purpose of the project: a better quality of life for the 200 families through the areas of health, education, nutrition, recreation, ecology, and religion.

Specific objectives:

1. Drilling a tubular well for the water supply;
2. Planting of trees in the streets of the village;
3. Lectures on preventive health care.



Eastern Province, USA

The unjust structures that burden the poor manifest themselves in many ways, including access to higher education, access to medical care, entrance into labor markets, participation in the marketplace, and access to technology. To begin to address some of these seemingly intractable issues, the Vincentian community at Niagara University, under confrere Joseph L. Levesque, proposes to develop an inter-faith institute of public ministry. It is our contention that leaders in the faith community know how to effectively serve the poor. Therefore, by building their capacity to do so and by assisting them in pursuing available resources, we will better be able to promote and effect the sort of systemic change that is consistent with the aims of this award and that is sought by the Congregation of the Mission.

The message to protect and uplift the poor has to be carried by those who serve the poor. Yet, addressing the unjust structures experienced by the disenfranchised requires the strength of voice. As church communities weaken, so do their voices. Our proposal seeks to empower religious leaders in a poor urban environment with the knowledge and understanding of ways to assist their churches. This proposal will increase the ability of the faith community to impact positively on the lives of the poor in our community and will develop



a replicable model that may be used in other areas of the region, state, nation and world.

Brief history: While businesses have closed, companies have relocated and those with means have migrated out of the city of Niagara Falls, the faith community has remained as the beacon of light in most poor neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the churches too have suffered from a decline in membership and available social and economic capital. Nonetheless, the churches have continued steadfast, and the core of the faith-based community remains resolute in its commitment to helping the community and their congregations. To this day, the churches still provide the most direct means of touching the residents in these communities.

The overarching goal of this project is to develop a model of public ministry in the spirit of St. Vincent that addresses urgent community needs by empowering individuals to think and act creatively to help themselves and their communities.

The specific goals are:

1. To build the capacity of the faith-based institutions serving the disenfranchised and poor areas in the city of Niagara Falls;
2. To provide training and development opportunities for members of the local faith community;
3. To provide a forum for the discussion and dissemination of issues and topics critical to serving the urban poor in our community.

To meet the above goals, the following objectives will be accomplished:

1. Establish the Inter-Faith Institute of Public Ministry;
2. Conduct a needs assessment of the faith-based community in Niagara Falls;
3. Develop a board of community advisors from a broad cross-section of the inter-faith community in Niagara Falls, to include ministers, youth, lay pastoral agents and other leaders;
4. Design an easy-to-read, well-organized and interactive web site;
5. Host bi-monthly workshops at Niagara University for Church members of all ages on a variety of topics that include resource building such as grant writing, discussions about topics and issues that are plaguing poor communities;

6. Design and host one moderated strategic planning session;
7. Produce a series of pamphlets and brief publications.

In closing, I would like to remind all of you of the objective of the Systemic Change Award: “ To acknowledge and support specific projects developed by individuals or groups of confreres, whether specifically missionary or not, that reflect St. Vincent’s creativity in responding to the needs of the Church and/or help promote systemic change of unjust structures which oppress the poor.”

I thank the recipients of this award for their creativity and efforts to bring about systemic change in the life of the poor. I hope that the projects presented above will help to stimulate that creativity among confreres in other provinces.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General