

The Vincentian Family

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: in the Service of the Poor

Motivation

“This means carrying on the tradition of charity which has expressed itself in so many different ways in the past two millennia, but which today calls for even greater resourcefulness. Now is the time for a new ‘creativity’ in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by ‘getting close’ to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters.”¹

Our identity as the Vincentian Family (VF), comes from our roots, our history, and the potential that we possess as VF. True to that identity we will value our past, incorporate it into our present and move towards the future to serve the poorest.

Special material exists that has treated this subject of VF, from a historic perspective,² with a group vision,³ and in regards to its juridical-ecclesial aspects.⁴

The Congregation of the Mission dedicated a General Assembly to the Vincentian Family.⁵ The Assembly called for a greater awareness of the importance of the VF in the service of the poor.

“The 1998 General Assembly sent all the members of the Congregation to collaborate with other members of the Vincentian

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Inenute*, no. 50 (6 January 2001).

² Cf. BETTY ANN MCNEIL, “The Vincentian Family Tree,” in *Vincentian Heritage* (1998), 99-120; BETTY ANN MCNEIL, “Genealogical Development of the Vincentian Family,” in *Vincentiana* (1997), 43-58; ROBERT P. MALONEY, “On the Vincentian Family,” in *Vincentiana* (1997), 117-124; BENJAMÍN ROMO, “The CM and the Vincentian Family,” in *Vincentiana* (2004), 321-330.

³ Cf. J. IGNACIO FERNÁNDEZ DE MENDOZA, “The Vincentian Family: An Overall Vision,” in *Vincentiana* (1998), 341-353.

⁴ Cf. ALBERTO VERNASCHI, “Vincentian Family Associations: Juridical and Canonical Dimensions,” in *Vincentiana* (2002), 478-489.

⁵ 39th General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, “The Worldwide Vincentian Family and the Challenges of the Mission in the Third Millennium (Rome, 6-31 July 1998),” in *Vincentiana* (1998), 193-402.

Family, responding together to the cry of the poor. Our mission does not end with just the personal or community surrendering to the poor. It goes farther and calls us to seek concrete ways of involving others, men and women, young and old, so that they, by discovering the richness of our charism, will serve the poor.”⁶

We will attempt to answer some questions: What is the Vincentian Family? What is it that characterizes the members of the VF? What is their particular style as VF? What is their common heritage? What is their present situation? What are their challenges, commitments, and dreams? Is there any concrete proposal?

1. Yesterday: “Everything Started in France in the 17th Century”

“Since 1617 the extended Vincentian Family has grown to include several hundred diverse groups of women and men, laity and religious, Catholic and non-Catholic. Such a record testifies to the ongoing impact of the extraordinary life of a single individual...”

A majestic family tree has developed because his mission, spirit and rule have been adapted to many cultures since emerging in seventeenth-century France.”⁷

We participate in a historic, doctrinal, and spiritual patrimony. In the many branches of our Family there have been great saints, confreres, Daughters of Charity, laity... everyone in love with the mission of Jesus Christ, and his kingdom of the poor.

2. Belonging to the Vincentian Family

“All those institutions which in a direct or indirect way found their inspiration in St. Vincent at the time of fixing their aims and defining their spiritual character; all these can be called branches of the Vincentian Family, in the broad sense.”⁸

The expression, Vincentian Family, then, refers to an entirety of congregations, organizations, movements, associations, groups, and persons that, in a direct or indirect way, prolong in time the Vincentian charism, having been founded by St. Vincent de Paul directly, or finding in him their source of inspiration and dedication to the service of the poor.

⁶ BENJAMÍN ROMO, “The Vincentian Family in the World,” in *Vincentiana* (2002), 218.

⁷ BETTY ANN MCNEIL, “Genealogical Development of the Vincentian Family,” in *Vincentiana* (1997), 43. We recommend reading the entire article.

⁸ J.M. ROMAN, “The Vincentian Family, a continual renewal,” in *Vincentiana* (1995), 224.

According to the degree of affinity and specificity of each branch, the VF today has more than 165 branches worldwide that share a common heritage: the recognition of St. Vincent de Paul as founder or as the source of inspiration; an orientation stressing service of the poor; an inspiration based on the image of St. Vincent, with special emphasis on concrete and practical charity, lived out in simplicity and humility.

Today we refer to the “main branches of the Vincentian Family”⁹: *“Its largest branches bear communities with which Saint Vincent himself was personally involved, those under his patronage, or those founded by members of his own communities.... Other large limbs on the family tree bear communities that also share Vincent’s mission of serving Jesus Christ in the poor in a spirit of humility, simplicity, and charity.”*¹⁰

More than 400 years ago, St. Vincent de Paul began, in France, the adventure of serving and evangelizing the poor, to which, he gathered, invited, and motivated men and women of his time. He invited them to leave themselves and go and find the poor and cure their needs, convinced, in faith, that by “serving the poor, you are serving Jesus Christ” (SV IX, 252).

First, he started with a small group of women under the name of the “Confraternity of Charity” to help with the basic needs of the poor. Later, other priests joined him and he founded the “Congregation of the Mission” to evangelize the poor. He completed his work with lay women, the “Daughters of Charity,” who were consecrated for life to the service of the poor. His work is carried on today in many countries of the world where his charism (a particular way of following Jesus) is present and entrusted to many associations and congregations. We all feel responsible for a shared charism, that makes us feel like a family, a big Vincentian Family.

3. Our Style as Vincentian Family

We could say that there are some characteristic principles that define the identity of the VF. Among them are: Jesus Christ in the person of the poor, the poor in Jesus Christ; serving the poor through

⁹ The International Association of Charities (AIC), the Congregation of the Mission (CM), the Company of the Daughters of Charity (DC), the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SSVP), the Vincentian Marian Youth (JMV), the Association of the Miraculous Medal (AMM), the Vincentian Lay Missionaries (MISEVI), the Religious of Saint Vincent de Paul (RSV).

¹⁰ BETTY ANN MCNEIL, “Genealogical Development of the Vincentian Family,” in *Vincentiana* (1997), 43.

personal contact; the poor, sacrament of God; effective, affective and contagious love; Mary, teacher of a life of service and intercessory mother.

The VF has common origins, a style of its own. We could mention some of its characteristics: the centrality of Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor; loving Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ, serving them “corporally and spiritually”; service to the poor with practical and concrete charity; striving to live and serve with simplicity and humility; personal contact with the poor who are considered our “lords and masters”; loving in a way that is effective, affective, inventive and communicative; being evangelized by the poor; missionary aspect of the Vincentian charism; living a Mariology with a “Vincentian take.”¹¹

The missionary dimension of the Vincentian charism or what we hereby defined as “missionary aspect of the Vincentian charism” deserves some special attention. The mission is the reason for our existence in the Church. The VF can not stay at the margins of Christianity. We can enumerate four characteristics of the VF mission: our mission is global; our mission demands mobility; our mission is evangelization and service and our mission involves organizing and forming others in the service of the poor¹² and takes into account some missionary challenges that the VF has for the Third Millennium.¹³

4. A Common Heritage¹⁴

What is the common heritage that every member of the Vincentian Family possesses? We have much in common: our spiritual growth, our Vincentian formation, both our apostolic and missionary effectiveness, which can promote union, knowledge, mutual esteem and the ability to seek and find common projects that benefit the poorest of the poor in our countries.

We affirm that there are some elements that unite us together as a Family: having St. Vincent as founder or inspiration; a loud and clear desire to serve the poor; Vincentian spirituality; the virtues of charity, service, simplicity and humility, among others.

¹¹ BENJAMÍN ROMO, “Unifying Elements in the Vincentian Family,” in *Vincentiana* (2002), 409-420.

¹² Cf. ROBERT P. MALONEY, “The Vincentian Family as Missionary,” in *Vincentiana* (1998), 355-358.

¹³ Cf. *Idem*, 359-364.

¹⁴ ROBERT P. MALONEY, “On the Vincentian Family,” in *Vincentiana* (1997), 121.

5. Principal Branches of the Vincentian Family

The branches of the Vincentian Family that have up until today kept closer ties are: the International Association of Charities (AIC), the Congregation of the Mission (CM), the Company of the Daughters of Charity (DC), the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SSVP), the Vincentian Marian Youth (JMV), the Association of the Miraculous Medal (AMM), the Vincentian Lay Missionaries (MISEVI). Joined to these, there are many other Associations and Congregations that nourish their spirit from the fountain of the Vincentian charism.

In order to coordinate the almost two million people who make up the Vincentian Family, a decade ago, the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, Robert P. Maloney, began gathering the leaders of each branch once a year to promote the ties of unity and to launch common actions on an international level. The experience has been so rich that we are going to have the 13th meeting and the common actions that we undertake become clearer each time.

During these annual meetings, all the common actions from the last year are set forth and those for the next year are elaborated; there are moments of formation; common plans are revised; new interventions are outlined; but, above all, one is carried away with the dream of a big family dedicated to the corporal and spiritual service to the poorest on earth, wherever and whoever they are.

6. Our Future: Challenges, Commitments and Dreams¹⁵

They are: unity, collaboration, prayer, and specific Vincentian formation. To go to the poorest, to be creative.

As the Vincentian Family we want to join efforts, dreams, and courage to serve and evangelize the poor. It is clear that each of the branches has its own identity. The proposal of the VF is wider. It is not a juridical organization, it is not a new movement, and it is not a particular segment. The expression Vincentian Family refers to all of the congregations, organizations, movements, associations, groups and persons that, directly or indirectly, carry on in time the Vincentian charism, whether having been founded directly by St. Vincent de Paul or having him as source of its inspiration and dedication to the service of the poor.

Already since 1991 four challenges were identified: to live the Vincentian charism here and now in our history; to make serious

¹⁵ We recommend the complete reading of the final document of the 39th General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission (Rome, 6-31 July 1998), especially where it refers to the challenges, convictions and commitments of the Vincentian Family, in *Vincentiana* (1998), 384-397.

efforts in the area of formation; to reach out to the world of youth, and to form Vincentian missionaries with a mentality of collaboration.¹⁶

With respect to the autonomy of each group, in a spirit of fraternity and mutual assistance, the proposal of the Vincentian Family should be a joint effort to:

1. Recognize and become more deeply aware of the challenging reality of the poor.
2. Deepen the Vincentian charism in light of the present appeals of the poor
3. Work together more closely in both initial and ongoing formation. We have much to share.
4. Greater unity, mutual assistance, and development of service to the poor.
5. Create a database with information about the reality, needs, hopes and fears of the poor.
6. Elaborate common apostolic projects among the members of the VF.¹⁷
7. The innumerable joint initiatives of the VF in recent years are beginning to yield a rich harvest and make clear a new and broad horizon of promise, all with a view toward closer collaboration and union among the branches of the VF for a greater and better service of the poor.¹⁸
8. Formation in and dissemination of the Social Doctrine of the Church,¹⁹ teaching branches of the VF of its extreme importance to us who live in the Vincentian tradition.

As the VF we can have dreams, hopes. The great challenge is that the dreams become reality.²⁰

¹⁶ BENJAMÍN ROMO, "The Vincentian Family in the World," in *Vicentiana* (2002), 223-225.

¹⁷ Fr. Robert Maloney enumerates some of them: concrete works of charity; working together in foreign missions participation in popular missions, dissemination of the Vincentian charism; prayer and celebration of Vincentian feasts together. Cf. ROBERT P. MALONEY, "On the Vincentian Family," in *Vicentiana* (1997), 123.

¹⁸ BENJAMÍN ROMO, "The CM and the Vincentian Family," in *Vicentiana* (2004), 321-330.

¹⁹ Cf. ROBERT P. MALONEY, "Ten Foundational Principles in the Social Teaching of the Church," in *Vicentiana* (1999), 201-209. The author proposes the principles of: the dignity of the human person; respect for human life; association; participation; preferential protection for the poor and vulnerable; solidarity; stewardship; subsidiarity; human equality and common good.

²⁰ Referring to the dreams of Fr. Robert P. Maloney for the VF in the Third Millennium: the VF will become a united force, an army of

7. PROPOSAL on an International Level²¹

In different countries, the proposal for joining together as the VF, is catching on and is becoming a concrete reality. Several meetings have taken place among the international leaders of some branches of the VF and diverse proposals have been presented and defined: day of common prayer of the VF, preparation of the Web site on the internet, efforts of mutual help, resources for reflection about the Vincentian charism, incentives for common projects to serve the poor, etc.

1. *Joining together of VF*

Throughout the years, the different branches of the VF, have always developed some spontaneous forms of rapprochement out and mutual collaboration.

In the 90's, based on several experiences in different countries, the major superiors of some branches met and a persistent proposal of Vincentian collaboration emerged from that. With a formal and renewed impulse, this VF proposal of organization does not have juridical canonical effect; rather its purpose is the sharing of all the groups and persons that participate in the Vincentian heritage, so that they relate to and collaborate with each other, always looking for providing a service to the poor.

2. *Objectives and principles of the VF*

The proposal of the VF organization is based on the conviction of our missionary responsibility in the service of the Kingdom, with on the prophetic and dynamic power of the Vincentian charism.

Encouraged by the power of charity, with openness and creativity, we want to develop mechanisms to meet the present demands of the Vincentian charism, and respond together to the real and urgent cries of the poor.

evangelization and human and integral promotion for the poor; will enrich ourselves mutually with formation programs; make the voice of the VF heard in international organizations like the UN and the European Community; use the most modern means of communication to form creatively for the service of the poor and channel our energies in themes of justice and peace; be able to motivate youth to join us in our groups and form other groups in the service of the poor; that MISEVI be present in other countries; that we become a family that prays with devotion and in a beautiful way. Cf. <http://www.pbcm.com.br/favi.htm>

²¹ CF. <http://www.fv.org.br/fvBrasil.asp?ID=5>

The proposal for the joining together of the VF, has the following specific objectives:

1. To intensify fraternity and understanding among the laity of the different branches;
2. To deepen the Vincentian charism in light of today's appeals;
3. To develop forms of collaboration in the formation of the members of the various branches;
4. To undertake common projects at the service of the poor, according to their new and real clamors.

To make these objectives concrete, some basic principles should be followed such as:

1. Openness of each branch within an ecclesial context of the service of the poor;
2. Wide respect for the autonomy and specificity of each branch;
3. Spirit of fraternity, of mutual help and equality among the different branches;
4. Valuing the experience of each branch and its concrete place in Vincentian heritage.

3. *Lines of action*

1. Join forces, walking spontaneously, to strengthen the laity in the VF, in view of a strong boost to benefit the service of the poor.
2. Seek better formation of the members of the VF through our knowledge of St. Vincent and his charism.
3. Strengthen the joining together of the VF, seeking the participation of other branches and organizing and developing the VF in parts of the world where it is not present.
4. To respect the autonomy of each group, in a spirit of mutual collaboration.

4. *Organization*

1. Promotion of groups of the branches of the VF in diverse countries.
2. Development of coordination on a national level.

3. Organization of a VF national secretariat.
 4. Preparation of national formation programs for the laity of the VF.
 5. Guarantee accompaniment from the CM and the DC, in the Vincentian formation and in the service of the poor.
5. *Activities being developed*
1. Having an annual meeting of the representatives of the main branches of the VF.
 2. Disseminating news of the VF through the web site (www.famvin.org and www.famvin.net).
 3. Publication and exchange of Vincentian animation and formation materials.
 4. Joint celebration of the common day of prayer of the VF and another Vincentian celebrations of important feast days within each branch of the VF.
 5. Joint service projects for the poor in different countries.
 6. Continental meetings of the VF, reinforcing the initiatives for closer ties, unity, formation and collaboration among the members and branches of the VF.

Conclusion

We are now in the Third Millennium which calls us to renewal, to change, and to Christian conversion. We cannot be content with what we are doing, with what we know, and with serving those whom we have always served.

The poor keep growing and multiplying, and us... shall not we grow and multiply as well in order to find the cure with more energy and efficacy? There is so much to do! Each member of every group must become a multiplying agent, someone who attracts many other passionate people to serve the poor.

Our founders, St. Vincent, St. Louise, Blessed Frederick Ozanam, and the Servant of God Jean-Léon Le Prevost were practical persons, not theoretical. We are called to a stronger commitment to the poor.

“The necessities of the poor are immense. The Lord is calling us to respond together. St. Vincent was conscious of the communal dimension of the service of the Gospel. He knew that by channeling our energies and growing in unity we could be more effective instruments to face the concrete needs of the poor.”

Let us make the Gospel effective for the poor. Let us live our identity as the Vincentian Family. Today there are new forms of poverty awaiting, from all of us, a response of love from God who knows them, who forgives them, who waits for them... and who loves them.²²

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²² We refer to the complete reading of the final Synthesis, "A New 'Creativity' in Charity" from the *Vincentian Month 2002: Advisors of the Vincentian Family* (Paris, July 2002), in *Vincentiana* (2002), 498-507.