

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

Dear brothers,

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

A Christmas Story for Advent 2006

It was sometime around the beginning of Advent that a group of men from the Social Club approached me about the possibility of donating gifts for young children in one of the more distant villages for which I was responsible. I chose one of the villages on the coast. I drew up a list of the ages of the children and presented it to the members of the men's society. But along with the proposal, I suggested that instead of them giving me the gifts, that they come with me to visit the village, to meet the children and to distribute the gifts. They were delighted with that possibility.

On Christmas Day we mounted three jeeps and drove along the Pacific Coast. The tide was in our favor as we rolled along the beach to one of the furthest villages that I visited at that time in my ministry. I could not believe the number of children who were waiting for us at the entrance to the village. Thank God, there was plenty to be shared. As we drew closer, it was striking to see their wide eyes and the looks of joy, as they anticipated receiving a toy, just a simple toy, that perhaps some had never ever received in their entire life. The gentlemen were delighted to have the opportunity to bring some brightness into the lives of these small village children.

The first part of the dynamic was that the young men belonging to the club met all the children, calling each by name, playing a series of games with them, which created a truly festive environment. Then the gifts were distributed. What joy and excitement there was as they unwrapped the packages to find out what gift had been given them. They quickly went to their parents, mom or dad or both, and showed them with great delight what they had received, something that they could call their very own.

Yet, at that very moment what struck me was the attitude of the parents. As they observed their child's gift, they immediately began to compare it with the gifts of others and then asking their children to claim something bigger and better than the others. What at the beginning had been the delightful reception of a cherished gift, turned out to be a fiasco of havoc, anger and confusion.

The positive aspect of this experience was that each of the men made a choice not just to donate money or hand over a gift to me so that I might distribute it to the poor children. Rather, each chose to participate in the event, which gave him the opportunity to see how the people in a distant village lived and the joy that a simple gift could bring to the life of a poor child, to come to know that child by name and to interact in such a way that a bit of happiness might be brought to his or her heart.

The negative aspects were the attitudes of the adults, which, in some sense, abruptly brought an end to an environment of joy that had been created in a very simple, personal, relational way. So often the desire to live a better material life, by comparing what one has to what others have, can create such negative attitudes as greed, selfishness, discontent, which can even move toward violence and a lack of respect for the wellbeing of others. And these attitudes are passed on from parent to child!

I reflected a bit more deeply on the question of how “anti-values” get transmitted and can bring about the destruction of a once peaceful, harmonious, joyful environment. As Christians, as well as all people of good will, we are called to create environments of harmony, peace, happiness, joy. We do so by passing on or transmitting values that are of an evangelical nature, values that we call religious. But obviously, we cannot pass on those values unless we have them ourselves. They are values which have been passed on to us from our families and Community heritage.

Let us take a look at this story in the light of the Constitutions and Statutes to see in what way it can help us in our preparation for Christmas 2006 during this Advent season. The prayer of Christians for generations at this time of year is “*Maranatha.*” “*Come, Lord Jesus.*” We, as Vincentians, create an environment for the Lord’s presence when we invite others to participate in the life of the poor, when we invite others to come and see where and how the poor live. We, as Vincentians, create the possibility of the Lord’s coming in our midst when we make that personal contact with the poor and when we see them no longer as poor, but as friends (C 10; 11; 12, 3^o; 18; 78, § 4).

The second reflection that could be beneficial in this Advent season concerns the transmission of anti-values, or, better yet, the call to promote values that are Gospel-oriented. What is needed today more than ever are those values or attitudes necessary to combat the anti-values that dominate our world. To do so, we certainly need to call out, with greater force: *Come, Lord Jesus. Give us the strength that we need to be firm in the values that you have taught us through the Gospels.* One of the greatest values that has been passed on to us down through the ages is our faith. It is the gift of faith which

enables us to be like the small children with the wide-eyed look of wonderment, as we have presented before us a cherished gift, which is the Lord Jesus himself (C 77, § 2). The gift comes as word or sacrament (C 78, § 2). It is the cherished gift of God's little ones, or of the Lord Jesus himself, discovered in relationships with those in community, or found in the depths of our being (C 44).

We contemplate God's goodness in the many, many ways that it has been revealed to us. Continually and gently God invites us to repeat over and over and over again, *Come, Lord Jesus*. Let this time of Advent, be for each and everyone of you, my brothers, a significant time of prayer (C 25, 3^o). Make sure you can take time, make time and consider it precious time, sacred time to be with the Lord. He is a precious gift, a cherished gift, whom we receive and whom we give. As Vincentians, we are called to be men of prayer. Those we are called to serve see us as pray-ers and how deceived they are when they fail to see that witness. Those we are called to serve see us as experts in prayer and how saddened they are when they experience the shallowness of our words. Those whom we are called to serve, as well as others, are drawn to men and women of prayer. When they fail to see that prayer is a fundamental aspect of our lives, they no longer find us attractive and they simply walk away. If our prayer is rushed, shallow, repetitious, wordy, or even lifeless, what a scandal it can be to those who hope to see us as men of prayer.

Let this time of Advent, my brothers, be a time to reflect on the quality of your prayer, the depth of your prayer, the source of your prayer (C 40). Let one of the main ingredients of your prayer be the Word of God, as we hear it proclaimed in the bible, the Word of God that is proclaimed on the lips of those who cry out to us for help and compassion. It is the Word of God that is exchanged between all those whom we call friends, whether they be members of the community, whether they be those whom we serve out of love, whether they be other members of our Vincentian Family, those of our Church, those whom we meet on a daily basis (C 44).

Let silence too be one of the ingredients of prayer so that we can truly, in the depths of our hearts, listen to what God says to us. Silence is necessary in order to hear with clarity the gentle voice of the Lord who speaks his love to us, his love for us (C 43).

Let another ingredient be time. Let there be sufficient time dedicated at the beginning of our day. Pause in the course of the day to slow down, come to a halt, so that you might hear what the Lord desires to tell you. Let there be time dedicated at the end of the day to recognize the goodness and graces with which you and others have been blessed in the course of the day, as well as to ask forgiveness for the graces to which you did not respond (C 45; 47).

Let another ingredient be space, sacred space, space we can call special, a place of encounter, a place of peace, a place that can be easily identified as God's place. That space can be shared with others, with friends in community, with the poor, with the young, with the elderly or it can be shared just between ourselves and God (C 46).

As Vincentians, prayer is intimately linked to action. "Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of anything" (SV XI, 83; C 41). Contemplation and service are united in the life of a Vincentian. They nourish each other. They influence each other mutually. By way of this intimate union of prayer and mission, the Vincentian becomes a contemplative in action, an apostle in prayer (C 42).

As a conclusion, my brothers, let us join in prayer, as Vincentians, with the rest of our Family and God's entire people, *Come, Lord Jesus, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of your love.*

As Saint Vincent reminds us:

Prayer is a great book for a preacher: from it you will draw the divine truths of the Eternal Word, who is their source, and you in turn will pour them forth on the people. It is to be hoped that all Missionaries may have a great love for this virtue, for without its help they will do little or nothing useful, but with its help it is certain that they will touch hearts. I ask God to give us the spirit of prayer (SV VII, 156; English edition VII, 171).

May you have a Blessed Advent and a Holy Christmas.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

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Superior General