

## *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!

As we begin this most holy season of Lent, I pray that it be a time of dying and rising for each and everyone of you, my brothers in the Congregation of the Mission. When reflecting upon Lent, perhaps one of the Scripture passages that most comes to mind and helps me to see what the Lord asks of us is the passage about the grain of wheat: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (John 12:24). Let this Lenten season be a time when we die to ourselves, individually and communally, in order that we might live more fully in the Lord Jesus, whose passion, death and resurrection is the integral focal point of Lent.

Might I suggest for your meditation this Lenten season, in order to live more fully the Passover of the Lord and experience once again the newness of life that comes in the Resurrection, that you focus on your own identity as a member of the Congregation of the Mission. I propose an examination of how you live out the characteristic virtues that Saint Vincent spelled out for us. They are like the five smooth stones that the youth, David, used to slay the giant, Goliath. They are the foundational pillars upon which the members and the Congregation as a whole are built. David, although small and weak in comparison to Goliath, stood firm and strong, believing in himself and believing that God was with him to confront the giant obstacle.

The characteristic virtues help us to stand strong before whatever obstacle it is that hinders us from living out fully the vocation to which we have been called. As we know, the characteristic virtues are those gospel values that Saint Vincent “particularly admired in Jesus Christ.” They are virtues that he lacked and yet ones that he strove to live out, to understand and to put into practice in his own life.

Here are some brief reflections on each of the characteristic virtues. I ask you to take to heart what you reflect on and may God’s grace help you in the process.

**Simplicity**, Saint Vincent said, “is the virtue I love the most” (SV I, 284; English I, 265), so much so “that I call it my Gospel” (SV IX, 606; English IX, 476). “I have special devotion and consolation in saying things as they are” (*ibid*). These words can help

us to identify simplicity in its real meaning as truth, sincerity, transparency. Living out simplicity helps us to avoid being two-faced, saying one thing and meaning another, or saying one thing to the face of a person and another thing behind his or her back. We are called to be simple, to say things as they are, but, might I add, always with charity toward the other. As Saint Vincent tells us, it is the freedom to speak to another “with full confidence, without concealing or disguising anything” (SV I, 284; English I, 264-265).

There are certain situations that call for the true living out of simplicity; for example, when friends sit down and speak to friends, even about difficult issues. Another example would be in the relationship between the local superior and the members of the house, when the Constitutions call for personal interviews, which should be carried out in utter simplicity. Simplicity must also be present in the “neophytes” seeking to commit themselves to following Jesus Christ in the Congregation of the Mission. Sincerity is called for on the part of our members in formation, especially in their relationship to their formators and their spiritual directors.

**Humility.** Saint Vincent called it “the characteristic virtue of the mission. Oh holy virtue, how beautiful you are. O little Company, how lovable you will be if God grants you this grace” (SV XII, 204). Then Saint Vincent again called humility “the virtue of Jesus Christ..., of his holy mother..., of the greatest of the saints..., it is the virtue of missionaries” (SV XI, 56-57).

Humility is the virtue that enables us to recognize and admit our weaknesses and limitations, creating the possibility of trusting more in God and less in ourselves. At the same time, humility enables us to recognize our giftedness, a giftedness which is to be put at the service of others. It is the virtue that allows the poor to draw close to us. It is the virtue that helps us to see that all are equal in God’s sight. At the same time, it enables us to draw close to the poor.

The opposite of the humble are certainly those who are proud hearted, with an attitude of “I am better than the other,” who look down at people from a place on high. Humility is a virtue which enables missionaries to inculturate, in other words, to become one with others, especially one with the poor. As Saint Vincent says in another place, it is a “perfect abandonment of all that you are and can be” (SV III, 279; English III, 279) with confidence in the one who is our Lord alone, Jesus Christ. Again, if we establish ourselves in humility, we will make the company a paradise and people will remark how happy we are (cf. SV X, 439; English X, 353).

**Meekness.** I call meekness the vocational virtue, or as Saint Vincent himself says, “an amiable way wins hearts and attracts them” (SV XII, 189). And again, “if a man cannot be won over by gentleness and patience, it will be difficult to do so otherwise” (SV VII, 226;

English VII, 241). Other words that we would use today concerning the word, meekness, would be gentle, gracious, amiable, friendly. In one sense it is related to humility in that it is the virtue that permits the poor to approach us. It is the virtue that make us approachable.

Meekness is not aggressive, angry, loudmouthed. It certainly is a key virtue in community. It is the virtue that helps build up the confidence of others in us, because when we are gentle, those who are shy will open up to us. Saint Vincent says “there are no persons more constant and firm in doing good than those who are meek and gracious” (SV XI, 65).

A theme related to that of meekness is that of hospitality, which is a characteristic that should distinguish any Vincentian: one who is welcoming; one who is attentive to the needs of others, and especially attentive to those who have come from afar.

**Mortification.** It is the virtue of Lent. We are called to die to ourselves. It is the virtue that calls us to give ourselves away, to think first of others, especially to think first of the poor, before ourselves. As Saint Vincent says, “the saints are saints because they walk in [the] footsteps [of Jesus Christ], renounce themselves, and mortify themselves in all things” (SV XII, 227). As he also said, prayer and mortification “are two sisters so closely united that one is never found without the other” (SV IX, 427; English IX, 336).

The time of Lent is a time of prayer and fasting. Fasting means much more than simply refraining from eating. It is that traditional Christian practice, which helps us die to ourselves. One of the dangers we easily face is to want to comfort ourselves, being unwilling, at times, even to make some small sacrifices for the other. Another danger is thinking first of my needs, my routine and, therefore, my comfort. In that there is the danger of unwillingness to go the extra mile for the other. As Saint Vincent said, the gift of mortification “is acquired only by repeated acts” (SV V, 436; English V, 443). So let this Lent be a time for us to practice the art of mortification.

**Zeal for souls** (or, as I would call it, passion for humanity). Saint Vincent said that “if love of God is the fire, zeal is its flame” (SV XII, 307-308). It is the consequence of a truly compassionate heart. It is all about passion for Christ, passion for humanity, and passion especially for the poor. Zeal is a true missionary virtue. It is expressed in availability, the disposition to service and evangelization even when old and infirm. As Saint Vincent said, “And I myself, old and infirm as I am, should not cease to be disposed, yes, even to set out for the Indies to win souls for Christ” (SV XI, 402).

Related to zeal is the sense of enthusiasm, which calls for action. As Saint Vincent also said, “Let us love God, my brothers..., but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows”

(SV XI, 40). We can understand zeal as a concrete expression of effective love, which is motivated by compassion or, in other words, affective love. As Saint Vincent said, "Imagine then that there are millions of souls stretching out their hands to you" and calling you by name (cf. SV I, 252; English I, 245).

*The Congregation, furthermore, tries to express its spirit in five virtues drawn from its own special way of looking at Christ, namely, simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal for souls. Speaking of these five virtues, Saint Vincent said: "The Congregation should pay special attention to developing and living up to these five virtues so that they may be, as it were, the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation, and that everything each one of us does may always be inspired by them" (CR, II, 14) (C 7).*

Lent is a time of special grace. Let it be a special grace for us to help us be who we are called to be, members of the Congregation of the Mission, faithful to following Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

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Superior General