

“Sharing the Mission”

A Report on the Vincentian Family

(January 2005 – June 2007)

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INTRODUCTION

I shall proceed in three steps. First, I shall briefly situate us within the basic framework of our relationship and ministry in the Vincentian Family. Second, I shall indicate what has happened in the Vincentian Family, at least on the international level, since 2005. And finally, I shall present the challenges ahead and the programs planned.

1. FRAMEWORK OF OUR RELATIONSHIP AND MINISTRY IN THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

1.1. *In our Constitutions and Recent Documents*

Our relationship and ministry in the Vincentian Family is fundamentally rooted in St. Vincent’s insight that we all share in the mission of Christ (and the Church) to evangelize the poor, and that we can do much more for the poor when we work together. Our Constitutions (1980) make a reference to this in article 1,3^o: “The members... help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor.”¹ More specifically, Statute 7 § 1 states that “lay associations founded by St. Vincent and those which are inspired by his spirit should be of special concern to our members, since they have the right to our presence and to our support.”

¹ Constitutions 17 says something specific about our relationship with the Daughters of Charity: “*Since the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity share the same heritage, members should willingly give them assistance when asked, especially in the matter of retreats and spiritual direction. They should also show a brotherly spirit of cooperation in those works which have been undertaken together.*”

The 38th General Assembly (1992) clearly stated that "we are not alone in our vocation, rather we belong to a large Vincentian Family...."² And precisely who belongs to this Vincentian Family is defined by the 39th General Assembly (1998) thus:

*"The expression 'Vincentian Family,' [...] should not be understood in a juridical-canonical sense, but as a pastoral term. By (it) we refer to the networking of congregations, organizations, movements, groups and persons which, directly or indirectly, extend through time the Vincentian charism. The branches of this network were either founded directly by Saint Vincent de Paul or regard him as their source of inspiration and dedication to the service of the poor. The Congregation of the Mission considers itself as part of this family."*³

This same Assembly saw the challenges facing the Congregation in the new millennium, reiterated its convictions and formulated commitments all in the context of its relationship with the broader Vincentian Family. Six years later, the 40th General Assembly (2004) took up the same objectives, giving particular attention to formation in Vincentian spirituality and the collaborative work with the poor.⁴

I bring up these matters in order to underscore several points. One, that the commitment to the Vincentian Family has become integral to the Congregation's ministry. The *Practical Guide for the Visitor* (1998, 2005) spells this out especially when it enjoins the Visitor to make sure not only that confreres are prepared for this ministry but also help establish the various Vincentian groups.⁵ Two, the focal point of our coming together as Family is the charism we all share and receive from St. Vincent de Paul, the love and service of the poor. These two points determine, in my opinion, the nature of our relationship with the rest of the Family branches. On the one hand, we are given the responsibility to promote the charism in these and other groups — thus an active leadership role in it. On the other hand, we are to regard ourselves as one group among many who are co-sharers of the charism. From the viewpoint of the Constitutions and the Assemblies, we are not the sole, let alone primary or

² Letter to the Confreres, 38th General Assembly 1992, *Vincentiana* 36 (1992) 364.

³ Footnote number 2 in the Final Document, 39th General Assembly (1998), in *Vincentiana* 42 (1998) 386. In her study, Sr. Betty Ann McNeil lists 305 associations or groups from 1617 to 2006 that may be said to be part of the Vincentian Family. There are still others that need future verification. See, BETTY ANN MCNEIL, *Vincentian Family Tree*, Chicago, 2006.

⁴ Final Documents, 40th General Assembly (2004) in *Vincentiana* 48 (2004) 355-364.

⁵ *A Practical Guide for the Visitor*, numbers 384-389.

superior, guardians of the charism. It is good to remind ourselves of these points especially because, in my opinion, the effectiveness of our ministry towards the other groups in the Vincentian Family will largely hinge on the balance we strike between the two sides of this responsibility.

1.2. In Our Experience Today

Working with others in our Family, particularly with the Daughters of Charity, has been in fact part of our history. Through the years the nature of this relationship swung from an almost total dependence on the Directors (meaning, our confreres) to relative autonomy between the two Congregations directly founded by Vincent de Paul, and between these two and the AIC or Confraternities of Charity. This was in no small way influenced by the specific relationship of our Superior General to these other two groups. As St. Vincent's successor, he provides the strongest link to the heritage and person of our common Founder. It is also in this capacity that many branches look to the Superior General for inspiration, leadership and guidance.

1.2.1. The Superior General and the Rest of the Vincentian Family

As you all know, the Superior General has specific canonical responsibilities towards the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity, being Superior General (that is, ultimate religious Superior) of both Congregations. At the same time, as per their respective Statutes, the Superior General is Director General of the Vincentian Marian Youth (JMV), of the Association of the Miraculous Medal (AMM), and of the Vincentian Lay Missionaries (MISEVI).⁶ In his capacity as Superior General and/or Director General, he appoints confreres (and even sisters) as National Directors or Directresses of these various organizations. In relation to the other branches within the Vincentian Family, the role of the Superior General is more of a moral or spiritual leader from whom they expect some guidance and animation in the Vincentian charism.

⁶ Helping him as his Assistant Directors in these groups are the DC Director General (Javier Álvarez), the JMV Assistant Director General (Pedro Castillo), the AMM International Coordinator (Benjamín Romo), and his delegate to the MISEVI International Coordinating Council (Felipe Nieto). At the same time, there are other confreres who, in a way, are his personal representatives to the AIC as Ecclesiastical Assistant (Manuel Ginete) and to the SSVF as Assistant International Spiritual Director (Teodoro Barquín).

His responsibilities towards the Vincentian Family at large cover the following areas: animation, organization, coordination, communication and formation. It is in the context of these responsibilities that the office of the Delegate for the Vincentian Family has to be construed.

1.2.2. *Office of the Delegate of the Vincentian Family*

In 1998, the Superior General created the office of the Delegate of the Vincentian Family precisely to assist him, particularly on the international level, in undertaking these responsibilities. These have become more and more urgent, given an increasingly interconnected world summoning collaborative responses to diverse situations of poverty. The first Delegate, Benjamín Romo, operated almost single-handedly for the first six years as he organized the office, assisted the different branches in establishing norms and statutes, coordinated various projects, etc. Since 2005, when I took over, we have tried to continue these activities. This time, however, we are fortunate to count on Sister María Pilar López, a Daughter of Charity as Secretary, and Alfredo Becerra, erstwhile editor of *Vincentiana* and responsible for *Nuntia* as assistant in matters of publication and communication.

In relation to the Vincentian Family internationally as a whole and to various groups therein, the Office of the Delegate has formulated a plan and focused its attention on the following objectives:

- Establish and/or strengthen Vincentian Family National Coordinating Councils
- Assist in the formation of advisors and directors
- Seek out others who share our Vincentian heritage
- Share the charism with the young people, and
- Establish links with other international organizations (not necessarily religious).

2. **WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE 2005**

In the past two years and a half, the following activities and events have taken place.

2.1. **Animation Visits**

In his visits to the different countries, aside from meeting with the confreres and the Daughters of Charity the Superior General also took time to meet with the different members of the Vincentian

Family. Since 2005, he has practically covered the 6 continents: Latin America (7 countries); Africa (8); Asia (4); Europe (9+); USA; Oceania (3).

For my part, as per the suggestion from the former Delegate, I concentrated on visiting and animating those countries that have not been previously visited. Thus in 2005, I went to Indonesia (April), Tanzania (September), Ethiopia (September). In 2006, I visited Nigeria (April), Thailand (May), Cambodia (May), Ireland (June), and Ukraine (September). In these countries one notices a great enthusiasm for our charism and a strong desire to become better formed in its spirituality.

2.2. Organization and Coordination

In line with the priorities we set for the Vincentian Family in these coming years, one important objective of my visits to countries with a relatively recent group of the Vincentian Family was to organize the national Vincentian Family coordinating councils. It is felt that the effectiveness of our services towards the poor depends on the structures of coordination and collaboration that are set up on the level of the country. In some areas like Brazil and several other countries in Latin America, these national coordinating councils have existed for some time now, and some of them even have formulated some form of internal regulation or guidelines to facilitate coordination among the various branches of the Family. A principal reason for visiting Brazil in March 2006 was precisely to learn from their coordinating council and thus be able to share this knowledge with other countries. Since then I have received “Internal Regulations” of the Vincentian Family in Mexico, Central America, Egypt, etc.

Another very important instrument of organization and coordination on the international level is the annual meeting of the Vincentian Family International Heads, held either in Rome or in Paris in January or early February. As you well know, this meeting usually sends out the yearly letter from the International Heads, with suggestions on the theme for the celebration of St. Vincent’s feast, as well as on possible projects that could be undertaken by the Vincentian Family on the local level. In the last three years, these have been the suggested themes:

2005: United as the Vincentian Family in solidarity with the most vulnerable

2006: Love is infinitely inventive

2007: What we have heard and seen and touched with our hands — we announce to you (on systemic change).

2.3. Assemblies and Meetings

A very useful means of organizing and coordinating efforts in the Vincentian Family has been international assemblies and meetings. Since 2005, various branches and national groups held important meetings, in which at least one of us from the Vincentian Family Office participated. The following are noteworthy.

2005: AIC (Santo Domingo), SSVP (Salamanca), JMV (Paris), Vincentian Youth Gathering (Cologne), AMM (Rome), MISEVI (Berceau)

2006: February (Latin America), April (AIC Asia, Manila)

2007: March (Rome, AIC International Assembly), April (MEGVIS), May (San Francisco, California, VF USA).

Aside from these meetings, several of these branches hold, annually or twice a year, meetings of their respective international coordinating groups. This is true especially for AIC, JMV, AMM, and MISEVI. The Director General is usually present at these, and occasionally the Delegate too attends.

2.4. Information, Communication and Linkage with Other Groups in the VF

In some of the countries I visited there exist books on the Vincentian Family complete with descriptions of the branches found in the country. On the international level, we are fortunate to have several publications: the revised edition of Sr. Betty Ann McNeil's book on the Vincentian Family Tree (2006) which updated the groups inspired by Vincent's charism; the revised "dossier" or booklet on the Vincentian Family (2006) published in *Vincentiana* in English, French and Spanish; and a model of a triptych on the VF which has been translated and adapted in several countries, and many other books in various languages.

In addition, the Vincentian Family websites, in various languages, have been maintained and they continue to furnish us with updated information on the Vincentian Family. Normally, this is the quickest reference on the history, branches, projects, recent news, etc. of the Vincentian Family.

2.5. Formation

Most of the visits would include formation sessions for members of the various Vincentian Family branches. Generally, I have been asked to speak about the worldwide situation, the challenges facing our Family, the spirituality that inspires us, as well as the projects that have been undertaken on behalf of the poor. In some instances,

I spoke on a particular theme suited to the event, as in Brazil (“On the most vulnerable,” March 2006); Valencia, Spain (“The transmission of faith in the Vincentian Family,” July 2006); Nicaragua (“With Jesus and Mary we encounter the poor,” October 2006); Madrid (“Sharing the Mission,” March 2007). Every year I also speak about the Vincentian Family at the CIF sessions in Paris.

In this work of formation, Sister María Pilar López serves not only as Secretary but also as a resource person. Since her arrival she has been invited to give conferences on various themes in Bogotá (Colombia); Caracas (Venezuela), and Rome (AIC International Assembly).⁷

Formation materials on the level of each branch as well as on the international level of the Vincentian Family have been published (e.g. VMY, AMM, and AIC) and can be accessed through the internet. In Latin America formations sessions for the members of the Family at large are regularly held in some schools of Vincentian spirituality. In Asia, an attempt is being made to open to other members of the VF in the local area some formation sessions originally planned for CM formators.

3. CHALLENGES AHEAD AND PROJECTS PLANNED

The above-mentioned activities and programs give us great hope for the future of the Vincentian Family throughout the world. Still, there are a number of things to which we need to pay sufficient attention, if we are to ensure the transmission of St. Vincent’s charism to future generations, and thus be able to sustain our services towards the poor. I mention some of these.

3.1. Formation of National Coordinating Councils

As I said earlier, these councils on the level of the country are crucial since they would serve as the coordinating group for the Family in a given country. It is important that the leaders of the various branches of the local Vincentian Family take this to heart. Otherwise, every branch will go on with its individual programs and the potential for greater, more lasting and better organized projects for the poor would be left unexplored.

⁷ Bogota: “The spiritual dynamic of solidarity with the most vulnerable” (“Dinamismo espiritual de la solidaridad con los más vulnerables”); Caracas: “The profile of the agent of Vincentian Youth Ministry” (“Perfil del agente de pastoral Juvenil Vincentina”), and Rome: “The roots of St. Vincent’s spirituality inspire our ways of responding to poverties” (“Las raíces de la espiritualidad de San Vicente inspiran nuestros caminos para responder a las pobrezas”).

As a loose network of otherwise autonomous congregations, groups, institutes, and associations, the Vincentian Family on the local level counts principally on the willingness, leadership, and persistence of the group's respective leaders, particularly on the part of the CM, if it is to establish and promote meetings, formation sessions and collaborative projects.

3.2. Animation of and reaching out to other groups in the wider VF or those countries that have yet to be visited

It is a source of joy and inspiration to hear many groups desiring to know more about the deep origins of their communities within the charism of St. Vincent de Paul. We need to reach out to them inasmuch as they long to become part of the bigger Family. This has the advantage of favoring our programs with the poor, as well as deepening our own spirituality.

3.3. Adoption of common projects to show solidarity among VF members

Meetings and international assemblies are important symbolic events that truly inspire people in our Family. But still the most inspiring moment to people outside of the Vincentian Family, and who may perhaps be working for the poor, is when they see groups of men and women, clerics, sisters and lay, Catholics and non-Catholics, working together on a project, united solely in the example and method of the great apostle of charity, Vincent de Paul. In some countries, the Vincentian Family has become a trusted assistant and conduit of funds from foundations and even governmental institutions.

3.4. Formation of advisors and leaders

The most common request that I receive is for a trusted member of the Vincentian Family who could assist in the formation in Vincentian spirituality. There is a dearth of good formators in this matter and I believe there will never be a time when we would have enough formators. There is especially a need to form lay advisors and directors who could provide the service of formation to their fellow lay Vincentians. We need to remember that the overwhelming majority of the Vincentian Family is lay. We can learn a great deal from Vincent's confidence in the capabilities of lay people, especially women. Formation in lay spirituality and in the missionary dimension of our charism should be a priority program in the Vincentian Family.

In connection with this, I wish to let you know that we are in the process of organizing formation sessions for advisors of the VF. The last international session of this nature was held in 2002 and it is about the right time to hold another one. This time however, we believe it would be more helpful to hold them by regions — thus, on the five continents. More details on this will be communicated later. If you have any suggestions in this regard, please let me know.

3.5. *Work with youth*

It is decisive that we attract youth to our mission with the poor. There is every reason to believe that they are just waiting to be inspired and recruited to this kind of involvement. From our own experience, we know that many will respond to the challenge positively. Yet, in order to be successful in this, we need to look at our own methods and processes in recruiting, inviting, and supporting them in this endeavor. We need to re-examine those ways that worked or did not work, and to take on new ways in order to involve them with the poor.

An important assembly is being planned in connection with the World Youth Day to be held in Australia. Members of the Vincentian Family in that country are organizing a Vincentian Youth Gathering in Sydney during the week prior to the WYD week itself. This needs our support and encouragement, as well as the participation of those among us who work with youth.

3.6. *Support for systemic change project*

The theme that is being proposed by the International Heads of the Vincentian Family is that of systemic change. More information about this is forthcoming. In the last meeting of the VF International Presidents and Superiors, it was deemed an important enough theme to suggest it for the next two to three years. This also needs our support and collaboration.

3.7. *Balance between leadership-animation and respect for autonomy*

Finally, the hardest of the challenges in my opinion is one that continually confronts us; that is, how to maintain a balance between leadership and animation on the one hand and careful respect for each Vincentian Family group's autonomy on the other hand. These in fact expect a great deal from us in terms of leadership, but at the same time there is the desire to be treated as partners in the charism. As you well know, this has important ramifications on different

levels, among them, economic and cultural levels. Perhaps an ideal which we could aim at would be extensive collaboration with one another, yet maintaining the distinct identity and peculiar character of each branch.

CONCLUSION

I trust the above has given you a view on what is happening in the Vincentian Family especially from the vantage point of the Office of the Delegate. I wish to end with a reminder from our General Assembly of 2004. After taking note of the impact the changes in Church and society have made on our Vincentian identity, it concludes thus:

“All this means that we must work to share our common spirit with the other branches of the Vincentian Family, and together to heed the call to an ongoing conversion through which we become evermore deeply involved in the world and in the lot of the poor” (Final Document, II, 2).

Mexico City, 8 June 2007