

Saint Vincent de Paul and the Mission: Challenges for Today

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*How happy the condition of the missionary
who has no more limitations...
than the world we live in!
(SVP XI, 828)*

Vincent de Paul took as the motto of his life and work the missionary program of Christ himself: "He has sent me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). As members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Vincentian Family throughout the world we all feel ourselves challenged by the **urgency of the mission**, just as does the Church in all the different continents. "The missionary mandate accompanies us into the Third Millennium, and urges us to share the same enthusiasm as the very first Christians: we can count on the power of the same Spirit who was poured out at Pentecost and who impels us still today to start out anew, sustained by the hope 'which does not disappoint' (Rom 5:5)" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 58).

Drawing from Vincent de Paul's experience and from his reflections, found in his letters and conferences, we can recover and bring up to date some proposals for the mission today.

1. Missionary activity was Vincent de Paul's creative response to the calls which the Lord sent to him through actual events

After caring for a dying old man in **Gannes**, Vincent discovers the religious ignorance into which the poor villagers have been abandoned. Then he repeats that first response, preaching in **Folléville** and inviting the parishioners to conversion.

A short time later, while serving as pastor in **Châtillon**, he perceives the misery and hunger in the poor villagers and the need for organized charity with the active participation of the laity and, above all, of the women.

The conversion of a heretic in **Marchais** who, after seeing the work of the missionaries understood that the Holy Spirit guides the Church, confirms in Vincent de Paul his conviction that the Lord is calling him to the evangelization of the poor.

These **events**, above all those related to the lives of the poor, are mediations by means of which the Lord is manifesting His Will to Vincent de Paul.

And Vincent de Paul knew to walk in the steps of Providence and to create new responses when faced with new situations. His first response, chronologically, will be **popular missions**. Later he will discover that the Lord is calling him to extend the mission to **distant lands** and, with no hesitation, to send his best missionaries for this work. His main foundations, **the Congregation of the Mission, the Confraternities of Charity, and the Daughters of Charity**, he will also place in service of the mission.

The Lord asks him (as he is gradually discovering) to dedicate his life to the evangelization of the poor, to continue **the very same mission of Jesus Christ**. Vincent does not hesitate to throw himself into the work with enthusiasm. He feels compelled to offer a response — bold responses that continue to surprise for their creative originality.

Just so today, for us who follow Jesus Christ in the steps of Vincent de Paul, actual **events**, specifically those events related to poor persons, invite us to **get moving**, on cue with the mission: paying attention to the diverse realities of cultures and peoples, adapting ourselves to God's steps with individuals and with groups, listening to the cries of those needs that are most urgent, cultivating the participation of everyone and the respect for everyone.

John Paul II coined the expression 'new cultural landscapes and historical frontiers' in order to refer to the new realities of contemporary civilization where the seed of the Gospel must be made present: "Family, culture, the world of labor, all economic goods, politics, science, technology, social communications, the great challenges of life, of solidarity, of peace, of professional ethics, of the rights of the human person, of education, of religious liberty."¹

Calls of the Lord and, therefore, the mission, cannot continue to be reduced to one place nor to only one activity nor to one form only of evangelization or service. Faithfulness to the mission demands personal availability, a renewed faithfulness, and creativity. "The proclamation of the Gospel requires proclaimers, the harvest needs workers, the mission happens, above all, with men and women

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Closing Talk of the Lay Synod*, Rome, October 3, 1987.

consecrated by life to the work of the Gospel, willing to go throughout the whole world to bring salvation.”²

Missionary restlessness appears in our communities frequently in intermittent ways. Faced with an especially grave situation, whether nearby or far away, generous responses are offered that are truly exemplary. However, these things may not always have the true mission which is the criterion of our programs and ongoing pastoral tasks, the **key** or the sustaining drive that keeps the whole community on cue with **creativity** and which draws out **responses from life** itself. Personal dedication, working piece by piece, creative dreaming, pastoral zeal — these continue to be the right dispositions (just as they were in Vincent de Paul himself) that are needed to face up to the new requirements of the mission in our own time.

2. **The discovery of Jesus Christ, the Father’s missionary, the Evangelizer of the Poor, is the hidden power that explains the fruitfulness of Vincent de Paul’s heritage to us as missionary**

One celebrated researcher of the life and spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul wrote: “That teacher who is Saint Vincent has his own teacher who is Jesus Christ; one can recover in both his correspondence and in his talks a long series of delightful lines, sometimes very unexpected, and with these put together a small book that could be called *the Imitation of Jesus Christ according to Saint Vincent de Paul*. On the horizon of Saint Vincent there always rises the Son of God.... Pay close attention to his life, episode by episode, one could even say minute by minute, in order to find there lessons on how to act.”³

Certainly, one could never understand the missionary activity of Vincent de Paul, nor any one of his works, without explicit reference to Jesus Christ. Vincent de Paul desired, from the moment of his conversion, **to follow Jesus Christ**, to be centered in Him, to see himself one time after another in Him, until he reached the point where at every moment he was able to do or not to do that which Christ would do or not do.

Vincent de Paul wanted to make Jesus Christ the **only rule of his life**. And to those who grew to associate with his missionary works, he showed this same road. To Father Antonio Portail, his first collaborator in the missions, he writes as early as May 1, 1635: “Remember, Father, that we live in Jesus Christ because of death in

² JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 79.

³ M. GOYAU, *La vie des livres et des âmes*, Paris, 1923, 84. Cited by P. COSTE, *El gran santo del gran siglo*, vol. III, p. 263.

Jesus Christ, and our life has to be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ, so that, in order to die like Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ.”⁴ In this same way, notice the surprising expression that we find in his letter to Father Nicolás Etienne on January 30, 1656: “Our Lord Jesus Christ is our father, our mother, and our all.”⁵

In the Vincentian experience there appears a strong relation between **Jesus Christ and the Father**. Jesus Christ has been sent by the Father. Jesus Christ lives totally dedicated to doing the will of the Father. Jesus Christ lives in continual prayer with the Father.⁶

Vincent de Paul never tires of repeating that the Son of God, the missionary of the Father, came to the world to evangelize the poor. Only to add immediately that missionaries do nothing other than to continue the mission of Jesus Christ on earth.

In his conference to the missionaries on October 29, 1638, Vincent states: “In this vocation we live in such a way as to be conformed to our Lord Jesus Christ who, it seems, when he came to this world, chose as his principal task that of assisting and caring for the poor. *Misit me evangelizare pauperibus*. And if one would ask our Lord: What have you come to do on earth? — To help the poor. — And something else? — To help the poor, etc. In his company there were no others but the poor and He stayed only a little in the cities, almost always conversing with the villagers, and teaching them. Would we not be happy ourselves to be in the mission with the same purpose which committed God to become man? And if one would ask a missionary, would it not be a great honor to say as did our Lord: *Misit me evangelizare pauperibus*? I am here to catechize, to instruct, to confess, to help the poor.”⁷

The mission is always the prolongation of the action of the missionary Christ Jesus. Because of this, only in the measure in which he reflects Christ and enters into His own dispositions and adopts his attitudes, will the missionary **make his life true mission**.

3. In the Church, the continuer of the mission of Jesus Christ to the service of the poor

As a consequence of his vision of Christ, Vincent de Paul sees and experiences the Church as continuer of the mission of Jesus Christ, distancing himself from the dominant ecclesiologies of his time.⁸

⁴ SV I, 295.

⁵ SV V, 534.

⁶ Cf. SV XII, 108; XI, 313; IX, 409; X, 243.

⁷ SV XI, 108. Cf. aussi SV XI, 130-131, 134-135; XII, 87.

⁸ A. Dodin, one of the most prominent experts on Vincent, clearly affirms this: “What is it that characterizes the whole presentation of Church for

Vincent de Paul stays within the doctrinal ecclesiology taught in the manuals.⁹ He wants to live in the faith of the Church without separating himself, even the least bit, from what the Church teaches.¹⁰ But the **originality of Vincent de Paul** in his vision of the Church, is rooted in seeing her as one **historical reality, itinerant, missionary, and at the service of the poor**, as the continuer of the mission of Christ that she is.¹¹

Vincent de Paul will not place the emphasis on the hierarchy, nor on any exterior or shiny adornment. For Vincent, “the Church is above all the poor people who seek help, those ‘good people’ who Vincent had encountered already and with whom he had felt identified while a pastor in Clichy, near Paris. To the service of this people he and his own would dedicate themselves. When speaking of the humble and the most poor, he would say: ‘Our lords and our masters’ thus opening up a new perspective in the theology of the mystical body.”¹²

So then it will not surprise us to find in Vincent de Paul’s correspondence such clear expressions about where to find the Church of Jesus Christ: “The Church is neither in the silk nor gold of the prince-bishops or abbots, but rather in the flesh and blood, in the sufferings and tears of the people. The People of God are here, and whether aware or not, participant in the mystery of the life, the sufferings, the death of the Son of God, in the hope of his glory. Called to join the Council of Conscience, Vincent de Paul will remember this Church when it is time for naming bishops for the service of the people of God and, first of all, for the poor.”¹³

For Vincent de Paul, the mission of the Church is none other than to **continue the work of Christ**, to do just what He did on earth, cooperate with Him in the salvation of all people. This close relationship between Christ and the Church is obvious in Vincentian expressions used when referring to the Church: “Spouse of the

Vincent? That it is completely different than any ecclesiology ‘with roman inspiration.’ I think here of that Church taken from the studies of Cardinal Bellarmine, and of St. Peter Canisius: a hierarchical Church, stable and vertical. At its peak, on the top of the pyramid, is the Pope, then the bishops, the priests, and at the bottom, the laity. Vincent did not have this image and he’s not the only one.” A. DODIN, *Lecciones sobre vicencianismo*, Ceme, Salamanca, 1978, pp. 66-67.

⁹ Cf. SV VI, 263-7 (lettre du 2 avril 1657).

¹⁰ Cf. ABELLY II, XII, p. 411.

¹¹ A. DODIN, *op. cit.*, 67.

¹² A. SYLVESTRE, *Saint Vincent et L’Église*, en AA.VV., *Monsieur Vincent, témoin de l’évangile*, Toulouse, Animation Vincentienne (1990), p. 126.

¹³ CABIERS, *San Vicente de Paúl y la Iglesia*, ANALES (1974), p. 75.

Savior,” “Bride of Jesus Christ,”¹⁴ “Vineyard of the Lord,”¹⁵ “field of grain” that requires workers,¹⁶ “mystical body.”¹⁷

It is exactly on this last image, the most often used, that Vincent de Paul constructs his sense of Church charity: “All our members are so united and bound together that what is wrong in one is wrong in all. All the more so Christians who are members of one body and among themselves must indeed suffer together. What is this! To be Christian and see the suffering of one’s brother without weeping with him nor experiencing sickness with him! This is not to show charity; it is to be Christian on the surface; it is to lack humanity, to be lower than animals.”¹⁸

Inside this body that is the Church, Vincent de Paul paid special attention to the poor who are “the afflicted members of our Lord.”¹⁹ Evangelization of the poor is the criterion and the validating sign that **the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church.**²⁰

Saint Vincent has discovered that the true person is the poor and, for that matter, the true people, the people of God, the Church, is the world of the poor. The hierarchy has nothing but the function of service. Saint Vincent lives out of this intuition, but it will be Bossuet, his disciple, who gives form to this intuition:

“Jesus Christ has come to the world to reestablish the order that pride had broken. In the world, the rich hold the first ranks; in the Reign of Jesus Christ, the first places belong to the poor, who are the first and true children of the Church. In the world, the poor are subject to the rich and serve them; in the holy Church, the rich are admitted only on condition of serving the poor. In the world, all privilege belongs to the powerful and to those who support them; in the Church of Jesus Christ, graces and blessings belong to the poor, and the rich have no privilege except to be in the midst of the poor.”²¹

Vincentian scholars do not hesitate to agree that this sermon of Bossuet is the best synthesis found of that experience of Church which inspired the life and mission of Vincent de Paul.²²

¹⁴ Cf. SV I, 571; III, 182; XII, 158-159.

¹⁵ Cf. SV V, 107, 178, 462; VII, 541; VIII, 126.

¹⁶ SV VIII, 125; IX, 734.

¹⁷ Cf. SV IX, 1; X, 364; XII, 96-97, 273.

¹⁸ SV XI, 272.

¹⁹ SV V, 85.

²⁰ Cfr. ABELLY I, XIII, pp. 55-56.

²¹ Bossuet, 1659 sermon. In AA.VV., *L'Église*, pp. 7-8.

²² Cf. *id.*, p. 4.

Those of us who today follow Jesus Christ in the steps of Vincent de Paul, know, through the ecclesiology of Vatican Council II, that **the Church** is the community which makes Jesus Christ present in history and that lives out the **responsibility to continue His Mission**. “The presentation of the gospel message does not constitute for the Church some kind of option; it is by means of the obligation placed on her, by the Lord’s command, with the goal that people believe and are saved.”²³ The mission constitutes the very reason to belong to the Church, which exists to evangelize.²⁴ Evangelization is the grace and the purpose of the Church; it is her vocation and identity.

The mission is Church activity. Evangelization is no private matter, but rather “an act profoundly ecclesial.”²⁵ It is the Church who sends the missionary. And the end of all missionary activity is the proclamation of Christ and the formation of the church community.²⁶ “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him” asserts the first letter of John (1 Jn 4:16). The discovery of the **love of God** is what raises up Christians in every epoch of history, to share the Good News throughout the world.

In the Church and as Church, each one according to his proper ministry and charism, must know himself to be truly a missionary, driven by the pastoral zeal of the same Christ, that will be “attention, tenderness, compassion, welcome, availability, interest in the problems of the people... fervor of the Spirit, interior excitement which nothing nor anyone could extinguish,”²⁷ especially committed to the cause of the poor.

4. The poor, protagonists of the mission

The mission, as Vincent de Paul understood and lived it out, integrates the world of the poor as an essential, constitutive element.

Christ is the Father’s missionary, who has been sent to this world to evangelize the poor. The Church, the continuer in history of Christ’s mission, has a duty to the poor.

The centrality of the poor in the mission of Christ and of the Church has been one **discovery** that has been maturing in Vincent de Paul’s experience. As J. Corera states, “Vincent de Paul lived the first

²³ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 5.

²⁴ Cf. *Ad Gentes*, 6.

²⁵ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 60.

²⁶ Cf. *Ad Gentes*, 6.

²⁷ *Redemptoris Missio*, 89; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 80. “Pastoral charity determines the manner with which the missionary thinks, acts, and relates with everyone else” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 23).

thirty years of his life searching for a comfortable and respectable place in the respectable society of this time.”²⁸ The Lord, by means of events and people, gradually brought about in him the discovery of his true vocation. “In order to dedicate his life he had first to discover the existence of the poor, since it was no difficult thing in his time to take on a lifestyle and ideals that would shield one from the annoying presence of the poor.”²⁹

The discovery of the poor and their suffering would not be enough to explain the surrender of his whole life to their evangelization and service. If Vincent de Paul can dedicate his person and all the institutions he founded to the poor, it is because he sees everything in God; **the poor are Jesus Christ for us**, they are His suffering members. Only from God, only from faith is it possible to discover Christ in the poor. There are many occasions when Vincent speaks to the Daughters of Charity and to the priests of the Mission stressing that service to the poor is service to Jesus Christ.³⁰ Thus, for example, in a talk to the missionaries in January, 1657, he argues: “God loves the poor, and consequently loves those who love the poor; since, when a person is much loved, this affect is felt by his friends and servants. Just so, this little company of the Mission seeks to dedicate itself completely to serve the poor who are God’s preferred ones; for this reason we can hope that, by our love of them, God will love us as well.”³¹

And, while encouraging the Daughters of Charity to dedicate themselves to the service of the poor, in his conference of November 11, 1657, he assures them: “My daughters, if only you would know that the greatest grace is to serve the poor, since you have been called by God to do this!... The poor are the great lords of heaven; it is their role to open its gates.”³²

Nevertheless, for Vincent de Paul, **the poor are not only the object of the mission**. Vincent de Paul is convinced that “only the poor are able to save the poor.”³³

The poor cannot be passive recipients of evangelical activity; they must participate with their own possibilities and energy. Vincent de

²⁸ J. CORERA, “*Qui ad margines societatis sunt reiecti*,” in *VINCENTIANA* (1988), p. 346.

²⁹ J. CORERA, *The Poor According to St. Vincent*, in *VINCENTIANA* (1984), p. 583.

³⁰ Cf. SVP IX, 252.

³¹ SV XI, 392 s.

³² SV X, 332, 337.

³³ Thusly has J. Anouilh interpreted Vincent’s intuitions, in the script developed for the movie *Monsieur Vincent*, directed by M. Cloche in 1947. The script can be found in: *Monsieur Vincent*, Ediciones Fe y Vida, Teruel, 1993.

Paul states this clearly: “They no longer need to assist only those who are unable to work or find their basic sustenance, and those who are in danger of dying of hunger if not helped. In effect if someone barely has the energy to work, you should buy him some tools, appropriate to his profession, without giving him anything else. Alms are not for those who can work... but for the infirm poor, orphans and the elderly.”³⁴

That which is without doubt one the most original intuitions of Vincent de Paul, the Company of the Daughters of Charity, is constituted by poor village girls. These **poor young women** turn out to be for Vincent de Paul the best **agents of evangelization of the poor**: “Know this, my daughters, that I have learned that these poor people are very grateful for the grace that God has given them and to see that the Daughters will be present to them and that these Sisters have no other interest in them than the love of God; they say that they now realize that God is the protector of the poor. See how beautiful it is to help these poor people to recognize the goodness of God! Why, they understand perfectly that it is God who moves the Sisters to do this service.”³⁵

“The poor are for Saint Vincent the place of faith; only in them does one find Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ does one find the living God.”³⁶ “Among the poor is found true religion, a living faith.”³⁷

In the conference of December 13, 1658, he does not hesitate to confess to his missionaries: “The poor will one day dispute our place in paradise and will snatch it away from us, because there exists a great difference between their way of loving God and our way. Their love is shown in their suffering, in their humiliations, in labor and in conformity with the will of God. And ours, if we have any, how will it be known?”³⁸

He feels, and he says so at the end of his life, that he has been evangelized by them, or perhaps, that through them he has finally learned what the true gospel means and what true faith means. Now he has no security in his life other than dedication to the poor; including, he hopes, for his own definitive salvation through them.³⁹ Since “there is no better way to assure our eternal happiness than to live and die in the service of the poor.”⁴⁰

³⁴ SV IV, 183.

³⁵ SV X, 512.

³⁶ J. CORERA, *Diez estudios vicencianos* [Ten Vincentian Studies], p. 39.

³⁷ SV XII, 171.

³⁸ SV XII, 100-101.

³⁹ Cf. SVP IX, 241.

⁴⁰ SV III, 392.

So, then, to continue Christ's mission in our world today, in the steps of Vincent de Paul, we will have to seek out the most abandoned poor, in such a way that, in the words of John Paul II, "no one should relax while, in your country, there is one man, one woman, one child, one old person, one sick person, one child of God!... whose human and Christian dignity is not respected and loved."⁴¹

Actually the mission has become truly **universal** when the most poor are the protagonists, the participants in full communion of the goods of the Reign of God.⁴²

5. Lay persons in the Church in service of the Mission

Ever since the experience lived out by Vincent de Paul in Châtillon, lay persons, and particularly women, appear as agents in the Church in service of the mission.⁴³

Vincent de Paul recognizes that women had no apostolic activity in the Church of his time, noting that this was not so in the Church of the first centuries: "There have been some eight hundred years in which women have had no public occupation in the Church. Before, there existed deaconesses concerned with organizing women within the Church and instructing them about the ceremonies which then were used. But... in the times of Charlemagne, this use ceased and your gender remained deprived from all occupation."⁴⁴

Vincent de Paul, who recognizes the existing situation, nevertheless does not accept it. He remembers that there were women at the side of Jesus Christ and that they fulfilled apostolic ministry: "Among those who remained firm in following our Lord there were women as well as men, who followed Him up to the cross. The women were not apostles, but formed an order whose office consisted in contributing to the ministry of the apostles, to attend to their needs and to the needs of the faithful."⁴⁵

For this reason, Vincent de Paul is convinced that the time has come for women to return to carrying out the ministry that belongs to them in the mission of the Church.⁴⁶

⁴¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Homily During the Celebration of the Word in Viedma* (Argentina), *op. cit.*, 637.

⁴² Cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 26.

⁴³ A. Dodin has noted how, through the intervention of Vincent de Paul, attention was given to the role of the laity — particularly of women — in the Church's direct apostolate. Cf. A. DODIN, "St. Vincent de Paul and Women in the Life of the Church," in *Lecciones sobre vicencianismo [Lessons About Vincentianism]*, pp. 161 ff.

⁴⁴ ABELLY II, X, p. 364.

⁴⁵ ABELLY, I.c., p. 368.

⁴⁶ Cf. ABELLY, I.c., p. 364.

Vincent de Paul is conscious that the participation of women in the mission of the Church encounters all kinds of resistance, some founded even in expressions of Saint Paul; consequently, Vincent hastens to declare that women who serve in the mission of the Church are dispensed from any possible prohibition.⁴⁷ And he clearly involves women in the missionary work of the Church, in the very building up of the Church.⁴⁸

Saint Vincent de Paul had the audacity to incorporate lay persons in missionary activity. The Vincentian Family today constitutes a potential missionary thanks to thousands of lay people who wish to assume their responsibility in faithfulness to the inspirations of Saint Vincent. **The mission will be done with the laity or not at all.**⁴⁹

By the fact of forming part of the Church, all of us are responsible for the mission. John Paul II has said: "The universal calling to holiness is tightly bound up with the universal calling to the mission. Each baptized person is called to holiness and to the mission."⁵⁰ "The Church is missionary and the work of evangelization is a fundamental duty of the People of God."⁵¹

Lay participation in the transmission of faith and in evangelization form part of the history of Christianity ever since the first centuries.⁵² "Lay people cooperate in the work of evangelization of the Church and participate in her mission of salvation both as witnesses and as living instruments.... Properly speaking, as long as there does not exist a laity and one which works with the pastors, the Church is not truly founded, nor does it fully live, nor is it the perfect sign of Christ among the nations."⁵³

Lay persons are called especially to participate in all missionary initiatives, not because now there are fewer priests, but because of the duty, the right which flows from baptism, because of which "they have the general obligation, and enjoy the right, both personal and by association, to work that the divine message of salvation is known and received by all people in all the world; an obligation that values them even more in those circumstances in which only through them can people hear the Gospel and know Jesus Christ."⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Cf. SVP X, 902.

⁴⁸ Cf. SVP X, 958.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 71-72.

⁵⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 90.

⁵¹ *Ad Gentes*, 35.

⁵² Cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 71.

⁵³ *Ad Gentes*, 41; 21.

⁵⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 71.

Because “the Gospel cannot penetrate deeply into the consciences, into the lives, into the labor of people, without the active presence of the laity.”⁵⁵

6. Charity, which animates the mission; the mission, which makes charity

Saint Vincent, reflecting on the attitude of Christ, discovers in His love the explanation of His surrender and service. Christ is contemplated by Vincent de Paul as an abyss of tenderness which brings Him to behave as **Servant**. In the conference of December 13, 1658, speaking to the missionaries about the members of the Congregation of the Mission and their occupations, Vincent exclaims: “O love, the love of my Savior! O, love, love! You were incomparably more wonderful than all the angels were able to comprehend or could ever comprehend! Your humiliations were nothing other than love; your labor was love, your sufferings love, your prayers love, and every one of your exterior and interior operations were nothing other than repeated acts of your love. Your love gave you a great contempt of the world, contempt of the spirit of the world, contempt of earthly goods, contempt of all pleasures and contempt of all honors. Here there is a description of the spirit of our Lord, with which we should re-clothe ourselves, which consists in one word, to always have a great respect and love of God.”⁵⁶

And in his conference to the missionaries on May 30, 1659, with no less enthusiasm, he invites them to contemplate the love of Jesus Christ and **to re-clothe themselves with this same love** which is capable of surrendering self up to the final consequences.⁵⁷

Jesus Christ did not content himself with preaching to the poor; he served them. This is one conviction firmly in the spiritual experience of Saint Vincent, by means of, in particular, the events of Châtillon in 1617, which gave birth to the Confraternities of Charity.

Saint Vincent has reflected amply over the gospel scene in Saint Mathew 25:31-46: “Whatever you do to one of these my little ones, you do to me.”⁵⁸ He clearly speaks of the poor in terms such as teachers, masters, lords, to point out the attitude of **service** proper to those on earth whose own mission is to continue the mission of Jesus Christ.

In the conference given by Vincent de Paul in the last days of his life, concerning the end of the Congregation of the Mission, which

⁵⁵ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Ad Gentes*, 21.

⁵⁶ SV XII, 109.

⁵⁷ Cf. SV XII, 260 ss.

⁵⁸ Cf. SV XII, 73 ss.

has been called “the testament of Monsieur Vincent”⁵⁹ the elderly missionary lists out in detail the proper object of the labor of evangelization: the folk in the countryside, the old people in the Asylum of the Name of Jesus, the inhabitants in those areas devastated by war, the insane at Saint Lazare, the youth at the reformatory of Saint Lazare, abandoned children, the poor of Madagascar, the slaves of Barbary....⁶⁰

And even to this list one could add other various kinds of poor who do not appear there but who were the focus of Vincent de Paul’s and his missionaries’ dedication: those condemned to galleys, ruined aristocrats and émigrés, refugees of war, soldiers.⁶¹

Saint Vincent repeats to his missionaries that they have as their own lot, as an inheritance, the poor: “We are the priests of the poor. God has chosen us for them. This is primary for us, the rest is incidental.”⁶² “The most important part of our vocation is to work for the poor, and all the rest is incidental.... How poor we are if we are remiss in fulfilling the obligation that we have to come to the aid of the poor! Because we have given ourselves to God for this and God counts on us.”⁶³

Vincent de Paul’s contemporaries reproached him more than once⁶⁴ for extending the mission to the ever growing needs of the poor. For Vincent de Paul it is not possible to restrain himself when faced with **all** the needs of **all** the poor.

The mission, as Vincent de Paul saw it and lived it out, cannot be reduced to one announcement of the word or of doctrine, nor to a one-time relief of the most urgent needs of the poor. For Vincent de Paul, the mission becomes channeled into the **totality of the person** who, as he loved to say, has to be attended to corporally and spiritually.

He says so perfectly clearly to his missionary priests, who sometimes were inclined to be satisfied with preaching: “To go to evangelize the poor is not understood only to teach the mysteries necessary for salvation but to do all those things which the prophets preached and prefigured, to make the gospel effective.”⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Cf. J. CORERA, *Diez estudios vicencianos* [*Ten Vincentian Studies*], pp. 62-86.

⁶⁰ Cf. SV XII, 260 ss.

⁶¹ Cf. J. CORERA, *El pobre según San Vicente* [*The Poor According to St. Vincent*], pp. 581-582.

⁶² COLLET, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

⁶³ SV XII, 108 ss.

⁶⁴ Cf. as an example, SVP XI, 390-398.

⁶⁵ SV XII, 84.

He says so with the same clarity to the Daughters of Charity who could think that their mission was only to relieve the bodies of the poor: "You are not here only to attend to the bodies of the poor sick, but also to give them instruction in what you are able."⁶⁶ "You must bring to the poor sick two kinds of food: corporal and spiritual..."⁶⁷

And, with the same clarity, in the rules written for the Confraternities of Charity, he shows that the association exists to serve the poor corporally and spiritually. The two aspects of evangelization always go together. Because of this, Vincent would himself be concerned with affairs such as cleanliness and the quantity of meat for each poor person.⁶⁸ In other moments he would speak of raising the spirits of the poor.⁶⁹ But, at the same time, he could mention catechesis and the spiritual preparation of the poor.⁷⁰ In the mind of Vincent de Paul, spiritual service and corporal service do not constitute separate ends, but two aspects of the same end, of the same evangelizing mission.

Just so, today, in following Christ in the footsteps of Vincent de Paul, we will have to guess how to correctly join the promotion of the poor with the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ; effective commitment to the struggle against poverty, the analysis of its causes in solidarity with those on the edge of society, the denunciation of personal sin with society and structures that create exclusion and dependence.⁷¹ "In effect, if the Christian message about love and justice does not show its effectiveness in activity for justice in the world, it will only with great difficulty gain any credibility with the people of our time."⁷²

Jesus' words and saving gestures stirred up hope among the poor and afflicted who came to Him. After having brought about various signs in favor of the marginalized, Jesus responded to those sent by the Baptist: "Go and tell John what you are seeing and hearing" (Mt 11:4-6). As followers of Christ Jesus we are called to be **instruments of hope today** with our activities just as with our words. We followers of Jesus are not able to stop talking; we are

⁶⁶ SV IX, 48.

⁶⁷ SV IX, 593 ss.

⁶⁸ Cf. SVP X, 616-617.

⁶⁹ Cf. SVP X, 966.

⁷⁰ Cf. SVP X, 967.

⁷¹ "The greatest obstacles to conquering poverty are not technical but moral" John Paul II has stated in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 85. "Poverty is the product of man's will who passes unjust laws that benefit the most powerful while burying into poverty those who are most weak and handicapped." *Ibid.*, 9, cf. 16, 37.

⁷² THE UNIVERSAL SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Justice in the World* (1971), 37.

unable to shut up the Good News, we cannot stop making the gospel credible with concrete works,⁷³ with eloquent signs of love that promote a new solidarity.

The encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II considers human welfare and development as one of the directions of the mission today, one which is oriented to the proclamation of the Gospel from which it receives its dynamism.⁷⁴

And so it is that for the Mission to be completed there has to be integrated:

- Proclamation of Jesus Christ dead and risen.
- Human liberation from all that threatens each one's integrity.
- Elimination of every obstacle to reconciliation.
- Dialog with members of other religions.
- Defense of creation subject to selfish human exploitation.
- Incorporation of community into the celebration of faith.

All those are elements which constitute **the framework of the missionary action** of the Church sent to proclaim Jesus Christ to all the peoples of the world.

Conclusion

The encounter with the missionary response of Vincent de Paul challenges us. The mission cannot be the commitment of a few in the Church nor in the Vincentian Family, but rather **the responsibility of everyone**. "The new missionary action cannot be delegated to some few 'specialists,' but will end up involving the responsibility of all the members of the People of God. Whoever has truly met Christ cannot keep him to himself, but must proclaim him" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 40).

Vincent de Paul gets it right in his own time when he articulates harmoniously **mission and charity**. Attentive to historical events, following Jesus Christ, he gave his life to the evangelization of the poor. We who are part of the Vincentian Family are called to re-create today **his same spiritual and missionary experience**, and to do so from the missionary program of Christ "He has sent me to bring good news to the poor," our motto and the key to our own existence.

(Translation: DANIEL P. BORLIK, C.M.)

⁷³ Cf. Mt 5:6; Jn 10:37-38.

⁷⁴ Cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 58.