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"Wherever your treasure lies, there also will your heart be." Vincentian mission values: Crossing the post-modern divide

By
Aidan Rooney, C.M.

Are you ready to go for a short walk, perhaps a little treasure hunt? Treasure is what we are about today.

> *Don't lay up treasure for yourself on earth, where months and rust can corrupt it, and where thieves can break in and steal; rather, lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*
>
> Matthew 6: 19-20a; 21.

Matthew follows this little teaching with one about how we see things, as if the things we value were out there to be seen (See Matthew 6:22-35). What I would like to explore this morning is a process for the identification of values: for us, the limited set we are calling "Mission" values, and the smaller set within that range called "Vincentian."

Part I: The horizon.

I suggest that this process of identification must deal with three influences in contemporary Catholic life and thought:

1.The implications of post-modern thought for an understanding of Mission.

2.The theological import of new scientific paradigms.

3.The now widely held understanding that the mystery of the Incarnation is the guiding metaphor for theological reflection on human experience and the nature of the cosmos.

I can see eyes only recently awakened beginning to glaze over. Fear not! The practicality of all of this for those charged with leadership in the Vincentian endeavor will become abundantly clear. Although no one is to blame for these reflections but myself, I owe an

intellectual debt to Richard G. Cote, O.M.I., Diogenes Allen, and our own Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, Robert P. Maloney, C.M. So, to the task.

Allen, in and essay entitled, "Christian Values in a Post-Christian Context," points to the "crumbling" of the pillars of western society.[1] Long-standing scientific world views have been called into question; a coherent and communal moral framework has failed to emerge; the inevitability of progress and the surmounting of the world's problems is in doubt; and the belief that all knowledge is inherently good is questioned as we enter the world of genetic manipulation. Why is this important to a group of people called to leadership in these times? Because these assumptions have been and, in many ways still are, our operating assumptions as well.

"Where your treasure is, there also is your heart." Students of scripture might go back and forth with this passage, debating its meaning as derived from its placement within the sermon on the mount from Matthew's gospel, or its use in Luke as part of a series of exhortations. Whatever the case, the passage implies that one has found something of value, and, indeed, that something that one has sought to capture has, instead, become the "cap-TOR." One of the gifts of post-modern thought is the release of language, especially scriptural language, from the vice-grip of modern historical critical methodologies.[2] [3] Put simply, we are now allowed to play our way into the meaning of scripture. A helpful technique is to allow one's mind to internally wander through the synaptic web created by strong, suggestive words like "heart" or "treasure." Try it with me now. "Treasure... Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum!"... "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field." "Field"... now there is another strong one... "The field is the world."

What this little game can do is establish for us a simple human fact. Values, beliefs, definitions, mental constructs of all types are constantly shaped and reshaped within our consciousness as we interact with our world. So when we search for values, Vincentian,

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[1] Diogenes Allen, "Christian Values in a Post-Christian Context." In Burnham, Frederic B. (Ed.). *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World,* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 21.

[2] Sandra M. Schneiders, "Does the Bible have a Post-modern Message?" In Burnham, Frederic B. (Ed.). *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World,* (San Francisco: Harper & Row,1989), 61.

[3] Richard G. Cote, *Re-Visioning Mission: The Catholic Church and Culture in Postmodern America,* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 12.

missionary, or otherwise, we must acknowledge these three things:

1.That our own perceptions are decidedly relative and constructed (the post-modern influence).

2.That any values that we seek to uncover in our tradition have more meaning now than they did in the seventeenth or eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, and that they will continue to accumulate meaning (the evolutionary influence).

3.That they are not simply contained in the writings or the experiential histories of a group or groups who might lay claim to particular set of values (the Incarnational influence).

One might stop to ask at this point, "Is the identification of Vincentian Mission Values a pointless task?" Well, as you probably realize, my answer is "no." The task is to provide a definition that acknowledges and embraces that lack of essential meaning and moves toward a glossary of practical meanings which can inform our behavior as Vincentian leaders in the twenty-first century.

Part II: A contemporary definition.

There is a distinction that needs to be made between values and ideologies. All too often, in describing American culture, commentators point to things like consumerism, narcissism, and materialism as "North American Values." Cote, and I will follow his lead, indicates that *these* kinds of constructs might be better described as ideologies—kind of "viral infections" that are not inherent to the culture itself.[4] This distinction rests on the theological premise that the Incarnation means something: culture, like every other aspect of human existence, is redeemed. Values, on the other hand, are those deep aspects of any culture which find resonance with the advancement of the human project, which we believe to be intimately bound up with God's project, and which, born linguistically in a patriarchal age, is unfortunately bound to the word "Kingdom."

For our consideration then, a reasonable working definition for a value is, "that aspect" of any culture that echoes a Gospel way of being in the world.

What then, might "mission" values be? Mission describes the entrance of one person or culture into the life and culture of another. Long gone, thankfully, is the image of one culture "carrying the truth"

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[4] Cote, *Re-Visioning Mission*, 97.

to another. If we follow our incarnational principle, it should become apparent that:

Mission values are those aspects of the meeting cultures that echo Gospel ways of being in the world in an harmonic fashion.

For the musicians in the group, the simplest form of this harmony is the three-tone chord of culture one, culture two, and the gospel. Or, to return to our original metaphor, mission values are treasures, hidden in the fields of meeting cultures.

Vincentian Mission Values, to state what must be obvious by now, are those aspects of the "culture" that we approach and our particular Vincentian culture which find resonance with the Gospel ways of being in the world.

The mystery of the incarnation says that there is treasure to be found. The "fields" in which we search are the Vincentian tradition and the lives and experience of the poor.

Part III: Seeking the treasure / identifying the values.

So, you want to go on a treasure hunt for Vincentian Mission Values. Step one: stake your claim; buy the field; do something that says you really love the world God has made, and that you expect to find "treasure" in these "fields." You are not going to plant treasure,

Saint Vincent de Paul: Serving the abandoned children.
Musée de l'Assistance Publique, Paris, France.

and say, "Eureka!, I have found something!" If you are quite serious about the Incarnation, there are Vincentian Mission Values, that is, gospel ways of being in the world that resonate with Vincent's or Louise's or Elizabeth's or Frédéric's way of being in the world.

Like all good treasure hunters, we need to pack a tool bag that is adequate to the task, but light to tote around. Step two: have the right tools. Our tradition has provided tools that we like to call "virtues"—ways of acting, speaking and living, lenses for perception—which make the search for values possible. I suggest that humility, that is, the realization that one is not the center of the universe (nor is any particular community the center, either); simplicity, the ability to honestly assess how our own needs affect our ability to engage in the treasure hunt; and zeal, the willingness to stay at the task, even though the field does not provide much shade on a hot summer day, are the principal tools of the Vincentian treasure hunter. But the bag is full of stuff that we do not need to carry around. So, step three: get rid of useless tools. I suggest that there are three tools we carry around in our bag which we would be advised to leave at home (or maybe even return to where we got them). These, too, are lenses of perception, but might be better called "vices." The first is that arrogance that comes from being educated and upper middle class: we think we know. The second is control—our unwillingness to be led by another to a place bereft of safety (there could be snakes in the grass in that field). Finally, complacency, the tendency to be content with the little tarnished community or corporate heirlooms we bring out of storage every year or so and proudly proclaim, "Look at our treasures!"

Part IV: Vincentian Mission Values in our culture and the ideologies that plague Vincentian life and ministry.

Perhaps a little treasure hunt is in order now. Ready? The world is a good place. Jesus told me. The field that is North American culture is worth staking a claim in. There are values, Vincentian Mission Values hidden in this field. Vincent would recognize them. What is this over here? Ingenuity, effectiveness, practicality, volunteerism, compassion, family, participation—a treasure trove! But, should not we be careful? These do not sound religious enough! Maybe I will just pull one of my heirlooms out of the closet. Here is a nice one: disponibility, and its modern structural cousin: mobility. Now I feel better! I know the territory better: I am no longer frightened in the

A group of symposium participants gathers for this photo, taken during the fourth offering of the Leadership Institute in Chicago.

field—it is my own room. And I can just sit back, admire my pretty little things, and never have to venture out and ask the question of practicality. After all, it does not matter if it actually helps the poor, just as long as I feel good about what I am doing. And on my best days, I can have a great time sneering at those institution-laden hospital sisters, or those empire-building parish priests. Ahhh!

Here is another nice little trinket: direct service. Pretty enough to look at. Fairly soon I become so enamored of it, I can quite comfortably leave that treasure called effectiveness out in the field, smugly contending that those poor university men are only engaged in indirect service.

That was not much fun, was it? It started out as fun, but there is something about embracing the world, our culture, and its values that puts us off. There is a risk here. When one buys the whole field, one gets to wander around both treasure and trash. Not everything in the world of the poor is treasure, for sure. Not everything that North American culture sings about will harmonize with the gospel. But that is what the tool kit is for. Vincentian Mission Values will not necessarily go by our traditional names for them.

The task for Vincentian leaders is really a task of interpretation. We are not bringing values, or anything else for that matter, into the world of the poor. A renewed understanding of mission tells us that

values exist in the concrete particular cultures in which we live and minister. What we are called to bring is our little Vincentian tool kit: a triad of virtues that are the necessary tools of interpretation, that will allow us to perceive the Vincentian values that already are present in our culture and the culture of the poor people we say we want to evangelize. What I contend, and what really is offered for our reflection is that, despite our protestations that we enter the world of the poor to BE evangelized, despite our protestations that we KNOW we will meet Jesus in the poor, we have yet to rid ourselves of some of the dead weight of inappropriate tools. We still want ultimate control over the situations in which we find ourselves, even though a post-modern understanding posits a world that is, of its nature, out of control. We still believe we hold, if not all, at least the majority of the truth, even though a post-modern understanding admits to the relativity and contingency of all knowledge. So, when the struggle gets tough, we are all too ready to remain in our quiet little rooms with their dusty heirlooms and comfortable overstuffed chairs.

To be *in search of* Vincentian Mission Values is a far cry from believing we can *extract* them from a bygone age and transplant them into contemporary society. What we can do is adapt the tools of another age, the tools of our tradition, that are appropriate to the post-modern context in which we live.

Among the questions that remain to be answered are these:

1. What will Vincentian simplicity look like, in concrete behaviors, in the Vincentian leader of today and tomorrow? (We need to answer this, because we need to start writing it in job descriptions).

2. What new habits of thinking and praying will we need to adopt to be humble Vincentian leaders of today and tomorrow? (We need to answer this, because we need to have this new mind set as we plan—and, for those living community life—our formation programs need to be geared toward this).

3. How will we remain zealous, when the stresses of the post-modern situation get us down? (We need to answer this because, to stretch the quote, "Once God's gotten the heart, God does indeed demand the work!")

4. How will we celebrate the intersection of North American and Vincentian values–values like effectiveness, practicality, equality—without succumbing to the enticements of North American and Vincentian ideologies? (We need to answer this so we present a cred-

ible witness to the gospel. We may not forget that we are not witnesses of North America, but sometimes we do sound like "Vincentianism" is the gospel we preach.)

5. Can we be comfortable with sets of Vincentian values that operate differently, and in different degrees, in the different subcultures in which we minister—health care, university, parish, etc? (We need to answer this, or we will fall back into the morass of competition and the sin of "my way or the high-way" from which we oft-times suffer.)

These questions, and others like them, always begin most comfortably as self-examination. How simple, how humble, how zealous am I? How arrogant, how controlling, how complacent? But they cannot remain individualized. To truly enable us to live, corporately, Vincentian Mission Values—whatever they are—these questions must be asked of our planning and decision making structures as well. I truly hope we have the courage to engage in these conversations. Thank you.

Often by refusing what we ask, (God) grants us a greater grace than by giving it to us, and we should realize that, since He knows what is good for us better than we do, what He sends us is best, even if it is disagreeable to nature and contrary to our wishes.

(Saint Vincent de Paul,
letter to Sister Avoie Vigneron, 24 August 1658)