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— Foreword —

Vincentian Higher Education and Poverty Reduction

BY

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I simply cannot imagine any place I would rather spend my life than inside a university. Welcoming and meeting some of the finest minds and practitioners of our time onto campus. Discussing the issues of our day with individuals who have made those concerns their life's work. Delighting in undergraduates' idealism and their discovery of complexity. Inhabiting quiet corners for study, or contemplation of art, or music, or theatre. Attempting to honor in practice the privilege and improvisation of good teaching. Even engaging in passionate disagreements, wherein the only recognized hierarchy is that of a compelling idea.

There is a bit of pretension, to be sure, and conversation is sometimes sacrificed to more immediately satisfying ideological grandstanding, but even these moments are occasion for quiet smiles and recognition of a shared humanity. At the end of the day, I know of no corner of our good earth that is more fertile with possibility. Ideas take shape and then spread, influence and sometimes even undermine the society around them. New generations meet the thinking of generations long before them, worlds wildly different than their own. The disciplined observation of scholars and the sheer ambition of their projects are open-handedly shared with academic colleagues throughout the world. Students are brought into this life of love — for there is no other word for it. One cannot study the world or dedicate one's life to educating the next generation without love.

At a Vincentian university there is an additional, particularly lovely, idealism rooted in the care of two seventeenth-century saints for the poor around them.

Vincent de Paul and his life-long collaborator Louise de Marillac brought people together, both informally and organizationally, so that the poor would be assisted. The simplicity of their purpose met with the still extraordinary ingenuity and complexity of their response. The legal, political, social, ecclesial, and economic forces all had to be understood, engaged, and ultimately managed so that the work could succeed. Thousands of letters remain from both founders, coordinating their works and collaborators, raising money,

filing and fighting law suits, begging the wealthy, employing the royal court, fighting political enemies, building consistency in services throughout multiple countries — and perhaps most important of all, attending to the spirits of all who were served and serving. For there was nothing ultimately more important to Saint Vincent and Saint Louise than the salvation of those for whom and with whom they worked.

This little book brings together these two compelling worlds. The essays, written by faculty and professional staff working at Vincentian universities, are hesitant, searching, proud, prodding, and of necessity incomplete. And yet they are idealistic in the finest sense of the term.

These are the reports of scholars who are attempting to apply their knowledge, research expertise, educational skills, and their students' labor to the needs of the poor in our own time and place. The danger, of course, is well-intentioned amateurism or encouragements to action without actual action. But notably little of that exists on these pages. Rather, there is a desire to share what they have learned with their colleagues, all so that Vincent and Louise's work might expand and our universities might be a true resource for the poor.

The world has changed since these two saints looked upon its needs. Louise and Vincent created a succession of local works where there were none. Today there are extensive public and private programs to address poverty, and there is an understanding of the economic and social forces that both create and ameliorate it. There are advances in health, communication, agriculture, logistics, materials-science, water purification, the productive use of capital, and so much more that can be put to good use in ways Louise or Vincent could never have imagined. It is in universities that much of this expertise resides.

For Vincentian universities, the first and foremost activity will always be the education of the poor — finding ways to fund and deliver higher education to first-generation, immigrant, and working-class individuals. Yet, when scholars assemble to accomplish this worthy task, the valuable knowledge they bring and the community they form create the possibility of a broader response to the poverty that still afflicts our world. At Vincentian universities this is fundamentally a religious task, though not always a confessional one, coming from the deeply held convictions of our faculty, staff, and students that God would have the world different from what it is. Their discovery and conviction, like that of Vincent and Louise, is that it is a blessing to know, educate, and work on behalf of the poor.

The authors remind us that solutions may take better hold when the complexity of poverty is acknowledged and the interlocking issues that the poor must negotiate are teased apart and addressed. Solutions may be more

effective if they engage the current economic and political systems. The poor may be better served when these social systems find reformers and collaborators, rather than the formation of another partially funded, understaffed program. These are but a few of the observations our authors explore. In the end, their intent is both modest and generous: to share with one another first efforts and ideas so that the potential of our academic communities may be realized and the poor assisted.

DePaul University, Chicago
1 November 2008
Feast of All Saints