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A Daily and Impassioned Seeking

*By the Most Rev. Beniamino De Palma, C.M.
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Let the bishop “*be like a father and a brother to the poor ... Let his diocese be a place where the Church really is the Church of the poor. Let him pray with the poor. Let him eat with the poor ... Let him be a father and a brother to the priests of his diocese ... Let him be able to listen to them.*”

In his intervention at the *Synod of Bishops* last October, Fr. Robert Maloney gave, in a few beautiful words, the profile of a pastor concerned for the needs of the least, a man of optimism and of dialogue, more attuned to persons than to structures, sensitive to such a degree that he intuitively knows when it is time to encourage, to support, to redirect, and to start anew.

Even though as bishops we have a different place in the organic structure of the Community, I believe that that my *belonging* to the Vincentian family goes to the heart of who I am. I love my Community of origin. In its womb the direction of my life took its form. Thus, I hope to share with each of my confreres a daily and impassioned seeking of the ways that express faithfully, and, at the same time, define better the Vincentian identity and ideal that I learned during my formation. These seeds bore in those places where the Community asked me to celebrate the gift of my consecration and my priesthood, through innumerable occasions of human and interior maturation, the encounter with the poor and their histories.

A look back on the journey already completed gives me that sense that it is not easy to decipher that will of God in the events of our lives, a task which our Founder “commanded” us insistently to take up with an open spirit and without hesitation. This has also happened in my life, especially in those decisive moments of “Exodus,” that sent me forth from old ideas and securities toward new and unknown adventures.

Thus it has been, right up to the last, unpredictable turn that he put in my life, calling me to the episcopal ministry. I know quite well that all this happened, not because of any merit of mine, but because of the *unfathomable plan of the One who arranges everything according to his own will*, and “has judged me worthy of his trust by calling me to ministry” (1 Tim 1:12). It is really true: God chooses the one who is foolish, weak and not well born (cf. 1 Cor 1:27-28).

My lived experience as a bishop in a diocese of Southern Italy, large in territory and with many complex problems, puts me continually in contact with situations in which I indicate, instill, and even seek with others some reasons for hope, for dreams, and for the courage to get back on the journey, which at times gets detoured and, sometimes, interrupted. There are so many human situations in which I recognize the need of the presence of a Church that is impassioned for the human person, even only if capable of “remaining with” (as did the *Samaritan* in the Gospel, and *Simon the Cyrenian* along the *Way of the Cross*) young people, families, men and women, the elderly, infants, workers, the disabled — all of whose compromised and broken lives are formidable provocations to my faith, challenges to my hope and my trust in the redemption of history, calls to my Christian and pastoral charity that I cannot ignore. These are the moments when the “naked” and demanding words of St. Vincent come back to me, as if to dissolve every presumption: “*a great trust in the help of God is the supreme means to do his work. He is the strength of the weak, and the eye of the blind.*”

I am not the “man of the temple” or the administrator of worship — I tell myself — but rather the companion on the street of every man, my brother, the witness to and the servant of that “infinitely creative charity” to be lived with the colors of simplicity, meekness, and pastoral longing. “Affective” and “effective” charity enabled St. Vincent to formulate in a unique essential the directions to guide one’s path: “*It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him. I must love my neighbor as the image of God and the object of his love, and do all I can so that they, in turn, can love their Creator, who knows them, who considers them as brothers, and has saved them*” (SV XII, 263).

Thanks and praise, abandonment into the merciful and providential hands of God, are the first movement toward the sources of Vincentian spirituality, and these are the closest to my heart, the deepest and most radical of my connections to God, the ones that make me ask myself frequently about the validity of my choices and my projects in life.

I am convinced that all of this flows from a stubbornly “optimistic” vision of a reality that has been, after all, redeemed by the Cross and visited by God. I believe that giving witness to “Easter hope” is one of the most pressing things I must do — as a believer and a priest — from within our culture which is always more anchored in the present, which looks with great mistrust at a confused future, which responds with skepticism before every certainty proposed to it, which finds itself broken apart at its center by individualistic tendencies, even though the world moves toward globalization.

I think of the difficulties and the daily dramas of the many people I meet in my ministry. I think of how many young people, adults, women and men, I

see as interiorly torn between desires and necessities, between proposals to do good and the inability to change, between histories that would like to change and realities that turn the lights out on dreams.

In these moments I remember the drawing power and determination of what St. Vincent wrote: “we have to cast our nets courageously” (SV III, 282).

My years in episcopal ministry have been a “school of humanities,” an untiring lighthouse of surprises. In the give and take of events I continue to look for and to gather up with sincerity of heart all those occasions that in some way question me and involve me as a Vincentian.

Rethinking my experience to see what it means to be a “Vincentian bishop” means for me redefining some of its specific dimensions. In particular:

The Primacy of Evangelization

The pastoral sensitivity of our Founder made him think about the preaching of the word as *the continuation of the very mission of the Son of God*. Thus he taught us, and in pursuit of this goal he gave his whole life. For this purpose the Risen Lord has sent his Church throughout the world and for this purpose (of this St. Vincent was certain) the Holy Spirit gave life to the “Little Company.” To give the *Good News* today to a person means to let him know that life today, that our history makes sense — in other words, to make come alive in the person the dignity of being redeemed and a real desire for God. During the Synod, Cardinal Martini talked about a return to the Gospel as a decisive cultural response to the needs of Europe — experienced above all by young people — of rediscovering one’s identity and rediscovering the values that express who the human person is. As a bishop, I translate this into multiplying and sustaining the paths that lead to Christ, and lead us to “fix our gaze on him,” because it is listening to his Word that makes flow a continual, seductive call to be his follower.

The World of the Poor

Tenderness toward the least among us, as well as for those who bear the stigmata of both old and new injustices and in their hearts — this is what I believe to be the historical sense of *evangelizare pauperibus*, and represents, at least as an intention, one of the attitudes continually present in my program of episcopal service. This is the “fundamental option” to make operative in the terms that our own Superior General suggested to the bishops: “*Awaken the concern of its members, the wealthy especially, that they might work with you in the service of the poor. Bring together young and old, men and women, clergy and lay, rich and the poor themselves in the service of the most needy ... Plan*

with the poor, so that they might have a voice in their own future. Celebrate the Eucharist with them. Share the word of God with them. Communicate to them your own conviction that the Kingdom of God is here and that it is for them. And since women and children are almost always the poorest of the poor, stand at their side in their struggle for basic human rights.” Teaching solidarity is a sobering way of life, focused on what is essential: *“The people respect above all the poverty of the bishop who conforms his life to that of Jesus Christ, the Bishop of bishops”* (SV III, 94). These are the words of St. Vincent, and they carry that sense of experience and wisdom.

Priests, my Friends

“Since Our Lord must be our model in whatever condition we find ourselves, those who are to direct others must look at him and take their example from him. He governed them with love...” Life together and the brotherhood I share with priests, who with me bear the burden and the joy of pastoral commitment, are precious moments so that the diocesan presbyteral service be lived as a way of welcome, of reconciliation, and of feast, and not just as a building site of initiatives and projects, but as family for each priest. I am convinced that the unending search for harmony makes each one even more ready to return to his ministry with a more serene interior disposition, able to gather up the challenges of a changing society and culture, able to find meaning and certainty. The intuition of St. Vincent, who put *fraternal charity* as a necessary condition for *pastoral charity* is extraordinarily true for those of us called to be men of peace, of reconciliation and of communion, but who often find ourselves at the risk of being good teachers, but not always good witnesses.

With each of my priests I would like to share the commitment to ongoing formation, which I believe to be one of the most important components for the task at hand of “proclaiming the Gospel in a world which changes,” in and around the areas in which we live. In his time, St. Vincent showed that he, too, understood this need when he said: *“the priest must have the necessary instruction, otherwise he would risk offending God ... To be a priest without the knowledge necessary is to be a priest against the will of God...”* Certainly, a culture which is not directed toward itself, but rather helps sharpen sensitivity and discernment, which makes rich in humanity the life of the priest, grounds him with enthusiasm in his vocation and presents him before his people as a true icon of Jesus, the Good Shepherd: *“Learn also the science of the Lord and his maxims and put them in practice in such a way that what you learn ... may help you to serve God and his Church better”* (SV XII, 64).

Laity: the People I Love

Every day I find in lay people a multiform richness of charisms, willingness and goodness. Their experience of life makes them experts in the joys, the sorrows, the worries and the hopes that are hidden in the heart of society. Their sensitivity toward the themes of justice and peace, of human rights, is often able to catch me, us men of the temple and of dogmas, sometimes escaped from life itself ... At times I ask myself: in what initiatives did Vincent take part because of the intuitions and the generosity of simple people?

Esteem for laity thus gets translated into privileged attention to them. To grow together, as clerics and as lay people, toward an open and constructive dialogue, to encourage them in their sense of ministry and in their sense of mission, to value their contribution to the building up of the Kingdom, to make them actors and bearers of a culture of life rooted in the Gospels, all these are indispensable and ambitious objectives of the pastoral program of a Church that intends to live credibly in obedience to the Gospel it proclaims and in the concrete signs of charity, which becomes its history.

In the diocese in which I live, the presence of other Christian churches and confessions makes necessary a continuous dialogue, a humble seeking of a truth much larger than the fragments which each one has at his disposition. This ecumenical tension spreads and brings together not only relationships of respect and communion in religious and cultural diversity, but also feeds within the communities the need to find again the fundamentals of each one's faith.

Before scenes that open up, laden with expectations, but also with fears, I know that every day my walk begins again with the people God has given over to my care. The only title I can truly claim is that of being a son of St. Vincent. To him I leave the last word.

“O Savior of the world, I choose you as the only example of my life, and I offer you the holy and irrevocable promise to live according to the promises I made in my holy Baptism and in the reception of Holy Orders.”

(ROBERT STONE, C.M., translator)