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*To the members of the Congregation of the Mission:
Messengers of Hope*

Dear Brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

In this, my first Advent letter, I would like to share with you three reflections and offer a practical application for our life as followers of Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor.

Three reflections

The core of this Advent letter is taken from comments I received in reference to my circular of 11 September.

1. A person gave a beautiful reflection concerning what I wrote about “gift-giving” and giving ourselves as gift, saying: if all of us who are called to be faithful to St. Vincent’s spirit could see ourselves as gift to those whom we serve, whether that be in missions *ad gentes*, popular missions, parish work, administration, hospitals, or teaching, what a wonderful thing that would be. Ask yourselves, my brothers, “Do I see myself as gift?” Christmas, for which Advent is a preparation, is traditionally a time of gift-giving. **Let us reflect on our own giftedness and our giving of ourselves as gift to those whom we serve this Advent season.**
2. Another person posed a question raised by my reminder that St. Vincent calls us to be a part of the Universal Church. It was asked what we should do in situations where the people with whom we work and share our ministry are in conflict with the teachings of the official Church. What is our stand before them? My response to this person is my response to each of us who desires to live the Gospels in a radical way. We are called to be compassionate to all. In our relationships we see first the person, as Jesus did, and we share from our hearts the love he has for him or her. When I was in the seminary someone once made a comment about the “uniqueness” of our Vincentian formation. We are taught first to see and love the person as person and later help that person come to understand what the Church’s doctrine is with regard to his or her own situation. During Advent we are to deepen our reflection on the Incarnation of God’s Word: “And

the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The Gospels reveal with clarity that the greatest expression of God's love for humanity is in God's becoming one like us. We are called to reflect God's love to humanity in and through our signs of compassion, our passion for and with those who suffer. **Let this time of Advent be a time of reflecting on the quality of our compassion, especially to the most abandoned.**

3. In another note, someone commented on my letter and our call to conform our lives more radically to the lives of the poor, allowing the poor to be our teachers. My reflection was taken a step further saying that our formation ought to be carried out in the context of direct experience with the poor. This Advent, when we are invited to love more deeply the Lord who chose to show his love by being born poor, let us liken ourselves to Jesus and liken ourselves to the poor, doing so in and through our closeness to them. I recommend that our programs of initial formation, and even our programs of ongoing formation, provide ample opportunities for contact with the poor, not necessarily putting an emphasis on what "we can do for them," but rather on what "we can be with them," so that we might come to know and love more deeply the Lord Jesus who will speak to us through them. **Let this Advent be a time of recommitment in our walking more faithfully with the Lord and hence walking more faithfully with the poor.**

A practical application

During Advent, I invite you, my brothers, to be more in tune with the Word of God that the Church presents us on a daily basis. We all know that in this special time of the year there is a richness in the Word of God that calls us all to personal and communal conversion, giving us at the same time the grace to edify those with whom we live and inviting us to be instruments in the transformation of our world.

I encourage everyone to reflect on God's Word daily. The experience of *lectio divina* is an easy practice that we all know and use. We can do it very simply, perhaps before retiring in the evening, by reading over God's Word and seeing what common theme exists between the first reading and the Gospel. Reflecting on that Word before sleeping each night and again in the morning when we awake, we could ask ourselves the question: "What does God's Word say to me in my actual living situation?" Our personal reflections can be enriched by scriptural commentaries like the Vincentian Family website's "daily commentary" — the SSVP website is doing a similar reflection on the Word during this season.

In community, I encourage you to share the Word of God during Advent. Perhaps the most edifying way would be to share

with one another the Sunday readings. A good practice could be to gather for an hour to listen to the Word of God for the following Sunday and then share that Word, asking what it says to us individually, what it says to us as a community. After spending an hour or so sharing the Word, we could spend some time exchanging experiences that occurred during the week. Let us laugh and just enjoy one another's company. It is a real way of deepening our communal reflection on the Word of God and living out that Word in community.

I would also like to encourage you, my brothers, to come together during Advent with the people with whom you share the apostolate, or gather with other groups of the Vincentian Family, to reflect together on some theme that the Word of God highlights during Advent. I am amazed by the way people can easily relate the Word to their own life situations. It is a beautiful faith experience that certainly edifies me and can help to challenge us all. What does the Word of God say in terms of our own reality? In terms of our family situations? In terms of life in our neighborhood, our country, or in the world in which we are living? What is God's Word saying? To what is God's Word calling us individually, or as a faith community, or as members of the Vincentian Family? As we all know too well, more often than not, we are evangelized by those whom we are called to evangelize. Let us reflect on God's Word so that it challenges us, as Family, to be a prophetic voice to the poor.

These are some suggestions I offer you, my brothers, this Advent season. The Word of God is rich in itself. Let the Spirit speak to you and lead you, individually, communally, together with the people with whom you share your ministry, together as the Vincentian Family.

May Mary, ever attentive to the Word of God, help us to be docile to the voice of the Spirit. Through her intercession, I ask the Lord to bless you and fill each of you with all the joy and peace that he comes to bring us at Christmas and throughout the New Year.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Gregory Gay, C.M." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General