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Funeral Homily

BY

ROBERT P. MALONEY, C.M.

There is a wonderful conference that Saint Vincent gave to the Daughters of Charity on 13 February 1646. "When we die" Saint Vincent asked out loud, "what will it be like?" He answered:

The poor, I think, will be there as our intercessors to welcome us into heaven. "Lord," they will say, "here comes Sister Ann. She taught me that you love me and that I can put all my trust in you." Another will cry out, "Lord, there's Father Bill. He taught me how to pray, to talk to you in my own words, to listen to you." Another will cry out, "There's Sister Claire. She opened a school in our parish and taught our children how to read and write. But most of all when Sister Claire was there we knew that God was present and alive in our midst." Then finally another will cry out, "Look Lord, here comes Father Jim Richardson. He taught me how important the truth is. He never liked to see the truth blurred. When he spoke, you knew he believed what he said."

My brothers and sisters, Jesus is the truth. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," he tells us in today's gospel. "No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus repeats this message again and again. "The person who walks in the truth comes into the light," Jesus says in the third chapter of John's gospel (3:21). "The truth will set you free," he cries out in John's eighth chapter. As he is leaving his disciples Jesus says to them, "When the Spirit comes he will teach you all the truth" (16:13). "This is why I have come. This is why I was born into the world: to testify to the truth" (18:37).

Saint Vincent loved these sayings of Jesus and so he made truthfulness—what he called simplicity—the first virtue that every member of the Vincentian Family should strive for. "It is the virtue I love the most," he said of simplicity. "It is my gospel."

My brothers and sisters, it is good that we are gathered here today as a Vincentian Family. We believe that the presence of Jesus the Risen Lord is central in life and we want to share the good news of his presence, especially with the poor—the good news of his practical, everyday, effective love for each of us and particularly for those who are otherwise abandoned. We believe that this truth sets us free. It sets the whole world free. Of course, it also turns the world upside down. This truth says that where there is death, there can be life. It says that where there is sorrow, there can be joy. It says that where there is darkness, there can be light. We believe this, my brothers and sisters, and in our best moments we proclaim it clearly. That is what Father Richardson loved to do: proclaim this truth very clearly.

May I tell you a little anecdote about Jim. Once, near the end of his term as superior general, he was visiting the United States, and he came to stay at our seminary in Northampton, Pennsylvania, where I was the local superior. One evening I went to his room to see if he needed anything, and I asked him how his visit to the United States had been. He said to me: “It was good, Bob, very good. I didn’t get angry once. You know, I have a very bad temper, but I like to say things clearly, and I know that if I hurt anyone I can apologize to him afterwards and he’ll forgive me.” That’s the way Jim was. He loved the truth. He was very simple, very direct, and when his directness offended others he was very humble.

Today, my brothers and sisters, we celebrate life—the life that Jesus shared with Jim and the life that Jim now shares with God and those who have gone before us. On the occasion of the death of the members of his family, Saint Vincent loved to reflect on their virtues. May I hold this one up before you today: Jim loved the truth. He lived nobly the first virtue that Saint Vincent proposed to his family, utter simplicity, clarity in speaking the truth.

If Jesus is the truth, then that is how we go to the Father. That was the road that Jim took. He urges all of us today, my brothers and sisters, to walk the same road. And so I encourage you, my brothers and sisters, walk on that road with joy and confidence because you walk with the Risen Lord. Let us sing a new song to the Lord today, as we walk with him on the road. Sing a resurrection song. Sing of the beauty of truth. Sing of the loveableness of simplicity, which was Saint Vincent’s gospel. Sing of the joy of all the saints. Sing with Saint Vincent, with Saint Louise, with our new Saint John Gabriel Perboyre. Sing with Jim, and with all our brothers and sisters who have gone

before us, as they cry out, "You are the truth, Lord. In you we are free. It is you who change our sorrow to joy, our darkness to light, our death to life."