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Vincentian Leadership: "...not yet what it will be..."

BY

JOHN LANE, PH.D.

For donors Bill and Mary Pat Hay, one of the most appealing aspects of the proposal they received from Rev. J. Patrick Murphy, C. M., was the request for support for a Vincentian Leadership Conference. The conference was to bring together internationally recognized Vincentian scholars with a sampling of leadership studies experts and Vincentian service leaders. The 4 June 2003 letter of invitation to participants read, "You are expected to come to the conference to present a paper on a specific topic related to Vincentian leadership and reflecting your own field of expertise."

The conference is part of a broader research endeavor, The William and Mary Pat Gannon Hay Vincent de Paul Leadership Project. According to Rev. Murphy, project director, and Dr. Marco Tavanti, associate director, the purpose of their multi-faceted research agenda: "is to identify management and leadership practices based on the values and vision of Vincent de Paul as reflected in a broad range of organizational cultures. We expect our findings will document the elements of a Vincentian management science to serve as the basis for curricula, materials, pedagogy and organizational development programs."¹

Conference participants gathered in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, between August fourth through the eighth, 2003. Two authors who were unable to attend presented their thoughts through video recorded messages. The others shared preliminary versions or outlines of their papers. Presenters invited participants to respond critically to what they read or heard. As often happens at such gatherings, some of the after-hour discussions were at least as lively and informative as those within the conference rooms.

As conference facilitator, it was my responsibility to propose a conference theme, set a tone, field questions, make connections and highlight differences among presentations, summarize as needed, and encourage interaction among the participants within and outside

¹ Research project letter, 16 January 2003.

the conference rooms. The participants made all of these tasks easy, especially the last.

At the opening session of the conference, we considered that “renewal,” or “Vincentian Aggiornamento,” or, more poetically, “Rekindling the Fire,” would serve as the unifying theme for our week’s work together. From the outset, participants seemed eager to talk about the future of Vincentian service and leadership and, through their papers, to offer philosophical and practical guideposts toward that future state. Everyone wanted to know more about the current status of leadership in Vincentian-sponsored institutions and to discuss new and emerging models of life-giving leadership and effective management practices that derive from an authentic Vincentian vision translated for the 21st century. The mantra for the week was: “What would Vincent do? What would Louise do?”

For nearly 400 years, the sons and daughters of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac have evangelized the poor by word and work, ministering always to both their spiritual and corporal concerns. Members of the Vincentian family conduct seminaries, administer hospitals, sponsor universities, and perform a variety of ministries. Today, as the numbers of the vowed and ordained members of the Vincentian family decline, it is not clear how or whether these ministries of evangelization and service will continue. There are no guarantees, but there is good reason to hope that they will.

As you will see, several authors observe positive signs that the work begun by Vincent, Louise, and their seventeenth-century patrons and collaborators continues and even flourishes. They report on exemplary local service programs and even large-scale works of charity in various parts of the world, especially in the Southern Hemisphere. Often, the success of such programs turns on new forms of collaborative leadership with Vincentian-minded lay people and new relations with public social service and other government agencies.

We have only just begun to learn how to translate Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac for the 21st century. Change and transition are always difficult, especially when we ourselves are the ones who have to change and endure ambiguous transitions. It is a truism: change is necessary and inevitable. Vincent remarked presciently: “The Company of charity is not now what it was in the beginning and is not yet what it will be when God has perfected it.” Neither is Vincentian leadership yet what it will be.

Although the project directors did not assign specific subject matter or topics to the authors, we find that the papers fall nicely into three interrelated categories. The first section deals with leadership and organizational life largely from a Vincentian point of view. The second invites readers to explore several critical leadership issues from perspectives outside the traditional male and North American and Western European leadership paradigms. The final section offers case studies and modern applications of the Vincentian way of leading and serving. One way or another all articles exemplify the “effective love” that Vincent calls us to practice.

The Vincentian family is a mission-driven lot. It is mission that animates and holds us together. How are we to understand the Vincentian mission in the 21st century? In a 2003 internal memo, which I use with his permission, Rev. Jack Minogue, C.M., DePaul University’s tenth president, wrote, “I don’t believe the Vincentian mission is something that some one grasps. I have lived most of my life trying to understand it and feel it. I see this mission only through a glass darkly. The Vincentian mission is a horizon that we approach or withdraw from. It is not an accomplishment that can be checked off.”

I believe that the articles that follow help us to better understand and, in a sense, experience the mission. They invite us to approach and not withdraw from it.

Special thanks to Mr. William Hay and Mrs. Mary Pat Gannon Hay for their generous support of and active participation in the conference. Thanks too to Rev. J. Patrick Murphy and Dr. Marco Tavanti for organizing and planning the conference and to Ms. Maureen Gauntner who attended to the many details that make a conference successful, including: transportation, meals, room accommodations, and the like. We are deeply indebted to Mr. Nathaniel Michaud for editing the conference papers and to Rev. Edward Udovic, C.M., and the Vincentian Studies Institute for publishing them as a part of the *Vincentian Heritage Series*.

MISSION STATEMENT
of
The Hay-Vincentian Leadership Project

Our Mission

Like a great fire, the de Paul Project awakens and advances the vision, values and leadership practices of Saint Vincent de Paul in people and organizations worldwide. Providing research, leadership development and collaboration in the manner of Saint Vincent, the Project ensures the continuance of the legacy of Saint Vincent's organizational genius and leadership skills in the service of others.

- We call it the de Paul Project after Saint Vincent de Paul, rather than Depaul University even though we are housed and founded in the University.
- We call it Project to imply practicality and action.
- We have a sense of urgency, thus the notion of Vincent's idea that we should do what we do with zeal — *like a great fire*.