Spring 2008

Toward a Vincentian Culture in Higher Education

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At the dawn of the new millennium, the dire situation of many member nations motivated the United Nations to adopt as one of its eight millennium development goals the plan to "eradicate extreme poverty and hunger." Current statistics sadly suggest that this laudable goal will fall very short of the recently established benchmark to "reduce by half the population of people living on less than a dollar a day" by 2015. The harsh reality of so many persons living at a subhuman standard is a call to galvanize commitment and mobilize resources on behalf of the poor at the individual and institutional levels and in the local, national, and global arenas. Vincentian higher education, with its assets of intellectual capital and sponsorship by a 400-year-old organization recognized for its action for the poor, can find here a special opportunity to extend the tradition and enliven the culture.

Such a contribution begins with reflection on our origins and our current institutional mission statements. There are three very basic questions which each individual, but also every responsible institution, must ask on a regular basis. Where did we come from? Where are we now? Where must we go? These are questions of existence but also of culture, as they probe both identity and authenticity. Vincent de Paul — knowing that institutions, like persons, must always be in process — frequently reflected on the institutions.
and congregations he had founded, always attributing the inspiration to God. Speaking to the first Daughters of Charity about their company he said, “As it was not then what it is now, there is reason to believe that it is still not what it will be when God has perfected it as he wants it. Don’t think that companies are formed all at once.”

With Vincent as our inspiration and guide in this privileged time of universal attention to poverty, it is very appropriate for those of us in Vincentian universities to reflect on the qualifier “Vincentian”—our distinctiveness within the higher education community. This is not a new exercise. Indeed, the Documents of Vatican II: 1962-65 and John Paul II’s 1990 apostolic constitution, “Ex Corde Ecclesiae” stimulated much discussion and some controversy on Vincentian and Catholic identity within the Congregation of the Mission and the Vincentian universities. Vatican II challenged each congregation to recapture its distinctiveness, its original “charism,” and to view this timeless mission in the context “of our times,” the present world culture and societal needs.


Documents of Vatican Council II, ed. by Austin Flannery (New York: Costello, 1975), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul-ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-iiopc-15081999. It is an affirmation of the Catholic university as “an incomparable center of creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity.” One of his challenges resonated with those in Vincentian institutions. Catholic universities “will be particularly attentive to the poorest and to those who suffer economic, social, cultural or religious injustice. This responsibility begins within the academic community, but it also finds application beyond it,” 40. The pope also offered reflections on the relationship of faith and reason, and faith and culture. He encouraged social responsibility and intercultural dialogues to respond to and learn from an emerging global society. He also presented a range of norms and practices to advance the university in its mission and relationship to the Church. One of these, the mandate for teachers of Catholic theology, has received the greatest attention.
“Ex Corde,” both inspirational and instructive in content, invited Catholic universities to share their intellectual resources with the greater Church and to bring them to bear on social issues. These documents, as well as the increasing importance of the laity within Church institutions, have raised consciousness and heightened conscience of the characteristics, components, influence, and relevance of the Vincentian culture in 21st-century Catholic higher education. Publications, convenings, charism materials, the appointment of mission leaders, and the creation of organizational structures for mission have grown dramatically over the past decades within our universities, as well as in other Church institutions such as health care and human services.8

Vincentian Culture: A Reality and Its Elements

The title of this article, “Toward a Vincentian Culture in Higher Education,” signals three convictions that are fundamental to the work of the universities if they are to be instruments for poverty eradication and the advancement of the vision and tradition. First, there is a distinctive Vincentian culture. Vincent not only clearly articulated the purpose and structure of each of his many organizational creations, but he also provided a rule of life, established methods and quality indicators for service, and described the spirit which should animate these endeavors. He called the Daughters to live in humility, simplicity, and charity and the Vincentian priests and brothers to model simplicity, humility, zeal, mortification, and meekness. Second, the Vincentian culture is dynamic and has been built on a set of core beliefs, values, and the lived experience of almost 400 years. Universal in its stress on responding to human need with respect, compassion, creativity, and zeal, the culture can accommodate differing situations, services, and historical times, as well as different faiths. Third, culture is transmitted principally through example and behavior, individual and corporate, rather than through theory and documents. Saint Louise de Marillac, Vincent’s collaborator, captured this crisply in her advice to a superior: “We must learn to ask and not command; to lead by example rather than by precept.”9 While the heroes and heroines

8 In the early 1980s the major service organizations in the U.S. (Catholic Health Association, Charities-USA, and the National Catholic Education Association) concentrated on mission statements and core values, and each issued a Catholic identity or ethical statement. “The Land of Lakes Statement” in the late 1960s had stimulated discussion on Catholic identity and academic freedom in Catholic higher education. Subsequent to Vatican II, the issue of charism (spirit and vision of founder’s gifts) or tradition of the sponsoring congregations received great attention in Catholic higher education. From the mid-1980s, Church institutions created offices of mission, appointed mission officers, focused heavily on the social mission of the church, and developed educational and formation programs in mission for lay personnel.

9 Spiritual Writings of St. Louise de Marillac: Correspondence and Thoughts, ed. by Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1991), Letter 395, 682.
of the past, beginning with Vincent and Louise, and moving through a large cadre of role models, offer inspiration, the responsibility for passing on the Vincentian culture lies now with each current member of the university community, from the youngest freshman to the most senior professor or seasoned administrator, as well as with scores of other workers within the institution.

An interesting experiment to gain insight into current perceptions of Vincentian culture is to pose the following question to individuals or groups within our institutional communities: “If Vincent de Paul, by some great suspension of the laws of time and space, were to come to this Vincentian university this afternoon, where would he feel most comfortable, most at home?” The responses are remarkably consistent but they also suggest a need for deeper understanding and more creative applications. Extroverts generally answer very quickly with: “Of course the church or the chapel because he was a holy, religious man, a saint.” A few votes will be cast for the classroom because, “Vincent was a born teacher and enjoyed engaging in dialogue and giving conferences.” Several respondents will place Vincent in the student union or the residence halls because, “he understood how important contact with youth is and knew that today’s students are tomorrow’s leaders.” Then inevitably a very reflective professor, student, administrator, or staff member will say that because Vincent knew who he was, understood his 17th-century world and knew where he was going, he would be at home and comfortable everywhere in this 21st-century university.

That is a commentary on Vincent, who was comfortable in his own skin, and knew who he was and what he needed to be, as well as where that identity and culture would take him. So must all of us who assume responsibility
for handing on the mantle of the man who reminded us that charity does embrace justice and that unjust structures and systems must be redesigned.\textsuperscript{10} He also advised us that “It is not enough to do good, it must be done well.”\textsuperscript{11} References to quality as a justice obligation, and to the detailed directives which guided the catechists, missioners, teachers, and visiting nurses — indeed, members of all his organizations — suggest that Vincent would be quite at home with our contemporary emphasis on assessment and accountability in higher education.

The task of each member of the contemporary Vincentian university then is to get in touch with Vincent, his values and vision, his wisdom and example — in short, the culture he initiated and entrusted to successive generations, the number of whom he could not have imagined. The challenge is to infuse that inherited culture into the contemporary institution in response to the current needs of society, especially those persons who are poor or marginalized.

A consideration of Vincentian culture leads us to consider institutional integrity. Do we speak with Vincent’s voice? Do we act in the manner Vincent modeled? Do we choose according to his value system? An honest, self-reflective, authentic culture is concerned with the identity communicated to and perceived by our various publics. An institution’s culture becomes its identity as recognized by outsiders, and experienced by insiders. Its integrity is its culture lived faithfully. Thus our Vincentian cultural integrity is critical if we are to avoid the damning judgment contained in a popular saying: “What you do is speaking so loudly, I cannot hear what you are saying” (in your mission statement, website, brochures, or your on-hold telephone message).

Culture then is the way a group of individuals, a corporate body, or an institution values and behaves. Culture motivates action and gives an institution a distinctive character and style, whether it be a baseball team, a hotel chain, or a university. In the university an authentic culture permeates personnel policies, faculty and student recruitment, financial aid decisions, management styles, programs, activities, curricula, research, pedagogy, criteria for honors and incentives — and of course ambience, so critical in our contemporary visual culture.

Culture is not like a garment which can be taken on or off with ease. It is more like a second skin that grows and protects the organism, almost imperceptibly, as individuals appropriate values and internalize principles. In addition to an integrated belief system, which for Vincent included a personal God, the dignity of each person, and society’s responsibility to respond to needs within the human family, a culture also offers role models, past and present, who live

\textsuperscript{10} CCD, Letter 2546, 7:115.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 12:201.
the core values. The Vincentian family has a multitude of such “giants” in its catalog of saints as well as within its current personnel pool.\textsuperscript{12} A culture also encourages stories and rituals which enflesh the legacy and enliven the tradition. A culture serves as a spiraling, dynamic connector within time: “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past.”\textsuperscript{13} It is Vincent who inspires and directs us as the culture weaves its way through time and across many landscapes.

**Images and Descriptions of Vincentian Culture in Higher Education**

To concretize this concept of institutional culture, several metaphors have been proposed. Some compare culture to DNA because it is the task of successive generations within an institution to pass down the genetic code to the next. Others prefer the metaphor of a spine because culture is to an organization what the spine is to the human body, offering structure and support to the entire organism and protecting the central nerve network. Others equate culture to a glue which bonds the organization and provides cohesion. Still others describe culture as the oxygen that gives life to the organization, respirations drawing from and giving back to the environment. Influenced by our technological age, a few even describe organizational culture as being like the operating system of a computer, supporting and unifying the various functions and hosting a multiplicity of programs.

Educators around the world have described Vincentian culture in the service of higher education with different emphases but with great consistency as well. Some focus on basic components of culture while others stress the desired outcomes of this cultural acquisition. While the following brief statements greatly summarize, and thus do injustice to, the author’s serious and lengthy reflections on Vincentian higher education, each still offers valuable insight into the lived Vincentian culture.

Reverend Robert Maloney, C.M., former Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, sees the Vincentian culture in the university as

\textsuperscript{12} The canonized members of the Congregation of the Mission include Vincent de Paul, Francis Regis Clet, Justin de Jacobis, and John Gabriel Perboyre. The beatified members include Ghebre Michael, Louis Francois, his companion-martyrs from the Revolution (John Henry Cruyer, John Charles Carron, Nicholas Colin and Peter Rene Rouge), and Mark Anthony Durando. The canonized members of the Daughters of Charity include Louise de Marillac and Catherine Labouré, as well as Elizabeth Ann Seton, Foundress of the Sisters of Charity in the U.S. The beatified members include Marie Ann Vaillot and Odile Baumgarten, martyred in Angers; Mary Magdalene Fontaine and her companion-martyrs (Mary Frances Lanel, Therese Magdalene Fantou, and Jean Gerard), martyred in Arras; and Rosalie Rendu. Three other Daughters (Marta Wiecka of Ukraine, Lindalva Justo de Oliveira of Brazil and Giuseppina Nicoli of Italy) were beatified recently.

being marked by global vision, excellent organization, collaboration, insistence on concern for the poor, and high competence in researching and solving issues of poverty.  

Reverend Thomas McKenna, C.M., Provincial of the Eastern Province and former theologian at St. John’s University, stresses Vincentian higher education’s great potential for liberation of the human. This freedom enables all persons to be viewed as one family under God; it encourages inclusiveness, mutuality and solidarity. Borrowing Vincent’s own image of the reversed coin, which allows one to see Christ revealed in the other despite human limitations and vagaries, Reverend McKenna notes that Vincentian education should lead students to cultivate a “radar for the poor” and a realistic, mutually respectful attitude in both serving and being served.

Reverend Donald Harrington, C.M., President of St. John’s University, stressed the Vincentian tradition of offering the opportunity for an excellent education to the disadvantaged, in the hope that these students and graduates will become committed to life-long service with special concern for the poor and neglected.

Reverend Dennis Holtschneider, C.M., President of DePaul University, and Reverend Edward Udovic, C.M., Senior Executive for Mission at DePaul University, collaborated on an article about the Vincentian Higher Education Apostolate in which they offered six constituent elements for distinctiveness. These are educating the poor and their children, focusing on first-generation college students, presenting the Roman Catholic tradition, instilling in students Vincent’s “affective and effective love of poor persons,” researching poverty, and sharing university resources in collaboration with other agencies. DePaul, building on its strong business and community service programs, has developed a challenging matrix of qualities and competencies that comprise a Vincentian leadership model suitable for many venues.

Reverend Gregory Bañaga, C.M., President of Adamson University in the Philippines, offered in his inaugural address an interesting paradigm

18 William and Mary Pat Gannon Hay Vincent DePaul Leadership Project, DePaul University, at http://leadership.depaul.edu.
based on experiential poverty. For him, Vincentian higher education is “of the poor, from the poor, with the poor and for the poor.” Education of the poor assures accessibility, education from the poor adopts the perspective of the poor, education with the poor provides proximity to and solidarity with the poor, and education for the poor is transformative of society.19

Reverend Daniel Pilario, C.M., a Vincentian theologian who works from the margins of society in the Philippines, takes a prophetic view of Vincentian culture and utilizes Reverend McKenna’s image of a radar that both identifies and responds to the poor. He claims that Vincentian higher education must “make the poor visible,” and affirms the need to be present to and stand with them.20

Santa Isabel University, operated by the Daughters of Charity in the Philippines, adopts an outcomes approach for the student and the institution. For them, Vincentian education focuses on poverty and has two results: first, it forms the integrated person who will build a faith community oriented to becoming a church of the poor; second, it will discover new knowledge and new ways of improving the well-being of the socially disadvantaged. It appears that in assessing their effectiveness, the university gives priority to graduates’ happiness and community leadership oriented to the poor, rather than to the typical success indicators of prestige, position, or possessions.21

In a similar way, several research fellows at the Vincentian Center at St. John’s tore a leaf from the Jesuits’ book,22 and their mission of producing “men and women for others,” and adapted it to the Vincentian culture. The purpose thus became “forming men and women in and for service to the poor” or “developing men and women for justice and peace, builders of solidarity.” Guided by these purpose statements, Vincentian efforts in service and for justice would be compassionate and not confrontational, gentle not strident, humble not self-righteous, evidence-based not ideological, and action-oriented not rhetorical.23

These various approaches, admittedly greatly summarized here, prove that at the core of the Vincentian culture are beliefs about God, the dignity of the human person, the humanizing effect of education, the advancement

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21 Promotional materials from Santa Isabel University, Philippines (http://www.USI.edu.ph); and interview of Sister Margaret John Kelly with Daughters of Charity administrators, Summer 2004, and with Rev. Bañaga in 2005.


23 Informal session of group of senior Vincentian research fellows in April, 2005, at St. John’s University.
of the common good, the value of direct experience with poor people, the creation of Gospel communities, advocacy for the marginalized, and responsibility for the vulnerable and needy. This last belief may cause concern in some academics that a Vincentian cultural focus could pre-empt academic rigor or subvert the educational enterprise in favor of moral formation or instruction in social responsibility. My personal experience, though, as well as that of many faculty from diverse disciplines, confirms that the academy’s acceptance of the responsibility to deal directly with poverty and its effects provides an integrated, interdisciplinary academic focus, gives distinctive character to a quality education, and unifies core competencies in learning and service. It taps into many of the motivations which drew persons to the “knowledge profession” and responds to their inclinations toward students. Indeed this book itself, with its diverse range of authors and disciplines, offers further testimony!

History has documented that Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, despite Vincent’s protestations to the contrary, were at the core brilliant intellectuals and effective communicators as well as creative collaborators and ingenious organizers. Four centuries of history and research reveal that the superlatives are justified and do not flirt with hagiography. Both Vincent and Louise served the poor and their congregations as educators, formators and leaders, blending their academic work with human development of minds and hearts, unifying the Word and their work. Their strength was not just in their brilliance, virtue, and teaching skills but also in the manner in which they brought members of all levels of society together around a critical social issue (this included the intellectual and social elites of a highly stratified social and economic era). Today, despite great emphasis on human rights and democracy, we experience growing wealth disparities and deep resentments at the consequences of those disparities. In the U.S., economic segregation is a reality and it has a troubling racial component. The Vincentian culture, marked by mutuality, human dignity, respect, and concern for the common good, has much to offer on current issues of sustainable development, participation, entitlements, interdependence, and solidarity as they are studied from national and global perspectives. These are critical issues in the eradication of poverty, and they form an appropriate agenda for Vincentian academics from many disciplines.

Recognizing that the Vincentian culture is an asset within our universities, and that we are in a privileged place and time to exert influence, it seems appropriate to identify some specific Vincentian themes we may want to focus on as we join forces to reduce poverty and its effects. What specific aspects of the Vincentian culture call us in this globalized, technological, politically conflicted, socially divided, humanity-challenged and opportunity-rich century?
Themes for Vincentian Cultural Emphasis in the 21st Century

Five themes seem to emerge under the impulse to relate Vincentian cultural continuity to our own times. These five have been selected because they embody the essentials of academic programming and can be adopted and adapted across university disciplines and personnel. Vincent liked to offer catalogs in threes or fives, so in fidelity to that practice, five will be proposed here. They are: transcendence and prayer, integral development, imagination, stewardship, and learning communities of service. These will be very briefly presented here in the hope that specialists in these areas will provide conceptual development and more thoughtful applications.

Transcendence and Prayer. The desire for transcendence and the belief in a personal God are central to Vincentian thinking and acting. Encouragement of the search for transcendence in its many forms, and prayer, as well as theological and religious study, must hold a privileged place in a Vincentian university. Vincent was fond of reminding his communities that persons of prayer are capable of anything. He also warned that “God wants first the heart and then the work.” He stressed the need for action to be infused by contemplation because prayer reveals the reality of each person’s inherent dignity, the meaning of being part of the human family, and the need to search out God’s will in the ordinary and extraordinary events and persons of daily life. Prayer, formal and informal, individual and communal, needs to be included and respected as part of the institutional culture. This is not only because of the many personal benefits derived from prayer and meditation, but also because they can contribute greatly to community-building. As secularism, neo-atheism, and religious extremism are on the rise, reflections on the meaning of transcendence and shared experiences of prayer can offer counter-influences and unify our diverse university communities. It is interesting but also somewhat puzzling that prayer and transcendence are not generally identified by Catholic institutions in their lists of core values as they are in other faith-based organizations. Perhaps their centrality is assumed, but we all know that what is assumed sometimes becomes overlooked, distorted, or even neutralized.

Imagination. A Vincentian education, concerned as it should be with working for justice and peace, must encourage and foster imagination. Imagination is the tool and playground of hope as well as of social transformation. It is the stuff of which integral development and holistic formation are woven, but it is also Vincent’s modus operandi. His creation of the Daughters of Charity as vowed women who functioned outside the cloister was revo-

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volutionary, and highly imaginative. His innovative responses to a range of human needs encompassing all age groups are well documented as a victory of imagination and trust in Providence over reasoned practicality. Vincent’s imagination allowed him to change the face of France and the Church through his political acumen, reliable research and planning, innovative organizational structures, and creative financing. Only a fertile and Christian imagination could have conceived of bridging classes to the advantage of the poor and forming organizations built on the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity — 20th-century concepts not in Vincent’s lexicon but in his practice. Today, global issues of poverty, trade, trafficking, terrorism, health services, water, and food security call for creative ideas and reforms which may well have their start in academe. If Vincentian higher education is to be faithful to its culture, it must discover ways to humanize technology; it must create structures that will eradicate poverty and advance justice. Cultivation of the imagination must be a high academic priority. Faculty must also develop imaginative pedagogies across disciplines, as did Vincent de Paul himself.

**Integral Development.** Vincentian programs, academic and otherwise, need to advance a holistic, integral development not only of students but also of the entire university community. All, from the youngest student to the most senior administrator, are in process along the human continuum of lifelong development, as are nations around the world. Integral or authentic development — terminology now used in Catholic social thought — suggests comprehensive, holistic, and sustainable advancement within personal, interpersonal, communal, and global contexts. Integral development, according to Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, who spent years serving on the Vatican Peace and Justice Commission and at the United Nations, calls for

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25 Vincent learned from the failed experiment of Saint Francis de Sales in seeking to have the Sisters of the Visitation, led by Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, leave their cloister to visit the poor in their homes while still retaining customs of their enclosed communities. Vincent was able to gain approval for the first Congregation formed to serve the poor outside convent walls by using language purged of the traditional concepts of enclosure, and more appropriate for engagement with the world. For example, he suggested they alter their vocabulary to use terms like ‘dress’ instead of ‘habit,’ ‘parish church’ instead of ‘convent chapel,’ and ‘annual promises’ rather than ‘perpetual vows.’


27 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004). The compendium offers this observation on integral or authentic development: “The human person must always be understood in his unrepeatable and inviolable uniqueness... the primary commitment of each person toward the other, and particularly of institutions and leaders (political and social), must be for the promotion and integral development of the person,” 131. “The social order and its development must invariably work to the benefit of the human person, since the order of things is to be subordinate to the order of persons and not the other way around,” 133.
immediate “investing in the full capacities of others, especially of the poor” in a way that will benefit the individual and common good. This echoes Vincent’s approach to ministry. He was a people developer, program creator, process facilitator, and social advocate who kept the origin and destiny of the human person always in focus. Competition and egoism had no place in his very practical and other-oriented efforts to develop people and systems.

José María Roman, in his comprehensive biography of the saint, describes Vincent’s social initiatives, many of which still have 21st-century parallels at home and abroad. Vincent distributed seeds and farming implements to refugees of the many civil wars that marked his era, so that the displaced could become independent, maintain their dignity, and contribute to society. The early Daughters, led by Louise, held literacy classes for young girls in hopes of increasing opportunity. In their nascent technical schools they taught young women the skills of knitting and sewing not only to produce revenue, but also to develop their independence. Together, Vincent and Louise introduced craft communities and housing for the elderly where needy artisans could use their talents to teach others, all toward the end of increasing confidence, independence and interdependence.

Vincent could and did take firm stands when necessary to protect the rights of poor people and to release them from unjust constraints. For example, he refused to let his priests cooperate with public officials who sought to move the homeless and derelicts from the streets of Paris and into institutions—a controversial strategy recently employed in the U.S. Vincent, after a great deal of prayer and consultation, determined that the policy had grown from political expediency and not charity, and was an infringement on the right of the poor to self-determination, as well as an affront to human dignity.

Integral development is seen in the continuum of services Vincent encouraged as responses to physical, emotional, spiritual, and occupational needs, to advocacy for the marginalized. For him, caring for the poor extended to consoling them, helping them, and supporting their cause. He provided for in-home and institutional services. He urged the conferees to be both humanizers and evangelizers as they brought glad tidings to the poor. He urged the Daughters to serve Christ corporally and spiritually in serving the needs of the poor. He championed the need for that affective and effective love which

28 Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, in a question/answer session, after an address given at a side-event sponsored by the Holy See Mission at the United Nations, “Economics are not to be separated from Human Realities,” October 2005.

29 Roman, St. Vincent. This biography, especially the treatment of Vincent’s life and work between 1634-1653 (pages 257-591), is replete with examples of the developmental approach Vincent used as he pioneered new services and organizations, and guided the formation of the young.

30 Roman, St. Vincent, 635-40.
unites compassion with productive service and is truly holistic.

Vincent understood well the danger in developing one’s mind without a correlative development of one’s conscience, caring for the body without caring for the spirit — and, conversely, in focusing on the spirit without reasonable regard to bodily needs. He understood the human person as an individual child of God with inherent dignity, born into a relational, responsible society. Because faculty have a sustained relationship with students, they have a unique role in fostering this integral (body, mind, and spirit) development of their students.

Through research, especially that of an interdisciplinary nature, faculty can find ways to support and advance integral development of persons in new, broader venues. Vincentian universities need to be involved in education for survival literacy (language, financial, legal, mathematical, aesthetic), crafting of legislation, affordable and safe housing, protection of the environment, justice in the marketplace and workplace, advocacy for the exploited and disabled, and a host of other major needs. The needs and interests of the poor and disenfranchised are many and present a long and diverse research agenda.

**Stewardship.** Concern about stewardship is growing at an accelerated rate and is apparent in demands for transparency in business’s relationship to the intergenerational responsibility for the earth’s resources. Increasing emphasis on social responsibility and accountability offers a counter-influence to the materialism and consumerism in first-world nations that also impacts other nations, especially their poor.

The founding of the first Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon in 1617 provides a lesson in Vincentian stewardship as well as a model for collaborative service and effective management. This seminal event is reported by Vincent himself, and compellingly described in Roman. Vincent, informed by a member of the congregation that an entire family was ill and in desperate need of help, gave a sermon which motivated his parishioners at Sunday Mass to such a degree that the family received more help that day than they could possibly use. When Vincent visited the family later in the afternoon, he saw the potential for waste of food and parishioners’ time, as well as the redundancy of effort and inadequacy of planning. Building on the goodness of his people and exerting considerable leadership, he developed an organizational plan that divided the labor of caring for the family for a given period and assured ongoing structured help for them. Roman reports that Vincent preached the sermon on Sunday, wrote the rule on Monday, and initiated the first Confraternity of Charity on Wednesday. This then served as the model for many such parish

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groups which subsequently dotted France and attracted the rich and poor to service. As noted above, Vincent valued, designed and facilitated structures which allowed persons to recognize, develop and use their own talents and material resources in the service of charity. He believed that talents are not given for personal satisfaction or advancement, but are on loan from God to be used for the benefit of others, and ultimately must be accounted for. He understood well the lessons of Matthew 25 on the parable of the talents and the Last Judgment. The success of Vincent’s stewardship is demonstrated by his original organizations, so solidly conceived that they have expanded for almost 400 years and now embrace the world and inspire many other foundations and congregations, lay and religious. Vincent believed that the use of personal talents in service was a lifelong obligation. When old and feeble, he said simply, “If I can’t preach every day, I will preach twice a week. If I can’t be heard from a distance, I will speak to the poor in a small group.”

Finally, Vincent cautioned against beginning a work without planning for sustainability, knowing that to start and then stop a service for the poor can leave them in an even more precarious position.

A Learning Community of Service. In “Ex Corde Ecclesiae,” John Paul II commented that “service to others for the promotion of social justice is of particular importance for each Catholic university, to be shared by its teachers and developed in its students.” Service, embedded in Vincentian culture, needs to be perceived and lived first as an attitude toward need and needy persons, and then as action. It also assumes prayer and preparation of a developmental program before action. Service is a necessary part of each student’s experience through volunteerism and learning, but it also offers opportunity for the entire university community, and yields many benefits of community-building as well as the development of confidence, compassion, and competence in service to poor persons.

It is important to acknowledge that service activities within a Vincentian school are not automatically “Vincentian.” A servant attitude is essential.

33 Gospel of St. Matthew, Chapter 25. In this section, the Evangelist offers the parable of the master who gave money in differing amounts to three servants to steward for him. On his return he rewarded the two who had invested well and increased their allotment, but he punished the one who, out of fear of losing the money, had buried it. The parable concludes in the judgment scene wherein the Shepherd divides the people, as a shepherd separates his goats and sheep, into those who used their talents to serve the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked and imprisoned, and those who failed. This passage makes explicit that our neighbor is in Christ, and Christ in our neighbor, and thus salvation is contingent upon living according to that reality.

34 CCD, 12:100.

35 “The Christian spirit of service to others for the promotion of social justice is of particular importance for each Catholic university to be shared by its teachers and developed in its students,” in Ex Corde Ecclesiae, 34.
Vincentian service is based on the dignity of each person and membership in the human family under God. Conviction on these points is essential if benefit is to be gained by the served and the serving, and if there is to be a mutually transformative effect produced by each service encounter.

Too often, service is limited to "what" is done and lacks a clear delineation of "the why" and "the how" of Vincentian distinctiveness. A professor recently cautioned that service in our universities can become legitimized egoism. This can occur when the "I feel good" or "I am glad I am who I am" effect prevails over the awareness that service is not about the "I" of the encounter but about the "we" of humanity. There is a distinctly Vincentian way of serving with humility and simplicity as well as charity and zeal for the other’s good. Authentic Vincentian service grows out of prayer, is built on respect for the dignity of the human person, deepens one’s sense of stewardship, and, as cited above, always uses a developmental approach in its goals and methods. Band-aid solutions and practices that encourage long-term dependence are not Vincentian.

Questions of value surface when the categories of service within the university are considered. Direct hands-on physical service is essential and generally preferred, but service of the mind (use of intellectual capital) and spirit (religious leadership) must also be recognized and valued. There is a tendency to elevate giving food and building houses over the type of service unique to the intellectual life which is the major resource of the university. Vincent’s service on the Council of Conscience, his careful assessment of human societal needs before planning action, his convening of church personnel for spiritual formation and governance education, his response to the Jansenist heresy, and his frequent engagements in counseling, consulting, and spiritual direction have their parallels in the work of many professors and administrators within our Vincentian universities. It is important that the specialized knowledge and skills of our various disciplines be recognized as a genuine resource in providing critical services to and for the poor of the world.

Blessed Frederick Ozanam (1813-1853), professor of both Law and Italian literature and a founder of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, can serve as a role model in this regard. Frederick visited the needy in their homes and in 1833, while a student at the Sorbonne, he established the Society. His stellar academic career in both law and literature brought him much recognition. In his writings he laid out philosophical, political, and social observations which are now encompassed in Catholic social thought. His letters and essays continue to impress and inspire readers by the breadth and depth of his wisdom, the universality of his insights, and the contemporary relevance of his social analysis.36

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36 Frederick Ozanam, A Life in Letters, ed. by Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M. (St. Louis: Society of St.
It is hoped that these reflections have affirmed the value of our dynamic Vincentian culture as it responds to the challenges and opportunities of each time and place, and have shown that this culture is learned, internalized, and transmitted principally through an authentic, faithful living out of the Vincentian vision. It is also hoped that the treasure-trove of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences found within our institutions will be directed to the eradication of poverty and the development of global peace and harmony. May Vincent guide us and bless us with knowledge, wisdom, prudence, generosity, and zeal to be worthy contributors to the Vincentian culture, interpreting the signs of our times in the interest of our brothers and sisters — especially those who suffer from poverty, oppression, and dehumanization.

Vincent de Paul, 1986).