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— Afterword —

Vincentian Higher Education and Poverty Reduction

BY

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Education in the Service of Communion

Recently the Sacred Congregation for Education and Seminaries issued a document entitled “Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful,” which emphasized the idea that education is a pastoral action that is done in communion and for communion.¹ Education becomes a living witness to the Gospel of Christ when it is done by a community of people who are committed to the values of Christian life and when it is directed towards a fuller and deeper communion of all members of the community.²

This is a very important challenge, particularly for us as followers of the great Saint Vincent de Paul. The members of the human community for whom Saint Vincent would tirelessly work so that they could be incorporated into the fullness of Christian life are the poor. For this reason, in its noble and desirable objectives, a Vincentian school of higher learning cannot afford to forget for one moment the needs of the poor, their situation, the causes of their poverty, and the solutions which enable them to reduce their degree of need, if not eliminate their poverty altogether. Communion in the Christian community will be meaningless if the poor are excluded from it.

Vincentian higher education can contribute to the reduction or even eradication of poverty using the means available to achieve the goal of helping those who are poor. This is Saint Vincent’s way: approaching all those who can contribute and inviting them to this precious task of helping the poor. Higher education is therefore a significant means to promote the art of loving the poor, which lies at the basis of the Vincentian motivation in assisting them.

Higher Education and Formation of the Heart

Higher education, for it to become a moment of Christian witness, has

¹ “Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful,” Congregation for Catholic Education (for Seminaries and Educational Institutions), 8 September 2007. Available online at: http://www.schulstiftung-freiburg.de/de/forum/pdf/pdf_282.pdf (accessed 29 September 2008).

² *Ibid.*, nos. 12-14.

ultimately to be directed towards the “formation of the heart” — that is, “they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others.”³ More than just the instruction of professional and scientific knowledge, educators aim at converting the heart so students are able to feel with the poor, understand their predicament, and do all that is possible not only to eliminate the causes of poverty but also to help the poor emerge into a more respectable and dignified life.

“Basically, a school is called to be a living witness of the love of God among us. It can, moreover, become a means through which it is possible to discern, in the light of the Gospel, what is positive in the world, what needs to be transformed and what injustices must be overcome.”⁴ This is Vincentian education at its very best — moving from affective love of the poor to effective love through actions involving the participation of the poor themselves.

Formation of the heart is only possible when we treat the subjects of our classes and investigations not simply as data and facts but as persons, images of a loving God. Saint Vincent’s secret in his dealings with all kinds of people — whether the poor in far-flung villages or priest-retreatants in the seminaries, or even the people of the royal court — lay in his profound respect of the image of God which he recognized in each of them. No less a vision than this ought to characterize higher education in a Vincentian setting.

Helping the poor is more concrete than poverty reduction. Our mission is always a personal mission, directed towards the person and not some abstract reality. Poverty for Saint Vincent always had a face — and in faith he saw in the face of the poor the face of God himself.

Commitment of the Vincentian Family to Education

It is very inspiring to note the commitment of many branches within the Vincentian Family towards education in its diverse forms. Whether it is the AIC in their non-formal education programs in Africa; the Daughters of Charity in their established schools in Brazil, Spain, and the Philippines; the Sisters of Charity at various noted schools in the United States; or the Vincentian universities at Niagara Falls, New York, Chicago, and Manila — all these are testaments to the conviction we share in the Vincentian Family of education as a most necessary means of promoting the development and empowerment of the poor in our day.

In a world of growing expertise and global networking, our Vincentian Family can ill afford to forget the benefits of partnership and collaboration,

³ *Ibid.*, no. 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 46.

particularly when it comes to scientific assessment of the conditions of poverty. This collaboration is further enhanced when, within Vincentian branches and educational communities, we are able to engage other persons and entities in the objective of poverty reduction. There is so much need for this in view of the social, cultural, and religious complexity of the world of the poor.



“St. Vincent and His Friends.” Sculpture by Margaret Beaudette, S.C.
Dedicated 2 May 1997, Niagara University
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The Vincentian Family subscribes to the idea that education is always towards justice and solidarity, towards the liberation of the poor.

I personally want to invite the confreres of the Congregation of the Mission and all Vincentian academic communities throughout the world to refocus their energies and dedication toward that which is most important to us: evangelization of the poor. As spelled out today in our world, working toward poverty alleviation — authentic service of the poor through the promotion of systemic change — will help the poor to live in freedom from the oppressive structures that keep them from recognizing their dignity as God’s sons and daughters. To achieve this goal, I want to encourage all those involved in Vincentian education not only to continue the initial dialog many of them have already begun, but to deepen that dialog in enacting the cooperative initiative between universities and other members of the Vincentian Family at large.

I have put much energy into the promotion of systemic change as a concrete way of living out our Vincentian charism today. It is an authentic way for us to live that which motivates us, the charity of Christ.