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A Vincentian Reading of the Pandemic: Hope Beyond All Reasonable Expectation

Guillermo Campuzano, C.M.

BIO

GUILLERMO CAMPUZANO, C.M., is a Vincentian priest originally from Colombia who is a member of the Western Province of the Congregation of the Mission. Father Campuzano currently serves as Vice President of the Division of Mission and Ministry at DePaul University. He previously served at the United Nations as a representative of the Congregation of the Mission. Father Campuzano is the founder and former coordinator of the Vincentian International Network for Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation and served as chair of the United Nations' Working Group to End Homelessness. Father Campuzano has vast experience in working with and advising religious life communities in different capacities. He was a human rights worker in the justice and peace project of the Catholic Church in Colombia. He has a passion for advocacy for different communities and has been frequently invited to advocate for those on the margins around the world. Currently, Father Campuzano is a member of and an advisor to the national team of Migration Ministry of the Catholic Church of the US. He also serves as the current coordinator of the interdisciplinary team that advises the President of the Conference of Religious Life in Latin American and the Caribbean (CLAR). Father Campuzano has a master's in pastoral psychology from San Buenaventura University in Colombia, a master's in human services and counseling from DePaul University, and a specialization in existential anthropology from Del Prado Community.

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Introduction

I do not know at what point during the COVID-19 pandemic these words will reach you. The changes are so fast and unpredictable that writing about it becomes almost impossible. The crisis is lasting much longer than we all expected. As I write today, the big question is about equity in the distribution of vaccines as large portions of the planet have no access to them. With much of the world unvaccinated, how can we ever overcome the pandemic?

There are those who continue to insist that the pandemic has made us all equal. These writers apparently do not understand the difference between being confined in a house of five or seven rooms with a garden and being confined alongside a big family in only one or two rooms. There is a difference between being able to order food online without leaving your home and having the fear that if you do not go out and work there will be nothing on the table to feed your children. Confinement for those who moved their offices to their houses is different from confinement for those who, if they stay at home, will starve. On top of which, many who do have to leave their homes for work have no access to our health system and so very well may die if they become infected. Never as divided and unequal as we are today, beautiful words like “equity” and “access” are still dreams under construction amid our fragile humanity.

This has not been different at DePaul University. For instance, early in the process of adjusting our classes and programs to a virtual model, we discovered that navigating online classes and programs presented new ethical challenges for instructors, staff, and students: Zoom disparity. Some lacked adequate internet connectivity, others felt vulnerable in showing their home backgrounds to classmates, or lacked any private space to work and be on camera. Our schools decided to create simple protocols to promote Zoom engagement and student equity. The main intention of these protocols was to protect our students’ privacy, equity, and safety. Many of our students experienced new challenges like food or housing insecurity, while others who already suffered from these conditions found them becoming even worse. Many had difficulties finding a job or paying their tuition. Different programs were created to provide them with integral support, and significant additional financial assistance was provided outside the norm.

My reflections are born from my own experiences at DePaul, meditation, prayer, and the need to accompany people and groups who have asked for my help. In different moments, I have been invited to share words from our Vincentian theology and spirituality that could accompany the day-to-day experiences of these individuals and communities. These are simply some personal theological and spiritual reflections born from the global impact of



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A quiet Wabash and Jackson Blvd. intersection at the height of evening rush hour during the COVID-19 pandemic the week of March 22, 2020.

Courtesy DePaul University/Randall Spriggs

the pandemic. They are big-picture perspectives that I have felt called upon to share with people both in my role as vice president of DePaul's Office of Mission and Ministry and as a frequent consultant to religious communities.

In the past, I have often rejected classic theologies, theologians, and scholars because they seem unable to shed light on things that are concrete. They seem stuck in the past or reliant upon irrelevant dogmatic constructions. Today we must share a message to keep alive the hope of the hopeless, a message that will help people find meaning despite their uncertainty and their undeniable pain and fear, despite the awful realities that the pandemic has unveiled: inequity, injustice, discrimination, racism, manipulation of politics for personal gain, etc. To do this, we must face reality. We must recognize the world's interconnectedness, the importance of small things, and the presence of God in the pandemic.

Reality: Unbearable language?

Vincentian theology is not afraid of reality and its language. We understand that it is preferable to let reality hit us, teach us, and speak to us without filters, without our rushing to interpret it. Being faithful to what is real is as important as being faithful to our own ideals. Faithfulness to reality always begins with listening, reading, and meditating. These are actions that enable us to carry reality inside and finding its meaning there. More than words and theories, reality reveals to us the directions in which life and history are leading.

This past year many of us have experienced a general sense of disorientation. We were collectively pounded by the unknown. Today we are still living in the anxiety and the

uncertainty of what will come next. Most of us have slowly found a certain new normality in our daily life, yet internally we continue to deal with questions, doubts, and fear. We have been touched directly or indirectly by the pandemic and at the least know people who have suffered because of it.

Vincentian theology welcomes reality as a singular human experience and an opportune word of God that can turn every situation, however dramatic it may be, into a “favorable time of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Reality is a channel of the word of God as important as Scripture and tradition. The life of Vincent de Paul, more than his writings or conferences, is a vivid example of how to read and interpret reality and to transform it into a time for healing, restoration, and transformation. We are invited to find each other in reality even when we disagree intellectually and to identify creative ways to transform anything that causes pain, exclusion, and humiliation to the human person or anything that puts life in all its forms at risk. Reality is a place of encounter, action, and new meanings. It is always said that the Vincentian way is very pragmatic. This Vincentian pragmatism develops into a Vincentian humanism/environmentalism, which places the most abandoned as well as our planet at the center of reflection and action.

As he struggled with painful emotions, Vincent remained convinced that, no matter what the circumstances, we must never abandon the poor. They are “our portion” in life, he stated. He was firm in telling the members of his Family that, even in extremely difficult circumstances, we must be creative in finding ways to tend to the needs of the suffering. Vincent wrote to Alain de Solminihac, “The poor country people stricken with the plague are usually left abandoned and very short of food. It will be an action worthy of your piety, Excellency, to make provision for this by sending alms to all those places. See that they are put into the hands of good pastors, who will have bread, wine, and a little meat brought in for these poor people to pick up in the places and the times indicated for them ... or to some good layperson of the parish who could do this. There is usually someone in each area capable of doing this act of charity, especially if they do not have to come into direct contact with the plague-stricken.”¹

In Christian incarnational theology, reality is the primary channel of the word of God because this word has a voice, a voice They (the Triune God) used to make everything. It is a voice They continue to use to give direction to history, to be present in reality as described

1 Robert Maloney, C.M., “COVID-19: Some Wisdom from the Past. The Experience of St. Vincent de Paul,” *The Way of Wisdom* (blog), 1 April 2020, <https://blogs.depaul.edu/dmm/2020/04/01/covid-19-some-wisdom-from-the-past-the-experience-of-st-vincent-de-paul/>.

after the Second Vatican Council: “... to carry [out] her task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times.”²

I am totally convinced that the very foundation of the Vincentian spirit began with, and still demands, a specific approach to understanding reality. It is rooted in the experience of all those on the margins of society deprived of their essential rights to food, education, health care, clothing, and housing, as well as all victims of systemic injustice due to their race, sex, sexual orientation, social class, religion, etc. In this sense I believe that human dignity; human rights; diversity and equity; solidarity and compassion; systemic change and political advocacy; new forms of leadership; and functional, real democracy are Vincentian themes. In these “signs of the times” we find a concrete Vincentian call wherever we are in the world for effective and pragmatic transformation as found in the origin of our collective experience.

DePaul University decided to respond to the reality of the pandemic based on common guiding principles grounded in our common pragmatic Vincentian spirit. One of DePaul’s core principles is that all of our students are our mission, and we take care of each one of them with equity. Following the Vincentian spirit, we are especially attentive to our most vulnerable students. Guiding principles for DePaul (referenced in the article by Dr. Gabriel Esteban in this special issue) that emerged during the pandemic were built on this one original principle of mutual care for all, with special attention to those on the margins. The principles were referred to consistently in all of the administration’s decisions and became our main tool in defining our strategies and establishing concrete ways for DePaul to be inclusive, responsive, and accountable. The guiding principles were:

- to take care of our people: personal safety, mutual care, social responsibility, equity and inclusivity were paramount.
- to share governance, practice distributive leadership, and use collective wisdom: all voices were important.
- to make decisions with the future in mind.

These principles included the following ideas as reference points:

- Open and transparent communication at all levels was critical.
- Speed was of the essence—time was against us and DePaul’s administrative working team and others throughout the organization needed to make decisions quickly.
- To the extent possible, decisions needed to be simple and easy to implement.
- We were to do our best—we would make mistakes. Perfection was not the goal, especially during a period of such uncertainty.

2 Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, numbers 3–4, 7 December 1965, Vatican.va, at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.



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Signs posted on the 11th floor cafeteria in the DePaul Center emphasize social distancing. September 9, 2020, on the Loop Campus.

Courtesy DePaul University/Maria Toscano

These principles enabled us to keep functioning and to provide the best education and care that we could to the DePaul community. But we would be remiss if we stopped with operational lessons from the pandemic, so I would like to share some broader thoughts as well.

In the context of a global and generalized “limit situation,”³ the most important lesson of the pandemic has come in the form of basic memory: the memory of our own mortality and the memory of our interconnectedness. Most people have probably had thoughts about being infected with the virus and possibly dying. The lesson we have learned in this time is something that we try to forget with our many myths of immortality. Humans are vulnerable beings. Frailty and death are part of the essence of the human condition. It is not the only thing, but it is an essential human dimension that we cannot ignore or forget. We have been humbled by a vivid picture of our “creatureliness,” by our mortality, by our essential vulnerability. Priest and theologian Henri Nouwen wrote that humility is only possible if we overcome the myth of immortality in our hearts. He said that “much violence in our society is based on the illusion of immortality, which is the illusion that life is a property to be defended and not a gift to be shared.”⁴

3 As defined in the existential philosophy of Karl Jaspers. For a brief essay on the meaning of the term, see: <https://joseluis817english.wordpress.com/2020/01/30/8/>.

4 Henri Nouwen, *You are the Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living* (New York: Convergent Books, 2017). For more information on Nouwen’s work, see the Henri Nouwen Foundation’s website at <https://henrinouwen.org>.

The Smallness of Everything and the Value of Small Things

This pandemic has shown us how small the world is. The phenomenon of globalization has been increasingly evident to us in economics, communications, relationships, etc. However, the pandemic has provided a new dimension to the globalization phenomenon and how the whole world is connected. The French philosopher Edgar Morin noted that “a very small virus in a city faraway in China has provoked a global cataclysm; has paralyzed the economic and social life in 177 countries and has caused a sanitarium catastrophe with a still unknown, shadowy, and alarming balance.”⁵

This finding forces us to be aware of our personal responsibility since there is no private or individual action that does not have an impact on society as a whole. For better or for worse, one’s actions affect the whole. Therefore, if we are not capable of offering a global response to the crisis, no one in any part of the world can really feel safe. The pandemic has taught us that we should recognize ourselves responsible for the destiny of each and every one of the planet’s inhabitants. We must finally understand the global meaning of co-responsibility and mutuality. The interconnectedness of life is a beautiful gift that carries an amazing responsibility and still unknown consequences. Life in isolation is not sustainable. Human advances in transportation and communication have made clear our need to act responsibly and ethically considering the global interconnection of life.

I am very aware that the exercise of solidarity and compassion is also global, and beyond the narrow limits of our people, region, country, or even continent. It has never been so true that we are citizens of the world, being aware that we belong to a single humanity in which we belong to one another. I am a member of several networks of advocacy and action constantly struggling for transformation, for the protection of the most vulnerable of our world. These global networks are created as effective forms of resistance to a culture of consumerism, individualism, and exploitation that only benefit a very small portion of humanity and systemically destroy our planet. I thank the pandemic for unveiling to us all, in such a painful way, the *real* course of our history and its possibilities.

Consider that poverty was unbearable for vast portions of our human family before the pandemic, and now is absolutely made worse. It is my hope that the pandemic will help us rethink an economy of proximity, being closer and more self-sufficient, that is capable of better alleviating the ups and downs experienced in other regions of the earth. We must create an economy of solidarity within our human family that continues to feed us and sustain us with abundant generosity. We must nurture our planet that every morning responds with flowers, fruits, the singing of birds, and abundant water despite our transgressions, as the

5 Edgar Morin, *Cambiamos de via*, trans. Núria Petit Fontserè (Ediciones Paidós, 2020), 16, Kindle.

founder of liberation theology Leonardo Boff has noted.⁶ We dream that each region of the world has the capacity to be self-sufficient, self-managed, and able to supply the fundamental goods necessary for the sustainability of life. In addition to guaranteeing the sustainability of the planet, this would mean dignified development for all regions and people.

Throughout the pandemic, we have longed for the little things. Human life is not woven together by large programs or projects. These, of course, are necessary to offer us frameworks, systems, or meanings that help us live better. But the days of our lives are made up of little things that we only miss and value when we lack them: a welcoming hug from a friend; an affectionate kiss from a loved one; a table shared by family; relaxed conversation with friends at the end of a work-day; a walk or a liberating run; a class, even if boring, but face-to-face, with eye contact and personal atmosphere; a Eucharist with the physical and spiritual presence of the people of God, where the body and blood of Christ is shared All this and much more forms our normal existence, feeding us and giving us the necessary strength to live, even though all these things became a part of our collective unawareness and our unappreciated routines. Life is woven together by these little things that together inform our humanity.

Globalization, sustainability, generalized poverty, human trafficking, violence, homelessness, and, yes, the pandemic, are all themes that in concrete ways redefine who we, the Vincentian Family, are today. *Reality*, harsh as it may be, redefines our mystical narrative, our prophetic narrative, and our narrative of communion.

Our common Vincentian mystical narrative is a constant invitation for us to be people guided and enlightened by the Spirit. We must not be self-centered but centered on the project of God, a just society where life is protected and where all can live with dignity. When we contemplate God in silence and meditation, we see the many struggles of impoverished humanity before us, we hear the cries of the poor and our planet, and we follow the direction of life.

The prophetic narrative of the Vincentian spirit implies an option for the most abandoned of our society. This option is inseparable from an option for our planet and for all the victims of systemic injustice. The prophetic dimension of our lives demands a prophetic radiance of joy, hope, vigil, closeness—proximity or trust—mercy: in short, the good news of the gospel! Our missionary discipleship is accomplished through a permanent state of mission on the periphery. Our prophetic work includes a constant caritative work to humanize the lives of all those excluded and marginalized. It demands that we develop

6 For more on Boff and liberation theology, see: <https://www.kosmosjournal.org/news/interview-leonardo-boff-a-founder-of-liberation-theology/>.

projects of systemic change⁷ and constant political advocacy so that the changes we promote are sustainable.

Our narrative of communion today is an invitation for us to continue to grow in a sense of belonging to this global family, this extraordinary network of faith and social transformation built upon unity wherein diversity is recognized and respected. Our communion is extended through all the networks we belong to, and the continual humanization of our relationships around a common mission. We are open, and every day we work to expand our interfaith, intercultural, and inter-convictional capacity. In our Vincentian Family there are lay people who live this common call through their families or jobs, and there are also consecrated people and ordained priests who have dedicated their lives exclusively to the charism. The pandemic is forcing us to think, to pray, and to reinterpret the direction of the Vincentian mission for this specific time.

The Presence of God in the Pandemic: Saints and Martyrs as our Neighbors

We have all witnessed the saints and heroes next door, just as Pope Francis said.⁸ I speak of those people stepping up outside of our governments and institutions. The government response will be judged by its citizenry when the worst of the pandemic passes. But society is slowly opening its eyes and recognizing all those people who responded with responsibility, solidarity, and generosity, some even at the risk of their own lives, to the horrific challenges of this pandemic.

In many countries around the world, people have gone to their balconies and windows to thank with applause, songs, and posters for these anonymous heroes who have watched over and cared for the infected and the sick. There are so many that have continued working, doing jobs that seemed simple, or menial, but that have been revealed as essential in our lives. These many gestures of quiet but effective solidarity remind us of the best of the human person. Yes, our best is when we are in solidarity and offer compassion. Donations, collections, providing free services, neighborhood unity, and attention to the weakest, all illustrate a comforting tapestry of the majority of society. Their actions are a rejection and a clear denouncement of the usual profiteers who want to benefit from the misfortune and general helplessness of the other.

It is true that we speak of heroism and sanctity, but really most of these actions would fall within a sense of duty. When asked, these everyday heroes deny that they are

7 For more on the Vincentian Family and systemic change, see: <https://vinformation.org/en/vincentian-formation-resources/systemic-change-resources/#intro>; for a recent manual published by the Systemic Change Commission, see: <https://famvin.org/en/files/2017/08/manual-for-systemic-change-english-2017-lq.pdf>.

8 See, for example, Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 2018, Vatican.va, at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html.

heroes; they are simply doing their duty. After this pandemic, we will have to ask ourselves what has happened to society from a moral standpoint that action born from a sense of duty and responsibility is seen as heroic. I recently heard it said that when common sense seems exceptional, society has become radicalized to the extreme. What can be said of declines in political and social life is perfectly extrapolated to moral life. However, it is still just and good to recognize the many heroes and saints next door. By offering their time, work, knowledge, expertise, and ultimately their bodies for the health of others, they have given light and hope to humanity.

It is important not to lose hope. Preaching during Holy Week of 2020, Rainero Cantalamesa of the Pontifical House said that the virus is not a plague or punishment for a sinful humanity. He reminded everyone that God has plans for our welfare, to give us a future with hope (Jeremiah 29:11).⁹ According to him, the pandemic offers a call for relational conversion in all directions, including our relationship with nature. It recalls Paul of Tarsus in his exhortation to the Christians of Rome when asked about the place of God in the face of the suffering of creatures: If God is with us, who is against us?¹⁰ God is present in this situation, not behind the virus as a punishment. God is suffering the pandemic with us and being a force of transformation and resurrection for the sustainability of life.

Similarly, we can and must read this historical moment. The situation we are experiencing has specific causes that we must learn about. But it is also legitimate to say from a faith perspective that in it and through it, God is calling us. We are being asked not only to respond adequately to the emergency, but to transform our way of life, and to relate to nature, with others, and with God in a more humane way as Jesus showed us in the gospels. God is here in this way, and not as the cause of misfortune. God is found not in the virus, but in the strength to respond to it with wisdom, solidarity, intelligence, and compassion. They call us to be holy and merciful as They are always in all circumstances (Matthew 5:48; Luke 6:36).

Some philosophers and thinkers have spoken of the pandemic as an event capable of provoking the advent of a new humanity.¹¹ As we carefully approach this anthropological possibility, we realize that there is a tremendous tension between the advent of a new and united humanity and the advent of an inhuman humanity. We must be cautious of the ego as the only referent of meaning, direction, and the only valid tool used in decision-making.

The inability to discern how we belong to each other is behind the failure of our current global struggle with the pandemic: racism, systemic and sustained injustice, economic

9 “Pope Celebrates Passion of the Lord, as Papal Preacher Reflects on Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Vatican News*, 10 April 2020, at: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-04/pope-francis-passion-of-the-lord-cantalamesa-sermon-coronavirus.html>.

10 Rom 8:31.

11 Morin, *Cambiamos de via*, 16.



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Michael Van Dorpe, then program manager for faculty and staff engagement in the division of Mission and Ministry, staffs the front desk of the Mission and Ministry office in the Lincoln Park Student Center during the COVID-19 pandemic the week of March 16, 2020.

Courtesy DePaul University/Jeff Carrion

inequality, environmental degradation, political radicalization, religious fundamentalism, and all of the conflicts that cause us to hide behind our insecurities. The underlying crisis continues to be an anthropological crisis generated by the way we understand ourselves, how we see others, and the ethical or unethical behaviors that this understanding and vision provoke.

As said at the beginning, both immersing ourselves in the crisis and taking distance from it, to interpret it, to make sense of it, is perhaps the most necessary contribution and the most typical of the prophecy we are called to live as people of faith. Faith does not take us away from the pandemic but allows us to enter its essence from the outside, to open it to new horizons in a profound communion and solidarity with humanity, with the earth, and with history. This is the time for prophecy, and this prophecy calls for the audacity to enter this and other crises without fear, with a deep sense of the whole and the common good.

Conclusion

Today we have a real chance to enter a movement that transforms meanings and paradigms; that promotes humility, decision-making, sincerity, and coherence; and that shuns alienating theories and alarmist, apocalyptic, pietistic, naive readings of reality. This is a message that I want DePaul students, faculty, and staff to know. This is something I hope the whole world can reflect on. Behind the pandemic is an opportunity for humanity to react before it is too late. This is an opportunity for all of us. A change of meaning and paradigms means assuming a new lifestyle, immediately. New behaviors are the most credible way of

any transforming action, especially in a society drowning in misinformation. We still must choose a future with meaning and hope, a future that is sustainable for the generations coming after us.

Recently, in spaces of sociopolitical and economic decision-making, there has been a great controversy about the primacy of life over the economy, of the person over the institution, of the common good over the individual good. The pandemic has forced the regeneration of political action. Political leaderships around the world have been unmasked by the decisions they have made, and the criteria used to make those decisions, in facing a public health crisis.

I have read with interest of the recent natural phenomena happening in many places on earth. The waters of the seas are becoming multicolored again, ocean life flourishes, birds have dared to return to cities, wildlife has been spotted roaming deserted streets, the sky has become bluer as levels of pollution have dropped, and even the ozone layer is recovering. It seems like the whole of earth and all its forms of life have been freed from the most lethal of viruses: humanity and its dependence upon an irrational lifestyle.

May this be a defining moment in our global commitment to all of life, not simply to human life. Hopefully we will recognize that all forms of life are harmoniously woven, a mysterious tapestry that reveals the creative hand of God who watches over everything. May we be able to understand the language of nature and its apparent relief when we disappear. I hope that we can understand what the resilience of life means, the resilience of the earth, and from that contemplated experience we might find our own resilience.

For people of faith, for our Vincentian Family, the pandemic is a time for love, action, and justice to be creative to infinity. What does it mean for us to call on God when considering the many dogmatic comforts of life we are used to? What does it mean to say faith when life appears so vulnerable before us? What do dialogue, relationships, and networking mean when we have become used to empty social, educational, and celebratory rituals in which communication is a superficial exercise? Will humanity react, will we respond to this opportunity the pandemic affords? Will we be willing to transform our perceptions, our actions, and our lifestyles for something bigger than ourselves, even if simply a gesture of solidarity with the world, our children, and the generations to come?

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A quiet Wabash and Jackson Blvd. intersection at the height of evening rush hour during the COVID-19 pandemic the week of March 22, 2020.

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