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Letter on the Meeting in Paris of Those Responsible for the Four Branches of the Vincentian Family

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June 30, 1995

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Brothers,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

About a year ago when I was visiting the Province of Mexico I had the opportunity to join in several striking celebrations with many of the groups that constitute our large Vincentian Family. Since that time, I have often reflected on what enormous potential our family has for the service of the poor, especially when we work together in a united way. With a view toward further collaboration, recently I invited those responsible for the four principal branches of our family to join in a meeting in Paris, which took place on June 3, 1995. Present were the Mother General of the Daughters of Charity, Sr. Juana Elizondo; the President of the International Association of Charity (AIC), Patricia Palacios de Nava; the President of the General Council of the Society of Vincent de Paul, César Augusto Nunes Viana; and I. Also present were: representing the Vincentians, Fr. Lauro Palú, the Assistant General who acts as liaison with Vincentian lay movements; for the Daughters of Charity, their Assistant General, Sr. Therezinha Remonatto, and Sr. Marie-Bernard Wagnies, who is the representative of the Mother General with the Volunteers of Charity; for the AIC, the Secretary General, Mme. Marianne Chevalier, and Mme. Mauricette Borloo, Vice-President; and for the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, their Vice-President, Amin de Tarrazi. We were all deeply moved as we celebrated the Eucharist together in the chapel where St. Vincent's body lies.

The goal of the meeting was "to look for means by which, while preserving the particular identity of each branch, we might cooperate more effectively with each other throughout the world in serving the poor better."

There were five points on the agenda:

1. *An exchange of information about each branch of the Vincentian family (statistics, places where each branch serves, the specific charism and the general characteristics of each branch).* During this discussion, I was once again struck by what a huge family we have. We number between one and two million members. In that context, the Vincentians are surely the "little Company," with 3604 incorporated members and 587 admitted members serving in 80 countries. There are 27,223 Daughters of Charity, serving in 83 countries. The AIC has 250,000 members organized

into 42 national associations, and with groups in many other countries, and the Vincent de Paul Society has 870,000, serving in 130 countries. Besides these, today there are numerous Vincentian Marian Youth Groups. In Spain alone, there are 46,000 members. In Mexico there are 7,000. In addition, our family includes countless men and women who belong to the Miraculous Medal Association and other Vincentian related lay groups, not to mention numerous communities of sisters, brothers, and priests that share in the Vincentian charism. Last year, for example, we affiliated 5,000 Sisters of Mercy from 12 congregations in Germany, France, Austria, and India.

2. *The juridic status of each of the four branches and their relationship with one another.* Under this heading, each group briefly described how it fits within the law of the Church and how we relate juridically and practically with one another.

3. *A description of what communication and collaboration is taking place on a local, national, and international level.* In the course of the meeting, we spoke of many examples of close cooperation and worked out some practical means of improving communication.

4. *The bonds that tie together the various branches of the Vincentian family.* All of us noted that we share in common: a) a recognition of St. Vincent as either the founder or principal source of inspiration, b) a thrust to serve the poor, c) a spirituality based on St. Vincent's, with a particular emphasis on practical charity lived out in simplicity and humility.

5. *What can we do to strengthen the bonds among the members of the Vincentian family?* We discussed how we might foster unity:

a. By initial and ongoing formation (through courses, seminars, congresses, meetings of groups involved in various apostolic works, etc.). How can the members of the various groups come to know one another better right from the beginning of our Vincentian formation?

b. By evaluating together the needs of the poor in the various countries where we work.

c. By common apostolic works on behalf of the poor.

d. By cooperating in popular missions or missions "ad gentes."

e. By spreading knowledge of the Vincentian charism (through documents, newsletters, periodicals, books on Vincentian spirituality, etc.).

f. By having representatives at the various general assemblies, international meetings, etc.

g. By praying with one another. For example, the AIC has a worldwide day of prayer on March 15. Are there other occasions and other ways in which we can pray together? Does the common spirituality that binds us together move us to pray with simplicity, as St. Vincent taught us?

In the course of the meeting we came to a number of conclusions.

1. The heads of the four branches will meet regularly, at least once a year, in Paris. The next meeting will take place in January or February 1996.
2. At the next meeting we will take up the question of inviting other branches of the Vincentian family to take part in our annual meeting (e.g., the Vincentian Marian Youth Groups, the Miraculous Medal Association, the various congregations of men and women of Vincentian inspiration).
3. Each of the four branches will prepare five pages of basic information which will then be distributed in English, French, and Spanish to the members of the Vincentian Family. This information will describe the origins, historical development, and actual situation of each group and will give addresses that will be useful for establishing contact. Each branch will publish this information in some appropriate form so that it can be used especially in the formation of its members.
4. At the next meeting the four branches will discuss ways of responding *together* to emergency situations throughout the world (e.g., Rwanda).
5. The four branches will each invite the others to participate in their General Assemblies and in other meetings on an international level.
6. In regard to collaboration in common works, we focused on the following points:
 - a. It is important for the branches to keep one another informed about what is being done together.
 - b. Given the transnational character of the four branches, we discussed ways of exerting pressure on societal structures, as well as on local and national governments, through concerted action.
 - c. In emergency situations, we agreed to communicate by fax in order to seek out ways of collaborating with one another.

7. We agreed to discuss, at our next meeting, the ecumenical bonds that we have formed in our works of charity.
8. We spoke about proclaiming a worldwide day of prayer for the Vincentian family, offering texts for reflection or intentions to pray about. At our next meeting, a concrete proposal will be made in this regard.
9. We agreed to try to sensitize the members of each of the four branches about the need to foster vocations to the other branches.
10. We agreed to encourage, upon the occasion of the visits of the Superior General to various provinces, a "Vincentian Family Day," as a way of stimulating mutual collaboration and reciprocal knowledge among the various branches.

I found this meeting a wonderful experience. I was deeply impressed by the generous commitment of so many men and women to the service of the poor. Later, I will send all of you more information about the various branches of our Vincentian Family, which is growing very rapidly. At this time, let me take the occasion to encourage each of you to work closely with those groups that already exist, to help in founding and animating others, and to assist in their formation programs.

Reflecting about our family today, I am reminded of St. Vincent's words:

Be united with one another, and God will bless you. But let it be by the charity of Jesus Christ, for any union which is not sealed by the blood of Our Savior cannot endure. It is therefore in Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ that you ought to be united with one another. (Abelly, book II, c. 1, 145)

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General