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Advent Letter 1996

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To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

During Advent over the last several years we have meditated on the wonderful cast of characters whom Matthew and Luke place on the Advent stage: Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the model listener, who responds obediently: "Be it done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38); John the Baptist, direct and austere, whose herald's voice cries out, "Prepare the way of the Lord" (Lk 3:4); Isaiah the prophet, standing in the background and proclaiming: "See, I am doing a new deed; even now it comes to light" (Is 43:19); Joseph, silent, just, peering with wonder into the transcendent mystery of God and accepting it in faith (Mt 1:18-25).

There are also other rather subtle New Testament accounts of the coming of Jesus into the world. They have their own allure and beauty, even if they are quite different from the lovely stories recounted by Matthew and Luke. Let me focus on one of these this Advent. It is probably the earliest New Testament description of the coming of the Lord, antedating the infancy narratives by several decades. In writing to the Philippians, Paul takes a hymn used by the first Christians, which contains several movements that build up in crescendo toward its climax. He modifies it slightly to suit his purposes, and, by way of preface, makes a direct appeal to his readers: "Have this mind among you which was also in Christ Jesus"(Phil 2:5):

THE HYMN

⁶Who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
something to be grasped.
⁷Rather, he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
coming in human likeness;
⁸and found human in appearance,
he humbled himself,
becoming obedient to death,
[even death on a cross].
⁹Because of this, God greatly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue confess that
Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

ITS MOVEMENTS

His status
and attitude

Humiliation 1

Humiliation 2

Exaltation

Homage 1

Homage 2

It is a wonderful hymn. Countless Christians have mediated on it over the centuries. St. Vincent loved to cite it (cf. SV II, 338; XII, 201, 368, 426). We proclaim it every Saturday as a canticle in our evening prayer.

This Advent let me suggest to you two Vincentian themes that resound in this song.

1. The first theme, self-emptying, has given rise to a whole school of Christian thought, one that influenced St. Vincent profoundly. You remember his advice to Antoine Durand, the newly appointed superior of the seminary at Agde: "It is essential therefore for you, Father, to empty yourself in order to put on Jesus Christ" (SV XI, 343). Influenced by Paul's words, Vincent placed self-denial among the five virtues of the Company; he called us to empty ourselves in order that the Lord might fill us. But Paul's meaning is actually even more profound. He is saying that Jesus freely made himself powerless from birth, taking on the human condition that inevitably ends in death, even the dreaded form of death meted out to slaves in the Roman world, the cross.

Surely St. John Gabriel Perboyre, whom we have meditated on so often this year, identified with the message of this hymn dramatically. So too do all those who give their lives wholeheartedly to the poor, standing with them in their powerlessness. The infancy narratives teach us this same truth in a more picturesque way. Jesus is born among the poor of Israel. There is no room for him in an inn, so his first dwelling place is a manger. Humble shepherds are the first to come and worship him (Lk 2:7-16).

2. A second Vincentian theme in this passage, proclamation of the incarnate and risen Lord, is fundamental to our vocation. This is the climax of the hymn. But the proclamation of which it sings is not just that of apostles or missionaries or teachers; rather, in a burst of enthusiasm the hymn cries out that every tongue (in heaven, on earth, and under the earth!) proclaims: Jesus Christ is Lord. The early Church professed its faith precisely in that simple one-sentence creed (cf. 1 Cor 12:3; Rm 10:9). It is the good news: Jesus, who identified himself with the powerless, has been raised up by God his Father to be the Lord of the universe. This is precisely the same message that the angel sings out in Luke's gospel: "I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the city of David a Savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord" (Lk 2:10-11).

It is crucial that this simple creed have a dominant place in our lives. There is almost nothing that St. Vincent repeated more often to his family than this: the Incarnate Word, now the Risen Lord, is the center. In all our evangelization, in all our service, Jesus is to be the focus. Whether it be in Addis Ababa or New York, whether it be in an AIDS hospital or in the pulpit of a church, our own person or the gift we bear or the words we speak must proclaim: "Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." In the Vincentian tradition we proclaim this good news:

- 1) through the language of works (cf. SV II, 4): performing those works of justice and mercy that are a sign that the kingdom of God is really alive among us: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, helping to find the causes of their hunger and thirst and the ways of alleviating it;

- 2) through the language of words: announcing with deep conviction the Lord's presence, his love, his offer of forgiveness and acceptance to all;

3) through the language of relationships: being *with* the poor, working *with* them, forming a community that shows the Lord's love for all.

Advent is a time of peaceful reflection. I encourage you, my brothers, to make it a moment for embracing more fully the human condition that we share with Jesus, with its joys and sorrows, with its moments of acceptance and rejection, health and sickness, and even death. I hope too that this Advent is a time when the whole Congregation can be more fully identified with the poor in their powerlessness, as was Jesus, the Word made flesh. Then we can surely proclaim him more genuinely as Lord, since it is in his humiliation Paul tells us that he is exalted, it is in his dying that he is risen.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General