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OPENING REFLECTION

Luis María Martínez San Juan, C.M.

I want to begin by giving the definition of the word “pastoral” a Vincentian twist. This definition will focus this presentation like a light from above: **Pastoral** is any effort to reach Christ because he has reached you first (the work of one's own sanctification); one can only live and find this power in a community (the place of encounter with Christ), that has received this mandate: *Follow me, be my witnesses and go and make my disciples...(proper end).*

This definition offers us the three key elements of Evangelization. And these components constitute our spirit:

[1] The Mission is not our work. It is Christ who has chosen and sent us. And .. *how sorry we will be if we do not announce his gospel!*

[2] The Church and the world need us to make the Gospel real; to live out the command of Jesus: *As the Father has sent me, so I also send you.* Saint Vincent proposes similar words of Jesus to us: *He has sent me to preach the good news to the poor (Cons.5).*

[3] This desire cannot be lived out alone, but only in community. "Each and every one of its members (of the Congregation) dare to say with Jesus: *I have to proclaim the Gospel. It is for this that I have been sent. (Luke 4:43) (Cons. 10).*

For this reason, our community "can affirm of itself, as all the Church does, but in a special way, that the mission to evangelize constitutes our community's very own grace and particular vocation and expresses its true nature." (Cf. EN 14) (Cf. Cons.10)

The Vincentian mission to the people has its place in the general pastoral work of the Church. But, be careful, this position does not come to us as easily as rain from heaven; no one is going to give it to us. We have to seek it. We have to look for it and find it if we want to survive.

Some time ago, our previous Vicar General, P. Flores, commented to me: *The Church will never disappear as charism or as institution: the Lord himself has assured us of this. But the congregation can disappear in its charism and institution. Not only is this possible, but it has actually happened historically to others. We cannot sleep. We need to work and look for our niche. We have come together here for this very reason.*

We also need to search for and find our own place in a specific way: in the style that Saint Vincent began, *adapting ourselves to the circumstances of the peoples, the places and the times (I,227/I,274).*

I. TO SITUATE OURSELVES CORRECTLY

We came here restless. We desire to make the proclamation of the good news credible to people today: people living in diverse circumstances and diverse cultures. Some define this evangelical task as a movement outward. The dynamic "going out" began with God. With his *bending down to Humanity, he begins the History of our Salvation: Jesus leaves heaven, renounces everything, descends and comes to us on our level, the level of simple people.*

This dynamism, initiated by God, and carried through in the course of the History of the Church, urges us today to leave our native place and to incarnate ourselves in other cultures. Then we live a double fidelity:

A fidelity to all humanity to which we direct ourselves and a fidelity to the treasure that we have received and whose servants we are; a treasure we carry in vessels of clay, but which the power of the Gospel makes capable of reaching out and transforming the criteria of judgment, the points of interest, the lines of thought, the fountains of inspiration, and the models of life for all humanity" (EN19).

So let us begin the work of this Vincentian month faithful to the suggestions of the majority of us made through the process of **dialogue**. As we recall from above, we want, with Saint Vincent, **to look at the reality**. Through his awareness of the reality, Vincent heard God's voice calling him **back to the mission** through the call of some poor country people, the *call of the poor and abandoned*.

Here, today, we intend to do the same. God continues to call us through our people. We must listen to God's voice today. Let us turn our eyes and minds to the reality. I am sure that God wants to tell us many interesting things through the crowds of people and places we represent.

II. TO LOOK AT AND SEE OURSELVES

It is clear that we should begin the work of **looking at and seeing ourselves**. Immersed in our own **worlds**, we can focus ourselves on three vistas: our own little world, the places in which we serve the Church, and our Communities and Provincial teams.

(1) The **world**. And not the whole world, but rather our **little world** -- those human contexts in which we live, as well as the concrete situation of our people and their need for evangelization, their hopes...

As Vatican Council II proclaims:

*The people of God, moved by a faith which impels them to believe that it is the Spirit of the Lord that fills the universe and that leads God's People, seeks to discern in **the events, demands and desires** of those who participate jointly with their contemporaries, the true signs of the presence and plans of God. Faith illumines everything with a new light and manifests the divine plan for the total vocation of humanity. For this reason, faith orients the mind toward full human solutions." (GS11).*

As long as we do not stay on a superficial level, but allow ourselves to look into the depths, perhaps we will be able to discern the true signs of the presence of God and God's plans in the events, requests and desires that we experience. To do this, we must dialogue. There is a saying in my country, "Four eyes see better than two". Let us then look at our worlds together.

Real history is the **theological place** where we hear the *call of God* and **encounter Him**. It is the place where the decision is made to follow him. It is interesting to recognize the voices that help us feel that call of God: "*I have seen the oppression of my people..., I have heard your complaints against your oppressors, I have seen your suffering... And now, go and free them*"(Ex 3,7ss). For this reason, we can begin by asking:

What are the most urgent needs of evangelization for our people? Where do we perceive them to be?

What are the saddest and most difficult situations of our people that the mission might help them overcome? (This requires more than just "preaching" a mission.)

What are the situations of darkness that are in need of the light of the Gospel?

(2) The **Church** is called to give life to the real world. The Church in the world and the local particular churches live their own realities *in light and in shadow*. Saint Vincent also encountered a Church full of light and shadow. Because he loved the Church so much, and he recognized its imperfections, he worked to transform the Church. He offered a solution.

Through *the light and shadow* that we see in our church, we are being asked for an answer. Before formulating new questions, let me to remind you of some of the situations that Saint Vincent knew and dealt with. Perhaps they might be similar to ours:

a) The first situation that stumped Saint Vincent was **the people's lack of knowledge:**

You will really experience the ignorance of the people, an incredible ignorance... How can a poor soul believe, or hope, or love God when that person does not know God nor what God has done for him because of his love. And how will such a person be saved without faith, without hope, without love? Well then, God, seeing the needs and calamities caused by the times and the negligence of pastors and the heresies by which they have caused great damage to the Church, has desired, because of his great mercy, to remedy all this by means of the missionaries, sending them to the poor people so they can save themselves." (XI,80- 81/XI, 387-388)

Isn't this happening today when the powerful mass media create false hopes of safety in the hearts of the people?

b) Let us continue with Saint Vincent:

I have another consideration: the need the church has for some good priests who can do away with so much ignorance and so many vices of those on earth. Such priests could free the Church of this lamentable condition, about which good souls ought to be crying with tears of blood. (XII, 85/XI, 392)

Isn't it true today that while the poor need the light of the Gospel, they do not **find the real answers** they need in our churches? Can't we recognize the urgent needs that cry out to us as missionaries?

c) Another important point, and a burning issue for an authentic missionary who wants to live like Jesus who *spoke, preached, and also acted (Acts 1,1)* is this: What is the level of the Christian commitment to the most needy? Saint Vincent continues to offer us new challenges. Saint Vincent affirms with clarity: *To evangelize in word and deed is the most perfect thing we can do; it is what our Lord does and it is what those who represent him in this world have to do.* (XI,89-90/XI,393)

It could happen that after my death some people motivated by a spirit of contradiction or comfort might ask: "Why bother taking care of these hospitals? How can you care for these persons ruined by the war and why seek for them in their homes? Why take on so many problems of so many poor people? Why direct the women who care for the sick, and why waste your time with crazy people?" There will be some who will criticize these works, don't doubt it. Others will say that it is too ambitious to send missionaries to far away countries... We should just give missions right here; there is enough to do here without going so far away; I want to be busy here. Don't talk to me about abandoned children, nor about old people in the name of Jesus, nor about those prisoners! (XII,89-90/XI 393)

These texts of Saint Vincent indicate the direction that our discussions could follow. Questions about the Church should come from the need for salvation discovered in our own little worlds. We could discuss the following questions.

We have discovered the search for salvation in our little worlds. So we ask:

What answers are our churches giving?

What answers are we, the children of St. Vincent, giving?

Should we be giving different answers? (Which? How?)

We can focus on positive answers as well as our deficiencies. And at this point, we could focus on the real condition of the parishes or communities where we will give missions.

(3) Our third focus is "to observe" and it touches us very closely. We have to look at ourselves. We have to examine our communities, our Provinces and the answers we are giving today as children of Saint Vincent. We have to take long hard look at our Missionary Teams. Are we giving convincing, Christian, Vincentian answers to the problems mentioned above?

Paul VI in the *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, speaking about evangelization, shares some thoughts we cannot ignore.

It has been repeated frequently in our days that this century is thirsting for authenticity. Above all, with relation to the youth, it is affirmed that they are horrified by the fictitious, by falsehood, and are decidedly in line with the truth and sincerity. These signs of the times ought to make us resonate with a vigilant attitude. Quietly or with loud shouts, but always with strength, it is asked of us: Do you really believe what you are announcing? Do you live out what you believe? Do you really live what you teach? Today more than ever, the witness of our lives has become an essential condition of preaching effectively. Without

going in circles, we can say that in a certain measure, we make ourselves responsible for the gospel that we proclaim. (EN76)

The thought of Paul VI coincides not surprisingly with that of Saint Vincent. We see how he put his finger right on the sore spot of some of the problems that existed right from the beginning. A man of great ideals such as he could not but help to point out these negative realities:

We look for the shade; we don't like to go out in the sun. We like our comfort so much! In the mission, for example, we are in the church, protected from the wrath of time, protected from the heat of the sun, from the rain, everything to which the poor people are exposed. And we shout asking for help when we are given a little more work to do out of the ordinary! My room, my books, my Mass! Is this what it means to be a missionary - to have all these comforts? We live on the patrimony of Jesus Christ, with the sweat of the poor. We should go to the dining room thinking: "Have I earned the food that I am about to eat?" (XI,201/XI,120-121)

A missionary work can fail from its origin because of the lack of zeal for the salvation of all humanity. Without this zeal, we are simply the "corpses of missionaries." Without this missionary zeal, we would lack our "identity." This Vincentian month intends to return us to our roots and make us drink of the fresh fountains of the evangelizing and missionary spirit. We listen again to Saint Vincent as he says,

I know quite well how this was being done at the beginning of the little company, how we followed exactly the practice of not letting any opportunity pass by to teach the poor".../I/)

With this motivation that gives us as much from *Evangelii Nuntiandi* as from Saint Vincent, we can enter into a new field of analysis and dialogue. Are we content with just saying it, or are we really "evangelizers of the poor"? How would anyone know that we are dedicated to evangelize the poor, above all the most abandoned? (Cons.1,2)

- As Vincentians, we are called to give some answers to the problems in our society. And what is the real response we should make in regard to the vision of the future for the Mission in our Provinces?
- How do we see ourselves? How do we see our lives in relationship to our goals?

Why don't we make a self portrait? Let us try to do it!

It's possible that the problem of "what we do" is not related to ill will or laziness. It's possible that we find real difficulties in doing good things. Why do we not talk about the zeal we should have in our missionary dedication? It is worth our while to speak about the problems and difficulties that we are facing.

- What are the real difficulties we discover in the concrete situations where we announce the good news to the poor?
- Can we identify the causes of these difficulties?

III. PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS

Let us now think about our linguistic groups. In order to make the dialogue most effective, I want to make some practical observations.

1. This first dialogue ought to bring us to a most profound awareness of our real worlds: successes, dreams, desires, problems, failings, hopes... Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to note that the theme is so broad that we do not have enough time -- even 17 hours wouldn't be enough. That is why we ask that you not spend too much time on the small details that are not so important, but that you go right to the core. This afternoon, when we come back to the Plenary Session it will be good to communicate the more significant experiences. Lesser details, as important as they maybe, we can leave for the informal discussions that will surely be one of the pleasures of our time together.

2. Another observation. In our discussions, we should not focus only on negative aspects. There might even be groups that in honest analysis do not find any negative aspects. Perhaps we can affirm that we are doing all that we can. God does not demand more than what we can honestly do.

It is important that, if this is so, we share this also with the rest. The negative realities that we observe as we make an examination of our real worlds should only move us to correct them. A sincere self-evaluation is the first step on the road to conversion.

But we need to know and see all the good that God is doing through our simple sincere efforts and works. Like Mary, we have to know how to thank God for all the great things he does with us.

3. This first discussion is important in the total concept of this month. We must try to give some answers during this month to the needs and inquiries that come out spontaneously in the discussion of the groups.

On the other hand, we will make known to the Father General, and to the confreres of our Provinces and our Missionary Teams, what we learn here from the missionary sense of the participants about the real worlds in which we labor.

4. Finally, I want to point out the fact that the plan we offer has only one objective: to help and facilitate dialogue. The questions in this presentation are not questions on an examination. For that reason, each group should treat what I've said and the questions I suggest with freedom. Find in your concrete and diverse experience, without spending too much time in them, the most interesting questions to put forth for discussion among us all.

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