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From common spiritual heritage to shared service of the poor

by Zeracristos Yosief, C.M.

First of all, let me greet you all in the words of St. Paul: "May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ send you grace and peace" (1 Cor 1:3). I served as a member of the Preparatory Commission of this 1998 General Assembly. The sole purpose of this presentation is to say "hello" and "welcome" to all of you, representatives of our Congregation and to offer you several points of orientation for your consideration and relevant to our gathering here in Rome with other Vincentian Family representatives.

Since June 1996 the Congregation of the Mission has been talking a great deal about and prayerfully reflecting on the Vincentian Family. It has been a real surprise for many of us to discover that the family of St. Vincent de Paul embraces more than two million people. This is truly amazing and reminds us of the great responsibility which is ours. The great challenge for us, however, is not just to acknowledge this whole group in the abstract, but to be able to welcome each group as another member of our own family and to be convinced that having the same founder or the same spiritual source means that we then share a common spiritual heritage that leads all of us to the commitment to service of the poor. With this awareness, we can even think about joining each other to plan to serve them better.

These are the basic elements which will join all of us together here. Thus we are ready for the second stage taking place this week of July 9 - 14, 1998. This is a crucial week for us and for the future of the Congregation of the Mission and the Vincentian Family as a whole.

Before planning the future, we need to develop a clear idea of what it means to "be family"

Someone might ask, "What is the purpose of this week with the Vincentian Family?" My answer would be that we want to know each other better and so come to accept and even love one another as family members. We Vincentians of the Congregation now know, thanks be to God, that we do not stand alone and that we cannot be a closed organization but rather one that is open to others with whom we can plan for the future. We have come to be aware that we have two million sisters and brothers who also witness to Christ in the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul.

We also believe that this week's gathering is a work of divine providence and we want it to be qualitatively different from any past General Assemblies. Thus each member of this Assembly is called upon to maintain this spirit of openness to all who

have been invited to join us here so that we can be evermore strongly committed to know and love our Vincentian Family.

St. Paul pointed out to the Philippians that "my prayer is that your love for each other may increase more and more and that you never stop improving your knowledge and deepening your perception" (Phil 1:6). I am sure that during this week we are going to do a lot of talking and come up with not a few plans and commitments. This is important and even essential but we should not allow it to be merely an intellectual exercise for its own sake.

Recalling principles and stating intentions are not enough. Rather, each of us is asked to participate in a lively way that can lead us to a greater sense of responsibility and effective action as followers of St. Vincent de Paul. The love we want to develop among ourselves is not a "political love in the Church." Love for the poor is not merely an act of the intellect but of the heart and the hands as well, as St. Vincent always reminds us. It was he himself who showed us that our spirituality consists in "practical, effective charity." Since Vincent de Paul, the apostle of charity, shows us a way of following Christ in the Church and in the world, it is important that we always stress this practical love.

St. Vincent once expressed himself in the following way: "We should help and support one another and strive for peace and union among ourselves. This is the wine that cheers and strengthens travelers along this narrow path of Jesus Christ. I recommend this to you with all the tenderness of my heart" (SV IV, 262).

To sum up

If we can understand that the member groups of the Vincentian Family have a great deal in common with each other, even with our differences, then in the days to come we can highlight our common heritage. But since those who do not know each other cannot love each other we have to get to know, appreciate and love one another more.

This is one of our main objectives in the coming week and the process we will be following has been designed to make this more possible to achieve. We can then more realistically think that our knowledge and love for each other can lead us to love and serve the poor better. "Let us go, my brothers," as St. Vincent once said to the confreres, "let us go and occupy ourselves with new love in the service of the poor, and let us seek out as well the poorest and the most abandoned..." (SV ???).

I think that the basic attitudes we need to have during this week to come are those which have been repeated over the past two years:

- a) To recognize St. Vincent as either the founder or a principal source of inspiration for all of us,

b) A strong thrust toward serving the poor,

c) A spirituality based mainly on concrete, practical charity, lived out in simplicity and humility.

If this Assembly is going to give a new hope to the Congregation and to the Church, I think then that every branch of our family should agree with that which the AIC years ago already affirmed: "acting together against all forms of poverty." It is this awareness that I wish for each of us during the week to come.