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The Vincentian Family: an Overall Vision

*by José Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza, C.M.
Vicar General*

I begin this conference by cordially greeting each and every one of the representatives of the different branches of the Vincentian Family gathered here:

*the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission,
Daughters of Charity,
the International Association of Charity,
the St. Vincent de Paul Society,
Vincentian Marian Youth Groups,
Lay Vincentian Missionaries (MISEVI),
the Miraculous Medal Association,
Popular Missions,
Religious of Saint Vincent de Paul,
Sister of Charity of Strasbourg,
Sisters of Saint Jeanne Antide Thouret.
The coconfederation of Mother Seaton.*

To all of you I extend my most cordial greeting.

On October 1, 1996 the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission: 1998 was convoked. The theme chosen for this assembly was the following: The Worldwide Vincentian Family and the Challenges of the Mission in the Third Millennium.

I consulted a dictionary which gave the following definition of the word "family": a coming together, joining of persons or things united by common characteristics or conditions. Applying this definition to our situation, we can say that the Vincentian Family is composed of persons and institutions who have come together and who are united by a common and basic characteristic: the following of Jesus Christ, servant and evangelizer of the poor, in the manner and the way of St. Vincent de Paul.

This definition of the Vincentian Family brings us to our first conclusion: in a family of this nature two complimentary factors come into play: (1) the unity of origin and projects, and (2) the diversity of persons and institutions.

In a family, men and women, parents and children, adults and young people, descendants in a direct or an indirect line live together. All of them generally claim common ancestors and at the same time follow and share identical or similar ideals. These elements find their unique expression in the Vincentian Family. All of

us, individuals and institutions, hold in common our origin and fundamental project, namely, that which was formulated and lived by Vincent de Paul.

In this family, people from distinct nations and cultures live and collaborate together. In the actual catalogue called the personnel directory of the Vincentian Family, we find the names of men and women; clerics, religious and lay; rich and poor; socially prominent individuals and people of humble origins, persons affiliated with the family for a long time and other who have only recently been incorporated into the family.

At the present time, the Vincentian Family is not confined to a particular country or a single continent. Rather its field of action embraces almost the whole world. The Vincentian Family, in step with the actual times, is also affected by the syndrome of globalization, in the fullest sense of the word.

Belonging to the Vincentian Family

In the broad sense of the word, "all those institutions that either directly or indirectly are inspired by St. Vincent de Paul at the moment of determining their objectives and defining their spirituality" are members of the Vincentian Family. (1) Viewed in this way the Vincentian Family today has many dimensions. Allow me to call to mind some of the numbers that in the last few years we have used frequently (I thank Sr. Betty Ann McNeil, D.C. for this data). The Vincentian Family is composed of 268 institutions, of which 239 are Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 21 are lay associations and 8 are Anglican Congregations. Of all these institutions only 165 still survive. (2)

In its restricted sense, the Vincentian Family is made up of "those congregations and associations that owe their foundation to St. Vincent or have expressly declared their desire to consider themselves as his spiritual sons and daughters. (3) It is in this sense that the Congregation of the Mission, the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the International Association of Charity, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Marian Youth or the Vincentian Marian Youth and the Miraculous Medal Association belong to the Vincentian Family. I am sure, however, that other names could be included in this category.

Signs of membership and bonds that unite the members and institutions of the Vincentian Family

Institutions belong in some way to the Vincentian Family if they take on one or more of the following traits:

- directly founded by St. Vincent de Paul;
- wholly adopted or in some way adapted the *Common Rules* of St. Vincent;

- honor St. Vincent as their patron or primary source of inspiration;
- assume particular aspects of the Vincentian charism;
- profess the same spirit as the Congregation of the Mission or the Company of the Daughters of Charity;
- participate at their very core in the vocation of St. Vincent de Paul, which consists in following Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor;
- assume as their own the spirit of simplicity, humility and charity;
- owe their foundation to the missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity or lay members of the Vincentian Family;
- are affiliated with the Congregation of the Mission or the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

We do not have available reliable statistics about the number of persons who belong to the Vincentian Family in the broad sense.

Henceforth I will refer to the Vincentian Family in its restricted sense.

A brief description of the diverse branches of the Vincentian Family

The International Association of Charity (AIC)

This association was founded by St. Vincent in Châtillon on December 6, 1617. From its beginning this institution took on certain particular characteristics: it is a lay association, Church-based, concerned about the material and spiritual well-being of the poor; has a clear understanding of organized charity, is concerned about the ongoing formation of its members and maintains a close relationship with the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

The members of this Vincentian lay group number more than 250,000 and are interspersed among 42 national associations. During the 1960's this association made notable efforts in renewing its theological and spiritual bases as well as its practices. I limit myself to listing some facts: the AIC has adopted new statutes and rules and now calls itself the International Association of Charity. Its members participate in assemblies on different levels: local, national and international. An international president and an executive committee coordinate the activities of the AIC.

In 1971 the Superior General passed the direction of this Association from his hands to the hands of national directors and local spiritual directors. Though there has been a juridical change in the relationship between the AIC and the

Congregation of the Mission, the bonds between these two institutions have not been weakened; rather, in every aspect they have become more intentional and cordial.

In 1980 the Fundamental Document was approved: "We act together against poverty." This had many ramifications in the evolution of this lay group. The Assembly of Assisi (1990) and Guatemala (1994) delineated lines of action for this Vincentian lay association. The AIC is also a member of numerous international organizations. In summary, within the context of a scrupulous fidelity to the Vincentian spirit, this lay group has again reinterpreted its proper mode of being and acting in the Church, in civil society and in the Vincentian Family.

The Congregation of the Mission

The foundation of the Congregation of the Mission took place on April 17, 1625 with the signing of the contract between the DeGondi family and St. Vincent de Paul.

The latest available statistics list the Congregation with 4,128 members, of which 29 are bishops. There are 46 provinces and 4 vice-provinces.

Since Vatican II, the Congregation of the Mission has engaged itself in the task of renewal. Three criteria guided this process: a return to the sources, the directives of Vatican II, and the profound changes experienced in the world. The efforts sustaining this renewal were centered on successive local, provincial and general assemblies. This renewal is further evidenced in the writings of the Superiors General, the work of Vincentian study groups and the numerous publications of the Congregation. A result of this community undertaking has been the approval of new Constitutions and Statutes for the Congregation of the Mission.

Because of its honest and consistent collaboration with the other branches of the family, the Congregation of the Mission has always seen itself as a member of the Vincentian family.

The Company of the Daughters of Charity

The Daughters were founded in 1633. According to the data presented in their General Assembly of 1997, there are 26,120 Daughters and 385 seminary sisters.

The renewal that was undertaken since Vatican II is clearly reflected in their new Constitutions and Statutes as well as the documents that have come forth from their last three General Assemblies. Using the same criteria as the Congregation of the Mission, namely, a rereading of the sources, acceptance of the directives of Vatican II, and an analysis of the actual changes in the world, the Daughters of Charity have redefined their way of being and their projection as a community toward

the future. In their internal organization they have adopted new forms of participation and in their missionary activity they have broadened their horizons.

The Company of the Daughters of Charity has always viewed itself as an integral member of the Vincentian Family. The document "A New Fire" approved by the General Assembly of 1997, referring to the third commitment of the community says: "We commit ourselves to collaborate with the laity, especially with the Vincentian Family." On May 8, 1997, on the occasion of the opening of their assembly, the Superior General asked the Daughters of Charity "to remember that you are part of a great family that identifies itself with a common charism and shares a common heritage."

St. Vincent de Paul Society

On April 23, 1833, Frederick Ozanam, with a small group of lay persons founded the St. Vincent de Paul Society. At that time the first conference had seven members. Since then it has experienced continued growth. Today about 900,000 men and women, from 131 distinct countries and 48,200 local conferences belong to the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

This society is a worldwide lay movement of universal breath, whose objectives involve them in social and charitable works. It fosters the personal holiness of its members through service to the poor. A decisive component of this society is its following a Vincentian spirituality. St. Vincent is its patron and this group has always looked to St. Vincent as it defined its spirit and objectives. From the beginning they accepted and cultivated the evangelical and Vincentian virtues: nearness to the poor, effective charity, discretion, meekness, humility of the group, zeal for the salvation of the neighbor.

Since Vatican II this society has undertaken a series of reforms. In 1975 a new rule was approved which made the society a truly "mixed group," with a greater participation of the members, open to non-Catholics, to non-Christians. In an attempt to put an end to misery and to discover the causes of poverty, this society has widened the circle of its social and charitable action.

Marian Youth or Vincentian Marian Youth

This lay group dates back to the time of the Virgin's appearance to St. Catherine Labouré in 1830. St. Catherine received a command to establish an association of Children of Mary. Pope Pius IX, on two separate occasions, June 20, 1847 and July 19, 1850, approved this association. The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission exercises the role of Director General. This group is a Vincentian Lay Association, closely related, from its foundation, to the Congregation of the Mission. Its purpose, unchanged from its establishment, has been the formation of poor children and adolescents. Such a purpose has always been an objective of all Vincentians.

Two hundred thousand lay persons are members of this association. Its renewal, which began immediately after the Second Vatican Council, has affected its name, its way of thinking and its objectives; the formulation of its spirituality and the formation of its members; its pastoral projection and its insertion in the dioceses, and its relationship with the other members of the Vincentian Family. Today this lay association defines itself as, Church-based, Marian, Vincentian and apostolic. More recently this groups has emphasized its missionary and charitable dimensions.

On February 14, 1988, Fr. Richard McCullen approved new international statutes of this group. Since that time, and in some cases prior to the above date, the national statutes of different countries have been approved.

From August 12 - 24, 1997 representatives from 45 countries participated in an international meeting of the Association in Paris. This meeting demonstrated the international dimension that this group has achieved. In the near future new international statutes will be drawn up and probably an international secretariat created.

The Miraculous Medal Association

This association also dates back to the appearances of the miraculous Virgin in 1830. This association was approved by Pius IX on June 20, 1847 for the St. Lazare house and by Pius X on July 8, 1909 for the whole Church. The direction of this group was given to the Superior General. On September 8, 1990, the Holy See modified the old statutes. On February 11, 1998 the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life approved the current statutes.

According to the new statutes, the specific ends of this association are: devotion to the miraculous Virgin, sanctification of its members, and apostolic and charitable works.

This association forms part of the Vincentian Family because of its origin, its historical relationship with the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity and its charitable action made evident especially since Vatican II.

From December 15 - 20, 1997, at the invitation of the Superior General, six members of the Congregation of the Mission from different countries met in Rome to exchange impressions about the renewal and the updating of the Miraculous Medal Association. Among other things, there is the hope of establishing an international secretariat. It is difficult to put a number on the persons who belong to this lay Vincentian association. In any case we can affirm the fact that this group is experiencing obvious growth in many countries of the world.

Because of time and space, it is impossible to mention the other entities of the Vincentian Family represented in this General Assembly. That does not mean that they cannot count on the interest and support of all here present.

Capacity for renewal

Throughout its long history, the distinct groups of the Vincentian Family have experienced moments of growth and moments of regression (regression due to unfavorable circumstances). The periods of greatest growth for each of these groups took place immediately after their establishment and after the French Revolution. On the local level, the growth or regression of the different groups effected the evolution of the Vincentian Family. Repeatedly the Vincentian Family has demonstrated a great capacity to react and renew itself in light of the changing situation.

Today what is the situation of the Vincentian Family? The Council's renewal has affected the whole Church and the Vincentian Family has likewise been influenced. In a brief period of time the different groups that make up the Vincentian Family have modified their statutes, practices, and pastoral orientation. They have been able to overcome a certain paralysis that effected them and at times a distance that separated them from the real world. Now, the Vincentian Family has set out on a new road, taking on ambitious programs that orient us toward the future. In this way the Vincentian Family has given witness to a double fidelity: fidelity to the Vincentian vocation and fidelity to the unavoidable commitment of constant renewal in order to better serve the poor of our time. In a word, we, as a Vincentian Family, have placed ourselves at the door of the Third Millennium with a new focus. Thus, the Vincentian Family today lives in a time of hope.

Signs of Unity

Let me formulate some questions: "What is the situation of the Vincentian Family today?" "Are we taking significant steps to enrich the concept and the reality of the Vincentian Family?" In my opinion our response can only be affirmative. For a long time the distinct branches that make up the Vincentian Family have been in need of and have been asking for a more informed and a closer relationship with one another. They have sought a more palpable unity within the family.

The recent meetings of the leaders of the diverse groups have contributed greatly to the achievement of these ends. The first of these meetings took place in Rome on June 3, 1995. Representatives of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, the International Association of Charity, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society participated. The second meeting also took place in Rome on February 2 and 3, 1996 with the participation of the same groups. A third meeting took place on January 17 and 18, 1997. On this occasion, besides the groups mentioned above, two representatives from the Vincentian Marian Youth participated. Finally on January 16 and 17, 1998 the groups gathered together in Paris, and this

time a representative of the Miraculous Medal Association and a representative of the religious of St. Vincent de Paul joined the group. The next meeting will take place in Rome on January 16 and 17, 1999.

These meetings have served a purpose of advancing and revitalizing our understanding of the Vincentian Family. These meetings contain within themselves a sign value that has served as a guide for other similar meetings of the family in so many different parts of the world.

Remember that on May 30, 1996, the Superior General, together with the leaders of the other three Vincentian entities, invited all the members of the Vincentian Family to gather together in prayer on September 27 of each year. The response has been most encouraging throughout the world. This initiative, in no small way, has helped strengthen the bonds that unite us and has made us feel closer to one another. In summary, at this moment, a little more than three decades after the close of Vatican II and near the end of the Second Millennium, the Vincentian Family has taken significant steps.

Allow me to point out another fact with regard to the Vincentian Family. In almost all the visits of the Superior General and the Assistants to the provinces of the Congregation, the different groupings of the Vincentian Family were called together. The response in each case has been most satisfying. I can assure you that I have personally shared in the joy and happiness of having met with so many members of the Vincentian Family.

The identity of each group and mutual collaboration among the different groups

The ideas, proposals and even the agreements reached at the above mentioned meetings orient us at this present moment when we celebrate a general assembly. From the beginning the diverse components of the family proposed that preserving the identity of each group, we seek the means by which we might collaborate more effectively in serving the poor. (4)

Throughout these sessions we have exchanged information about the charism, the historical evolution, recent statistics, the juridical status and the spirituality of each group. We evaluated the level of cooperation among the different groups, cooperation on the local as well as the international level, collaboration in concrete projects as well as diverse ministries, e.g., foreign missions and popular missions, initial and ongoing Vincentian formation, youth ministry and the formation of youth group advisors. It should also be pointed out that the different groups have invited other members of the Vincentian Family to participate in their general assemblies and other similar meetings. The members of the Vincentian Family have been asked to be asked to create other branches of the family in those places and areas where they do not currently exist. The publication of a biography of the leading figures of the Vincentian Family is being explored and finally the convocation of a

Vincentian Congress in the year 2000 is being discussed. The theme of said congress would be: the spirituality of the Vincentian Family.

As might be expected, the different meetings of the representatives of the Vincentian Family, focused their attention on some points that are on the mind of all the members of the Vincentian Family.

The Congregation of the Mission and the Vincentian Family

The Congregation of the Mission has continually viewed itself as part of the Vincentian Family. This fact is affirmed throughout its history by the written testimonies and the many works of the Congregation.

Let me briefly cite some recent texts which ought to encourage the missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission to build bridges between the Congregation and with the other components of the Vincentian Family.

We read in Article 17 of the Constitutions: "Since the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity share the same heritage, members should willingly give them assistance when asked, especially in the matter of retreats and spiritual direction. They should also show a brotherly spirit of cooperation in those works which have been undertaken together." Statute 7, § 1 refers to the relations between the Congregation of the Mission and lay volunteers: "Lay associations founded by St. Vincent and those which are inspired by his spirit should be of special concern to our members, since they have the right to our presence and to our support." The General Assembly of 1992 approved a text which, though more general than the other texts cited above, nonetheless is most relevant to our present discussion: "We are conscious that we are not alone in our vocation, rather we belong to a large Vincentian Family made up of Daughters of Charity, diverse religious communities, and lay men and women imbued with the spirit of St. Vincent. The Congregation of the Mission sees itself as an active member of the Vincentian Family. (5)

The above cited texts give us a glimpse of a tradition begun by St. Vincent; a long tradition that has been maintained up to the present time which finds us at the threshold of the Third Millennium.

With Joy and Humility

As we all know, the Vincentian Family began its journey almost four centuries ago. At the end of the second millennium the "sleeping lion," (applying this expression to the Vincentian Family), emerges with a new face and with new vitality. In these Post-Conciliar years, and more especially during this last decade, our family has taken significant steps in seeking its own mode of being and acting. All of this fills us with happiness and allows us to confront the future with joy.

With joy, yes but also with humility and realism. With humility because some questions are pending, questions about the identification of each member with the Vincentian charism, questions about the spiritual renewal and formation of all the family members.

Let us ask ourselves: has ongoing formation, both spiritual and Vincentian, reached the local level of the Vincentian Family, reached the grass-roots level? As a Vincentian Family, what image do we project to the poor, to young people, to the episcopal conferences? Has each member of the Vincentian Family assumed interiorly his/her membership in the Vincentian Family? What is the level of understanding and collaboration between the diverse groups of the Vincentian Family? Have the missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity supported wholeheartedly the Vincentian formation of the laity.

On October 5, 1996, the planning commission for the General Assembly of 1998 sent the Visitors and their councils a questionnaire which asked them to comment on the unity and collaboration between the distinct branches of the Vincentian Family in serving the poor. On the whole the responses allow us to be optimistic, but not overly so. There are still many roads to travel. As wise people of the gospel, we must realistically evaluate the present situation and from there project ourselves into the future with joy and humility.

This 39th General Assembly begins its deliberation on the theme of the Vincentian Family in the world and its mission in the next millennium. In the shared reflections of both groups, i.e., members of the General Assembly and invited participants, it should not surprise us to hear conversations about the "blessings" and the "curses" of the Vincentian Family, about its past and present history, about its present undertakings and its hopes for the future.

The Assembly can and ought to be an historical landmark for the Vincentian Family. For the first time in its long history, the theme chosen for a General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, refers to the Vincentian Family as such. It is important to remember that during these days, with the participation of so many invited members of the family, we have a wonderful opportunity to listen to one another, to know one another better, to mutually support and encourage one another and, yes, to promote the unity of all through the diversity of gifts: "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord" (1 Cor 12:4-5). Enlightened by the Holy Spirit and doing our part during this Assembly, we will be able to work collaboratively and with hope as we face together the challenges of evangelizing the poor.

Recognized Charisms

Rooted in the charisms that have been recognized by the Church, we see that throughout history, large inter-ecclesial families have been formed, families that have a double component: lay and clerical. Such is the case of the Vincentian Family promoted by St. Vincent. This family today has become a fruitful tree of great

proportions. The charism given by the Holy Spirit to St. Vincent at a given time in history is today shared in some way by millions of people.

A recent intervention of the Church's magisterium makes reference to this fact and speaks of the effects that this has had on other parts of the Church. John Paul II in the Apostolic Exhortation "Vita Consecrata" has expressed it in the following way: "These new experiences of communion and cooperation should be encouraged for various reasons. They can in fact give rise to the spread of a fruitful spirituality beyond the confines of the institute, which will then be in a position to ensure the continuity in the Church of the services typical of the institute" (55).

In the above text the Pope speaks with a dynamic understanding of the words: "new experiences of communion and collaboration." "New experiences of communion" speaks of a unity in the basics and an ever-increasing participation on the part of all the members in the matters that unite them. "New experiences of collaboration" refers to a common action, a bringing together of individual and community efforts, in order to achieve a common purpose: the evangelization and the service of the poor.

The Pope goes on to say that from these new experiences of communion and collaboration, great benefit is derived: moved by the examples of holiness the institute will be able to move beyond the boundaries of the individual group. In this way the Church is assured that these valuable gifts and charisms will be kept alive, assured that the gift that is shared by the Vincentian Family will be handed on to other generations.

Toward the Jubilee of 2000

The Church travels toward the Jubilee Year of 2000, toward the beginning of the Third Millennium. The year 1998, the second year of proximate preparation for the Jubilee is dedicated to the Holy Spirit. At the invitation of the Pope "the reflection of the faithful ought to be focused on the value of unity within the Church _ a unity which brings together all the distinct gifts and charisms of the Spirit."

As we reflect upon the different groups of the Vincentian Family and their ways of operating, let us hold in high esteem the unity in diversity of gifts, the varied responses to these gifts and the mutual collaboration which should take precedence over organizational pluralism.

This is the challenge that the Vincentian Family faces with as it begins this 39th General Assembly, namely, respect the unique character of each group; grow in our understanding of what it means "to belong" to the Vincentian Family; discover the bonds that unite us and finally channel our energies in the task of evangelizing the poor.

Before concluding I would like to refer to the fact that the litany of saints of the Vincentian Family has received some additions during recent years. On June 2, 1996 Pope John Paul II, in St. Peter's Square declared John Gabriel Perboyre a saint. So too on May 4, 1997 the Pope included the Vincentian confrere Ceferino Jimenez Malla in the catalogue of the blessed. Both died as martyrs. Finally on August 22, 1997, Frederick Ozanam was declared blessed. We have great reason to give thanks to God for the fact that we, the Vincentian Family, have such eminent brothers and sisters renowned for their commitment and holiness.

As Vincent once exhorted the Daughters of Charity, so he continues today to encourage us with these words: "Love and respect as brothers and sisters those whom the Lord has united and joined together with his love" (XIII, 562).

1. J. M. Román, "La Familia Vicenciana: una renovación incesante" in *Vincentiana*, July-October, 1995, pp. 224-246.
2. Betty Ann McNeil, *Monograph I, The Vincentian Family Tree*, Vincentian Studies Institute, Chicago, 1996
3. Román, op. cit., p. 224
4. R. Maloney, circular letter, April 20, 1994
5. Letter to the confreres, Final Document of the General Assembly 1992.

Translated by Charles T. Plock, C.M.