

7-1998

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### Recommended Citation

Maloney, Robert P. C.M. (1998) "The Vincentian Family as Missionary," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 42: No. 4, Article 30.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol42/iss4/30>

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## THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY AS MISSIONARY

*Robert P. Maloney, C.M.  
Superior General*

There is something fascinating about the dawn of a new millennium. We stand at the threshold of a new era in history, a great jubilee, a time for rejoicing.

It may be helpful for us to note today, my brothers and sisters, that one of the principal scriptural texts in our own Vincentian tradition is precisely a jubilee text. We find it in the prophet Isaiah (61:2). Jesus used it at the beginning of his public ministry (Lk 4:18-19). And St. Vincent made its first words the motto of the Congregation of the Mission. We all know the text by heart:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me;  
therefore he has anointed me.  
He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,  
to proclaim liberty to captives,  
Recovery of sight to the blind  
and release to prisoners,  
To announce a year of favor from the Lord.

Notice that Jesus' mission, and ours too, is to announce the jubilee, "a year of favor from the Lord."

It is easy to lose sight of the original meaning of the "year of favor." In fact, the people of Israel did lose sight of it, and rarely, if ever, did they put it into practice. But the jubilee was meant to be a time of rejoicing for the poor. It was intended, as *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* points out, to restore equality among all the children of Israel, offering a fresh start to families that had lost their property and even their personal freedom.<sup>1</sup> In that light *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* calls the whole Church today, at the dawn of the jubilee of jubilees, to lay greater emphasis on the preferential option for the poor and the outcast.<sup>2</sup>

So, I suggest to you today that our mission at the dawn of the third millennium is to make not just the year 2000, but the entire millennium a real jubilee, a time "to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners." The jubilee for Jesus and for St. Vincent was not just a single year. It was the celebration of the abiding, liberating presence of God's kingdom among us. As missionaries we are called to be permanent signs of the

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<sup>1</sup> *TMA*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> *TMA*, 51.

jubilee. Our life and our mission are to proclaim that Jesus is alive, that he is present, and that he breaks the bonds that hold us captive.

## I. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MISSION OF OUR VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Today I offer you four characteristics, though I am very conscious that there are many others. I choose these four not only because they are fundamental historically, but also because they seem to me particularly urgent at the dawn of the third millennium.

### 1. *Our mission is global.*

It is only in the 20th century, as a great modern theologian often pointed out, that Catholicism has truly become a "world-Church."<sup>3</sup> Living here in Rome I experience this dramatically, since we have rapid communication with numerous countries throughout the world. I see strikingly different realities and varied "faces" in our worldwide family; e.g., the rapid growth of our family especially in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe; the rise of new ministries and the increased role of the laity on all the continents; the steady increase of basic ecclesial communities. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is now in more than 130 countries; the AIC in 49; the Daughters of Charity in 85; the Congregation of the Mission in 81; the Vincentian Marian Youth in about 50. All of our branches have new missions. Having gone in recent years to remote places like Tanzania, Angola, the Solomon Islands, Albania, the Altiplano of Bolivia, Mozambique, Pakistan, China, Kharkiv in the Ukraine, Siberia, Senegal, Namibia, Belize, and Rwanda \_ just to name a few \_ we are becoming even more international as a family.

Whereas in the period immediately after Vatican II there was significant emphasis on national identity, today there is a revitalized awareness of our family's global missionary call. This is very much the way St. Vincent envisioned the mission. In an era when travel was difficult and most people died within a few miles of their birthplace, he sent missionaries and Daughters of Charity to places like Poland, Italy, Algeria, Madagascar, Ireland, Scotland, the Hebrides, and the Orkneys. He himself in his old age longed to set out for the Indies.<sup>4</sup> He told the missionary priests, brothers, and sisters to establish "the Charities" wherever they went.

### 2. *It demands mobility.*

Hardly anything could be clearer in the New Testament. Jesus comes from the Father and returns to the Father,<sup>5</sup> the source of all mission. He engages in an itinerant

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council," in *Theological Investigations* XX, 90-102; cf. also "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations* XX, 103-14.

<sup>4</sup> SV XI, 402.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 16:28; cf. Jn 1:1, Jn 14:28.

ministry. He gives his followers a mandate: "Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature."<sup>6</sup> Mission is not just one of Jesus' activities; it is part of his very being.

Today we are also very conscious that mission is not merely an activity of the Church but is part of her essence, so we stress the involvement of every Christian in the Church's mission.<sup>7</sup> All of us are missionaries, women and men, young and old, lay or religious. We are missionaries in our homes, in our parishes, in our neighborhoods, and we share in the responsibility for the Church's worldwide mission too, since Jesus asks us to keep our eyes always open to share God's gifts with those who are in need.

St. Vincent is eloquent on the need for missionary mobility: "Let us imagine that He says to us: 'Go forth, missionaries, go forth. What, are you still here? Look at the poor souls who are awaiting you, whose salvation perhaps depends upon your preaching and catechesis!'"<sup>8</sup> He holds up before our eyes the great missionaries who went to the Indies, to Japan, to Canada "to complete the work which Jesus Christ began on earth and never abandoned from the moment he was called."<sup>9</sup>

But if we are to be truly mobile, then at times we must be willing to leave well-established works that others can now take care of in order to go to the most needy and the most abandoned. Recently, for example, the Province of Colombia left a seminary in Cochabamba where the local clergy could now staff it in order to staff a seminary in Arauca that did not yet have trained formators and to cooperate in priestly formation in Rwanda. Throughout our family in recent years I am happy to say that there has been a serious reevaluation of apostolic works in order to free our personnel to go to the poorest of the poor.

### 3. *Our mission is evangelization and service.*

The core of our mission is evangelization, which, in the Catholic tradition, has always been a broad, inclusive concept.<sup>10</sup> As Paul VI pointed out: "Evangelization is a complex process made up of varied elements: the renewal of humanity, witness, explicit proclamation, inner adherence, entry into the community, acceptance of signs, apostolic initiative. These elements may appear to be contradictory, indeed mutually exclusive. In fact, they are complementary and mutually enriching. Each one must always be seen in relationship with the others."<sup>11</sup> In other words, service is an integral part of evangelization. It is the good news in action.

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<sup>6</sup> Mk 16:15.

<sup>7</sup> *Redemptoris Missio*, 71-74.

<sup>8</sup> SV XI, 134.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Avery Dulles, "Seven Essentials of Evangelization," in *Origins* 25 (# 23; November 23, 1995) 397-400.

<sup>11</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 24.

St. Vincent told us that we must first do and then teach. Evangelization, for him, involves not just preaching but action too. Again and again, therefore, he spoke of evangelization by "word and work." He calls both the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity to serve the poor "spiritually and corporally." When speaking to the members of the Congregation, he warned us:<sup>12</sup>

*If there are any among us who think they are in the Congregation of the Mission to preach the good news to the poor but not to comfort them, to supply their spiritual but not their temporal wants, I reply that we ought to assist them and have them assisted in every way, by ourselves and by others... To do this is to preach the gospel by words and by works.*

First, do. Then, teach. That is St. Vincent's rule for "effective" evangelization. In other words, St. Vincent sees human promotion and preaching as complementary to one another, and as integral to the evangelization process.

In light of St. Vincent's teaching, our evangelization will be fully alive when we proclaim the good news:

- a. through the language of works:<sup>13</sup> performing the works of justice and mercy which 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; staffing schools, hospitals, centers for the handicapped; offering programs for new mothers and their children; visiting the sick in their homes.
  - b. through the language of words: announcing with deep conviction the Lord's presence, his love, his offer of forgiveness to all; proclaiming the dignity of persons, their human rights, denouncing injustice.
  - c. through the language of relationships: being *with* the poor, working *with* them, sharing in some of their privations, forming with them a community that shows the Lord's love for all.
4. *Our mission involves organizing and forming others in the service of the poor.*

St. Vincent was adamant about this. Few saints are as concrete as Vincent de Paul. He realized that effective evangelization and service of the poor would require organization. To accomplish this end, Vincent created numerous lay groups ("The Charities") and founded two communities.

He brought the same organizational skills to the formation of the clergy. He felt that the poor would be served well only if there were good priests to minister to

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<sup>12</sup> SV XII, 87.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. SV II, 4.

them, and, to that end, he organized retreats for ordinands and priests, the Tuesday Conferences, and founded 20 seminaries.

Nor he did not stop there. He marshalled all of the resources he could find in the service of the poor: young and old, men and women, clergy and lay, the rich and the poor themselves. The seeds of his organizational gifts have continued to spread even to this day through the countless lay members of AIC, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Miraculous Medal Association, the Vincentian Marian Youth groups, and the more than 260 institutes founded in St. Vincent's spirit.

## **II. FOUR "GIVENS" AT THE DAWN OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM**

There are some striking realities that are very important for our family now as the year 2000 approaches. I will not attempt to prove them, since I think you all experience them in your own life and work. I merely mention them here very briefly as a preface to the final part of this talk.

1. The gap between the poor and the rich is growing wider. As Pope John Paul II pointed out in Brazil (1980), Canada (1984), and Cuba (1998), the rich are often richer precisely at the expense of the poor.
2. Poverty has new, and previously unknown, forms. Never has the world known so many refugees. Traffic in arms keeps local wars alive. The international debt creates staggering burdens in poor nations. New diseases like AIDS or new forms of old diseases, like malaria, are of epidemic proportions.
3. We are a huge family that can be a powerful force in the service of the poor – an "army," so to speak, with more than two million members.
4. Rapid, almost instantaneous, communication among us is possible, with means like fax, e-mail and the Internet.

## **III. SOME CHALLENGES FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM**

What are the principal missionary challenges that face our Vincentian Family in the third millennium? Let me suggest to you a few today. All of you have surely meditated on this same theme and will have other suggestions of your own to add.

1. *The first, and foundational, challenge is that we develop a deeply missionary spirituality.*

Some of you have heard me say this over and over again. It is my deepest conviction. Whatever we do, whatever we say, wherever we go, however we serve, we must be proclaiming in word and work that Jesus is alive and that he presences God's love among us. That is the good news.

Of course, there are different tones to spirituality. All Christian spirituality flows out of the person of Jesus. But if a Carthusian focuses on Jesus' prayer, if an Anchorite focuses on his solitude, if a Franciscan focuses on his poverty, we in the Vincentian Family focus on his practical, effective love lived out in simplicity and humility.

Let me mention briefly five keystones in the missionary spirituality of our family.

- a. Our holiness, our being grasped by God, is intrinsically bound up with our mission to the poor; we pledge to follow Christ as evangelizer and servant of the poor.
- b. Our growth in God's life also flows from the bonds of deep charity forged with one another and with the poor; we serve not just as individuals, but in solidarity with others.
- c. Our prayer, a crucial element in all spirituality, has its own particular dynamic, flowing from and leading to action, as St. Vincent often reminded us. Divorced from action prayer can turn escapist and create illusions of holiness. Divorced from prayer, service can become shallow, addictive, driven.
- d. Our freedom to go wherever the Lord calls us will demand simplicity of life, humility in listening, detachment from whatever holds us back.
- e. Our spirituality is deeply incarnational, rooted in the enfleshed humanity of Jesus. We contemplate the poor in Christ and Christ in the poor.

Today I encourage you who are here and the entire Vincentian Family throughout the world to dig ever deeper roots in this missionary spirituality.

Some challenges:

- 1.) I urge our family, within the next year, to produce a basic book describing the foundation stones and the concrete means for living out a Vincentian spirituality for the laity.
- 2.) I encourage all our groups, especially our lay groups, to continue to develop a well-organized, integral formation program, a real catechesis extending over several years, that will deepen our members in the spirit of St. Vincent.
- 3.) I ask that the formation programs of the priests, brothers, and sisters in our Vincentian Family be reshaped to put greater emphasis on our family and on solidarity in living a profoundly apostolic spirituality.

4.) I urge that in our cooperative family apostolic projects we not only work together but that we pray together too.

2. *The second greatest challenge that I foresee is the formation of our formators.*

I have lived in Rome now for many years, perhaps too many. From that experience I say this to you. There is no call that I hear more frequently or more clearly than the call for formators. I hear it from the provincials of the Congregation of the Mission. I hear it from Daughters of Charity all over the world and especially from the Mother General and her council. I hear it from the AIC. I hear it from the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul. I hear it from the Vincentian Marian Youth groups. I have had countless discussions in the last six months about the need for good formation and good formators. Our gift to the poor as missionaries will depend largely on the quality of our formation.

Some challenges:

1.) Can we organize more effective programs, both national and international, for the formation of formators among the Vincentians, the Daughters of Charity, and the other groups represented here? I urge those responsible in every country, and here in the General Council too, to ask the question: how can we better form our formators? We discussed a proposition in this regard recently in the General Council.

2.) I urge that, within the next year, we establish a well-functioning network on the Internet, so that we can distribute formative information and articles once a week or once a month in various languages.

3.) I ask our young members to learn languages so that they will have a genuine missionary flexibility and the capacity to be formators in lands other than their homeland.

4.) I encourage the provincials to train at least some among us become experts in the social teaching of the Church, so that that teaching becomes an integral part of our Vincentian formation.

5.) I ask that, through workshops, we form good mentors who can accompany our candidates in rich apostolic experiences among the poor.

3. *Of course, in a family with a tradition as concrete and practical as ours, one of the great challenges for the third millennium must be collaborative projects.*

These are already taking place in many, even most, of your countries. I encourage you to join forces all the more in the future.

The third millennium will be the millennium of solidarity, of networking. It will also be the millennium of the laity, as Pope John Paul II has already proclaimed on numerous occasions.

Our service of the poor will be all the more effective to the extent that we can channel our energies, which are huge, into collaborative projects. I use the word *collaborate* purposely. Each of us here has a missionary vocation, the lay women, the lay men, the sisters, the priests, the brothers \_ each of us. In our family there must be no rivalries, there must be no clerical domination. We must be simple, humble servants of the poor. That is why humility is so important in our Vincentian tradition. "It is the foundation of all evangelical perfection," St. Vincent said. "It is the core of the spiritual life."<sup>14</sup> Humility is the great collaborative virtue. It never seeks to dominate. The humble person looks for God's gifts wherever they lie, receives those gifts, as a steward, and hands them on to the poor.

Recently the heads of some of the principal branches of the Vincentian Family published six collaborative projects, from different contents, as examples to stimulate other similar projects.

Some challenges:

- 1.) Can there be similar collaborative projects in every one of our countries by this time next year? This goal is realizable within a year, I am confident.
  - 2.) Can we envision foreign missions where the missionaries are not just priests or brothers or sisters, but also single and married men and women from all the branches of our family?
  - 3.) Can we develop programs in which the poor work side by side with us, in which they share in our formation, and in our prayer, and so become a living part of our Vincentian Family?
  - 4.) Can we develop a Vincentian justice and peace network within all of our countries, and internationally too, so that we can mobilize our energies, on specific issues, in action on behalf of social justice?
4. *A fourth challenge for our family today is to develop, as a basis for its missionary effectiveness, some clear simple tools for praying as members of the Vincentian Family.*

St. Vincent was very practical about prayer. He gave us some methods for meditating, like the little method that he applied to both preaching and praying. He

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<sup>14</sup> *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, II, 7.

offered suggestions about the use of images, about the use of words, about the use of the mind, and the heart, and the will.

Some challenges:

- 1.) Does everyone in the family know about these Vincentian ways of praying, from the 90-year old sister in China to the 15-year old Vincentian Marian Youth group member in Mexico? I suspect not. Can we more effectively teach others to pray as St. Vincent did?
  - 2.) Can we teach one another ways of integrating prayer and apostolic life?
  - 3.) Can we develop some simple daily prayer forms, appropriate to different times of the day or different occasions, that we can offer, especially to young people and to the poor?
5. *A fifth challenge, in our missionary efforts, is to reach out especially to the young in the third millennium.*

I said this recently somewhere and afterwards received a strong letter from a sister saying that we should reach out to the old too! Of course, that is true. The elderly very much deserve our love and attention, but I encourage you to reach out to the young especially.

Is there anything that Pope John Paul II has emphasized more often, both in word and in action? The young *are* the third millennium. It belongs to them. It certainly does not belong to me. I doubt that I will survive beyond its second decade! And many of you can probably say the same.

So I say to you today, St. Vincent left a wonderful gift within the Church. He has placed it, to a large extent, in your hands and in mine. Pass it on to the young. Tell them how St. Vincent, inspired by Jesus' vision, saw the world upside-down. Tell them that the poor are the kings and the queens and the presidents in the Kingdom of God and that we are their servants. Hand on to them a rich gospel spirituality, rooted in the humanity of Jesus. Help them to share in Jesus' love for God as his Father, his trust in God's providence. Accompany them in listening to God's word as did Mary the mother of Jesus and in putting it into practice as she did. Demonstrate for them, especially by your lives, the importance of the truth. Illustrate for them by your example a way of seeing the world with the eyes of the humble so that everything is gift \_ everything \_ and God is continually reaching into our lives to make us new and whole. Do all this not just as a means of vocational promotion, but as a way of sharing the wonderful gift God has given us.

Our charism is very important within the Church. Can this Assembly challenge the members of our family, wherever they might be in the world, to create youth groups and give them a rich formation?

One of the frequent painful laments that I hear, especially from superiors, is how much time they must spend in *maintenance* and how little they can give to *mission*. Of course, maintenance is necessary. We all recognize that. But I encourage you to find the ways of focusing more and more of our family energy on mission. Jesus asks us to be free, detached, so that we can give of our lives wholly to his service.

As I conclude these reflections, I ask you to picture us standing with Jesus at the end of Mark's gospel. His ministry is over. He now entrusts us with the mission of proclaiming and presencing God's healing, forgiving, nourishing, sacrificial love for others. Jesus turns to us today, as he turned to his followers at the end of Mark's gospel, and he says: "Go. Go into the whole world and preach the good news to every creature." That is our mission. Let us go, my brothers and sisters, members of the Vincentian Family, and proclaim the jubilee news that God is here to set his people free.

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General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission  
July 13, 1998