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July 31, 1998

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission throughout the world

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

Images often speak more forcefully than words. The cover for this document is the centerpiece of a lovely tryptic painted by Kurt Welther for the Chapel of Mercy at St. Vincent's Parish in Graz. Vincent de Paul is sitting among the poor as one of them. He has no halo. He does not stand above them as their renowned helper. It is as if everyone had just come in as Vincent was about to sit down and eat his simple meal. Now he is sharing it with them. The faces of the poor at the table are not very clear. But the viewer, as Vincent tells us, "will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is represented to us by these creatures" (SV XI, 32). The face that shines from the center of the table reflects Christ's presence. Those who surround Christ at this simple meal recall to us the Last Supper, the sacramental meal of God's love for his people.

Our General Assembly brought together many representatives of our worldwide Vincentian Family with a view toward renewing and concretizing our commitment to follow Christ as the Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor. In the document contained on these pages, the Assembly expresses the challenges it foresees in the new millennium, its convictions, and a series of commitments to which we pledge ourselves for the years ahead.

During the Assembly we had a wonderful experience meeting with the representatives of our extended family. The evaluations were most positive. I recognize that it is difficult to communicate the enthusiasm generated at such a time to those who

*With the Vincentian Family
we face the challenges of the Mission
at the threshold of the new Millennium*

were not present. But I am confident that if all of us work with the members of our family at implementing the commitments formulated in this document, we will experience the joy and the energy of living in a family whose goal is to be beside the poor in their distress.

I have asked the Visitors to present this document to the members of each province in workshops, perhaps using the video that is being prepared in various languages. I have requested too that it be discussed at a meeting of all of the superiors of the province, at the provincial council, and at the next provincial assembly. I urge each local community to concretize the document as it formulates its local community plan. The world is filled with undigested documents. I encourage you to bite into this one, chew it, and digest it well. I hope that it can then be a source of energy for deepening our Vincentian spirituality side by side with the members of our family, and for formulating with them concrete, practical projects that will be of genuine service to the poor.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General

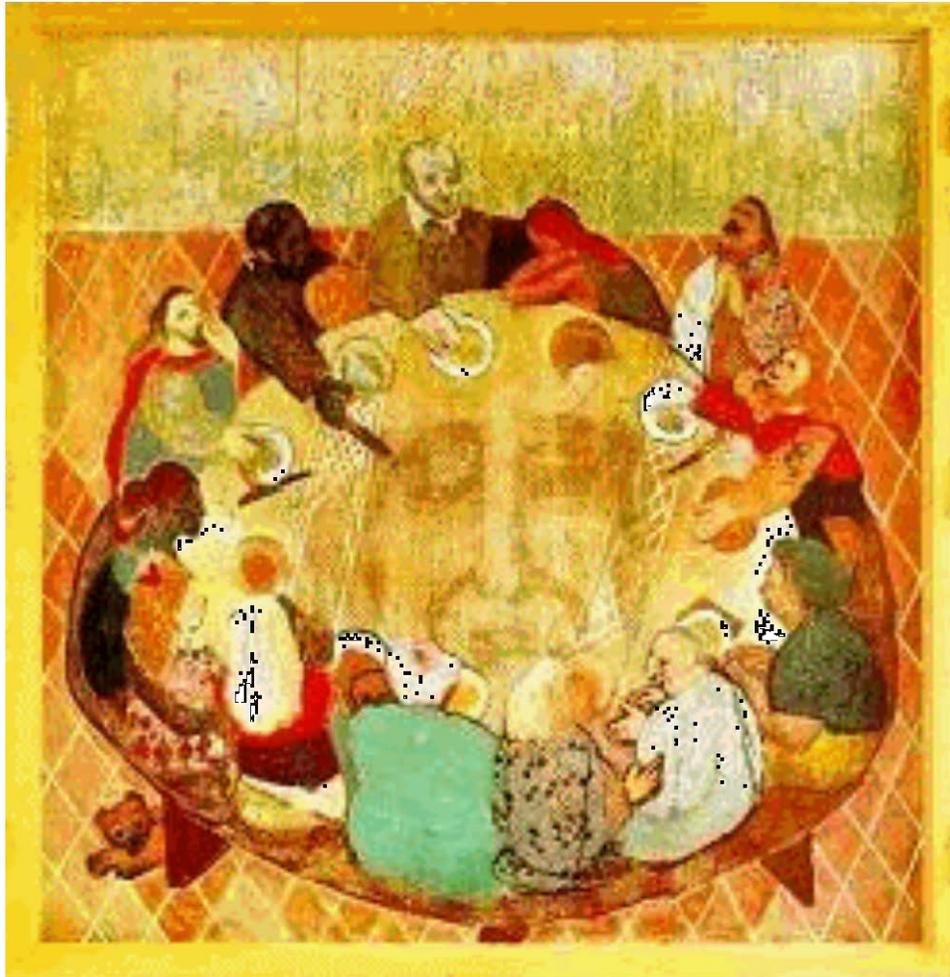
FINAL DOCUMENT

39th General Assembly

Congregation of the Mission

Rome

July 6 - 31, 1998



With the Vincentian Family we face the challenges of the Mission at the threshold of the new Millennium

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the Good News to the poor. (Lk 4:18) In the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus unrolled the scroll and proclaimed the words of the prophet Isaiah referring to the “year of grace” and to the establishment of the reign of God.¹ Then he added: *Today, this passage of scripture is fulfilled in your hearing* (v. 21) On the threshold of the new millennium, the Congregation of the Mission, together with the Vincentian Family², wishes to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy by making it a reality today, for it is our motto.

The deliberations of the General Assembly of 1992, which inspired our convictions and commitments over these last six years³, committed the entire Congregation to interprovincial collaboration. They also broadened our horizon toward greater collaboration with the laity and with all those who are committed to proclaiming Jesus Christ and struggling against poverty.⁴ Following the same pastoral path, in this time of transition from the second to the third millennium,⁵ the General Assembly of 1998 promoted, right from its preparation in the local communities and provinces, meetings for interchange and prayer together with members of the Vincentian Family. In this General Assembly, we engaged, for the first time, in a week of discussion, 9-14 July, with 33 leaders and members of various groups of the Vincentian Family. We, the members of the assembly, learned much from them, and recognize how much we need to collaborate in the service of the poor.

¹ Cf. Is 61:1-2; also Is 43:19-20; 65:17-18; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* 13 and 51.

² The expression “Vincentian Family,” which appears repeatedly in this document, should not be understood in a juridical-canonical sense, but as a pastoral term. By the expression “Vincentian Family”, we refer to the networking of congregations, organizations, movements, groups, and persons, which, directly or indirectly, extend through time the Vincentian charism. The branches of this network were either founded directly by Saint Vincent de Paul or regard him as their source of inspiration and dedication to the service of the poor. The Congregation of the Mission considers itself as part of this family.

³ The General Assembly of 1992 adopted as its motto the words of Saint Paul: “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2). Cf. *New Evangelization, New Men, New Communities*, the working document of that assembly, as well as the letter to the confreres, in *Vincentiana* (1992): 382-88.

⁴ *Vincentiana*, (1991): 507, 511. Cf. *Const.*, 1,3; *Statutes* 7. “For us members of the Congregation of the Mission, the complexity of situations and the challenge of poverty, are they not a call... to collaborate more with the laity, with the Vincentian lay groups, and other Congregations and organisms, and all who accept this challenge? ... How can we better intensify and improve this collaboration?”

⁵ The 39th General Assembly was convoked by the superior general with the theme: “The Worldwide Vincentian Family and the Challenges of the Mission in the Third Millennium” (Convocation Letter, October 1, 1996). Cf. *Vincentiana* (1996): 433-36; (1997): 65-66.

We now want to share with every member of the Congregation of the Mission, its local communities and provinces, the results of our work: the **challenges** facing the Vincentian mission, our **convictions** concerning our life and mission, as well as a series of **commitments** that will help us respond to the challenges of the coming years.

I. CHALLENGES

Listening, as did Jesus, sent by the Father to evangelize the poor, we recognize as signs of the times⁶ the following four sets of challenges:

1. The circle of **poverty** is expanding ever more. The number of the poor is increasing continuously, under new forms, with new faces (the unemployed, immigrants, refugees, displaced persons, etc.). The gap between poor and rich nations is increasing. Wars and corruption drain national resources. Daily we see more clearly that poverty is caused by unjust structures, even religious ones. These should be investigated and transformed to promote justice and peace. Because of abrupt socio-economic changes, neoconservative economic policies, economic inequality among different continents (giving rise to new political crises, external debts, etc.), changing ideologies and a certain culture of death⁷, the problems become more and more complex, at the very time when new means of mass media bring us closer to one another. At the same time, in our society, a culture of solidarity⁸ is developing, involving persons who do not share our Christian faith. The poor are making progress in organizing themselves to be agents of their own liberation. Likewise, they are learning to help each other even in their poverty.

2. God seems to be absent from some **cultural horizons**. The moral and spiritual richness of many peoples “runs the risk of being torn apart under the impact of multiple trends, among which secularization and the multiplication of sects are prominent.”⁹ At the same time, there are visible signs that encourage us. Among some of our contemporaries, there is a thirst for an interior life, for contemplation and for conversion. Sensitivity is increasing concerning human rights, respect for life, and care for the environment. Women are grasping their dignity and claiming their place of equality in society and in the Church. Many members of the Vincentian Family have committed themselves to these causes.

⁶ *Const.*, 2.

⁷ Cf. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 12.

⁸ Cf. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 12.

⁹ *Christifideles Laici*, 34.

3. At the threshold of the new millennium, the Church **continues its renewal**. In older Christian communities, as well as in those recently coming of age, there is a challenge for **new evangelization**¹⁰, an explicit proclamation of the person of Jesus Christ as the Savior and Fullness of Life¹¹, and a demand for effective participation in ministry by the laity using their various charisms. There is need for new solidarity with the oppressed, as well as a renewed missionary spirituality, a new relationship between the Church and the world, and with Christian and non-Christian religions. Also needed are the inculturation of the Gospel amid a multiplicity of cultures and the dedication of our best efforts to the evangelization of youth. The Church, despite its weaknesses and inconsistencies, is conscious of being a sign of communion and fraternity, and is growing as “a community of communities” for the service of the Reign of God. In the Christian community, the laity are progressively taking responsibility and asking for new types of formation.

4. In our **missionary vocation**, other challenges present themselves forcefully:

- to remain in a continual state of renewal in our works and apostolates;¹²
- to delve deeper into the sources that inspired our charism;
- to develop, along with the laity, our Vincentian, missionary spirituality;
- to increase our collaboration with the Vincentian Family in the areas of formation, active and participative evangelization, and concrete responses to poverty;
- to become more sensitive to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit active in the persons of the poor, in our own brothers and sisters among the laity, and in the members of other religions;
- to cope with a horizon shift in the Congregation of the Mission, which is growing precisely in those places where the needs are the greatest;
- to prepare our formators adequately;
- to increase our interprovincial collaboration;
- to make a significant commitment to the missions *ad gentes*;¹³
- to revitalize our witness and commitment in a renewed effort toward conversion.¹⁴

II. CONVICTIONS

¹⁰ Cf. *Vincentiana* (1996), 221, where the references to the recent Magisterium of John Paul II on these proposals can be found. They can also be found in: R. P. Maloney. *He Hears the Cry of the Poor: On the Spirituality of Vincent de Paul*. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995) 146-47.

¹¹ Col 1:19; Cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22.

¹² Cf. *Statutes*, 1.

¹³ *Const.*, 16; *Statutes*, 4, 5, 6.

¹⁴ Cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 76; *Const.*, 2, 11-12.

In view of these challenges, which take different shapes in different parts of the world, we want to express the following convictions.

1. At the threshold of the new millennium, we are convinced of our responsibility as missionaries in the service of the reign of God.

As the people of God in the service of the reign of God,¹⁵ in following Jesus Christ the evangelizer of the poor, we know that we have been sent to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to work in the service of the reign of God. *“What happiness, my brothers! ... to make God known to the poor, announcing Jesus Christ to them, telling them that the Reign of Heaven is at hand, and that this reign is for the poor.”*¹⁶

Together with the other members of the Vincentian Family, we experience the call to actualize the forms of the mission for our own times, when the relationship between evangelization and human promotion is especially important.¹⁷

2. We are convinced of the prophetic power¹⁸ and the dynamic vitality of the Vincentian charism.

Attentive to life events, Saint Vincent de Paul, beginning at Folleville and Châtillon (1617), discovered and experienced the presence of Jesus Christ, the evangelizer and servant of the poor, and he responded in prophetic and creative ways to the cries of the marginalized of his time. Today, in the light of this charism, we are called to evaluate our apostolic projects and our community structures, and to seek conversion and greater fidelity.

The vitality of the Vincentian charism does not belong exclusively to the Congregation of the Mission. Solicitude for the poor, in the following of Christ, belongs to the very heart of the Gospel and is a sign of Christian authenticity¹⁹ and of belonging to the community of Jesus’ disciples. Many persons and groups that are part of the Vincentian Family give expression to this prophetic power today.

3. We are convinced that throughout the world, the Vincentian Family shares the same desire to live faithfully in the following of Jesus Christ, the evangelizer of the poor.

¹⁵ The ecclesiastical documents in Latin America and Europe prefer the term “People of God.” The documents of Africa speak of the “Family of God.” And those of Asia use more frequently, “the community of the disciples of Jesus.”

¹⁶ SVP XII, 80. Conference 195, 6 December 1658.

¹⁷ Cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 29, 30, 31.

¹⁸ Cf. “The Visitor in Service of the Mission,” n. 8. *Vincentiana* (1990): 38-39.

¹⁹ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 82.

During the course of our assembly, we experienced this joyful reality. Together with us, the members of the Congregation of the Mission, many other persons and groups are working in the Church, the Family of God, and are on fire with the same enthusiasm and the same zeal which animates us. In the spirit of communion and participation, we in the Vincentian Family, like the Church as a whole, are convinced that the central role of the laity is irreplaceable in the process of evangelization.²⁰

The needs of the poor are enormous. All members of the Vincentian Family have to proclaim the Gospel together and work against all forms of poverty.²¹

4. Moved by the power of charity, we are convinced that we should work for human promotion and justice.

Vincent de Paul discovered that the love of God is expressed in action: “*Let us love God, my brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms, and the sweat of our brows.*”²²

The power of effective love creates habits of love and of service, beginning with personal contacts with the poor. Once we have come to know the poor, and are interested, as was Saint Vincent, in sharing in their joys, their sufferings, and their needs, we will want to love the poor, and express our love by way of creative work. Thus, as he assures us, in turning the medal over, and seeing them in Christ and Christ in them, we recognize them as our brothers and sisters.²³

In our work of prophetic evangelization, we should keep these characteristics in mind: attention to the reality of human society, above all to the causes of the unequal distribution of the goods in the world; participation in the life and conditions of the poor; cooperation with associations established to defend human rights and to promote justice and peace.²⁴

When, together with other members of the Vincentian Family, we share in the life and goals of the poor, we will discover the presence of the Spirit of the Lord who renews

²⁰ A new ecclesiology is developing: the laity are moving from passivity to responsibility. Cf. *The Synod of Bishops on the Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church* (1987), and the postsynodal exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (1988).

²¹ Cf. AIC, *Documento de Base. Contra las pobrezas, actuar juntos*. [Basic Document: Acting together against all forms of poverty.]

²² SVP XI, 40. Conference 25.

²³ Cf. SVP XI, 32. Conference 19.

²⁴ Cf. *Const.*, 12; *Statutes*, 9, 2.

us to speak with them, listen to them, and consider them as the agents of their own way to liberation. Then we can let ourselves be evangelized by them.²⁵

III. COMMITMENTS

These convictions, which should energize our life and our missionary vocation, move us to undertake the following commitments.

1. To collaborate with the other members of the Vincentian Family

If we work in unison with the other members of the Vincentian Family, we can be a more effective force for evangelization and works of charity and justice in today's world. We will also strengthen the bonds that link us to one another. As we work together we also wish to respect the autonomy and identity of each group and individual within the Vincentian Family.

We recognize, as members of the Congregation of the Mission, the need for a change of heart if we are to collaborate generously with other members of the Vincentian Family and so recognize the gifts and talents of others in promoting the reign of God. For these reasons we commit ourselves to:

a) create the conditions for collaboration with members of the Vincentian Family by:

- listening to one another
- getting to know one another
- sharing experiences of working with the poor
- praying and reflecting together;

b) set up structures to coordinate what is already taking place, or will take place at local, provincial, interprovincial and international levels, so that the different levels complement one another and subsidiarity is respected.

2. To respond together to the cries of the poor

The prophetic teaching of Saint Vincent that the poor are “our lords and masters”²⁶ challenges us once more as we enter a new millennium. Also, the increasing gap between

²⁵ Cf. *Const.*, 12, 3.

²⁶ SVP XI, 328.

rich and poor speaks to us with new urgency. Since charity and justice are two sides of the same coin, we commit ourselves to:

a) collaborate with the other members of the Vincentian Family in consecrating more of our time, our resources and our personnel to the evangelization of the poor, so as to contribute more to both their spiritual and human development;

b) plan specific projects at local, provincial, interprovincial and international levels to respond to the cries of the poor in our day in partnership with other members of the Vincentian Family and with the poor themselves;

c) address the causes of poverty in our different situations by participating with other members of the Vincentian Family in the work of Justice and Peace Commissions, both inside as well as outside Church contexts, and by creating specifically Vincentian forms of collaboration where the occasion calls for it;

d) support the movement for the cancellation or reduction of the international debts of poor countries to mark the Jubilee Year²⁷, in partnership with other members of the Vincentian Family.

3. To collaborate in formation

To en flesh Saint Vincent's charism in the new millennium, it is essential that the members of his family be well rooted in his spirit. This is especially true for those just beginning on Vincent's way, but is also important for those who continue to let themselves be shaped by his spiritual experience.

Vincent's call to evangelize the poor was broad enough to include persons of all ages, all walks of life, and all vocations in the Church. Today, the many branches of the Vincentian Family draw from this common heritage and so are able to nourish one another in their efforts at formation. At the same time, each group in the family has understood him from its own experience and so has a unique wisdom about him to hand down to its own members. The formation program of one group can enrich other groups while still continuing to form its own members in its individual tradition. The Congregation of the Mission desires to collaborate in common formation projects, while respecting the autonomy of the different branches as they go about forming their own.

In the following three commitments, the Assembly affirms the principles already set down in our various Community documents on formation. Here, it concentrates

²⁷ *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 51.

mainly on the additional values and practices which arise from a new consciousness of our membership in the wider Vincentian Family.

A. Formation of Our Own: Initial and Ongoing

1) Each province or group of provinces will make every effort to incorporate into its initial and ongoing formation programs elements which reflect our relationship with the worldwide Vincentian Family. These programs should:

- a) convey a real interest in the spirituality, history, and charism of each of the family groups present in the region;
- b) emphasize the necessity of teamwork and collaboration with the members of the wider family and provide training in the skills needed for this;
- c) instill an overall sense of belonging to the family.

2) We should promote a certain integration of our formation programs with those organized by the members of the wider family in the region. To do so demonstrates our willingness to be of service to the other members of the family and in turn to be formed by them.

3) Because a sense of solidarity with the poor is essential to our charism, our members should strive to identify and address the forms and causes of poverty in the world and especially those nearest to us.

4) We will promote, especially for our students, the learning of other languages, sensitivity to other cultures, and a firm foundation in the social teachings of the Church.

5) The Visitors should encourage the confreres to take part in the CIF program and, where possible, organize similar programs on regional levels.

B. Formation of Our Own Formators

1) Because formation is so important and decisive a means for personal and community renewal, each province should show a special concern to provide the best possible preparation for its future formators. In particular, it should work to secure adequate financial support for the integral formation of its members.

2) The provinces should have a sense of their co-responsibility for formation and be open to interprovincial cooperation by:

- a) encouraging and facilitating the mobility of their formators,
- b) sharing their economic resources,
- c) welcoming confreres from other provinces who need specialized training in formation.

3) The Superior General and his council should study the possibility of creating in one or more places:

- a) an international center for the formation of our formators,
- b) an itinerant team of formators who would offer their services to formators in different provinces.

These programs should train the participants in Vincentian spirituality, teaching methods, and multicultural sensitivity so they might work effectively in different parts of the world.

C. Formation of the Wider Vincentian Family

Each province or group of provinces will willingly respond to appeals from the different groups in the Vincentian Family for assistance in formation by:

- a) collaborating in the initial and ongoing formation of their members;
- b) helping to revitalize groups that are weak, and offering spiritual assistance to those that are alive and active;
- c) establishing a formation team from both the Congregation of the Mission and the wider family to design the elements of a common formation program and promote gatherings for the purpose of deepening Vincentian spirituality and strengthening the sense of belonging to the Vincentian Family;
- d) opening our existing programs for ongoing formation to the rest of the Vincentian Family where possible.

4. The international missions

“Today, as never before, the Church has the opportunity of bringing the Gospel, by witness and word, to all people and nations. I see the dawning of a new missionary age, which will become a radiant day bearing an abundant harvest, if all Christians and the

missionaries and the young churches in particular, respond with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time.”²⁸ All of us are invited to contribute to the preparation of the new Christian springtime by being docile to the action of the Holy Spirit.²⁹

Since the Holy Spirit has already opened the way to new forms of collaboration in some of our international missions and in other already established ones, we commit ourselves to:

a) encourage broad participation of the members of groups within the Vincentian Family, as well as of individual Vincentian collaborators, in both the established missions *ad gentes* founded by the provinces and in those under the direction of the Superior General.

b) establish a commission to develop a “*ratio missionum*” (guidelines for our missions), concerning: inculturation and north-south collaboration, criteria for accepting new missions, the process for selecting missionaries and for admitting candidates to the Congregation, relationship to the Vincentian Family, international support for already existing missions in individual provinces, procedures for regular evaluations, and funding.

c) recommend that the superior general study the possibility of establishing a secretariat for the new international missions for reasons such as: facilitating the relationships among the provinces, the branches of the Vincentian Family, other mission organizations, and himself; coordinating the gathering of information; searching out funds and other resources.

5. New means of communication

We are entering into an era of information technology which brings with it unrecognized, and therefore even more insidious, new forms of poverty. If the poor remain without access to information technology, they will be further marginalized and locked into a cycle of poverty.

Today the mass media continue to develop. A major issue is whether the poor will be able to participate in information technology so as to break out of the cycle of poverty and sit at the table with others, making their voice heard; and whether the Congregation of the Mission will use these new means in the service of mission.

²⁸ *Redemptoris Missio*, 92.

²⁹ *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 18.

The Internet is a powerful vehicle which can unite people. When used well it can foster human relationships and solidarity. As such it can be used for formation, collaboration, advocacy on behalf of those who have no voice, and for evangelization.

The Congregation of the Mission, through its members and structures, commits itself to:

a) take initiatives in fostering access by the poor themselves to the mass media so that they may participate in the benefits of communications technology;

b) establish a worldwide communication network and actively foster its use, providing economic and technological assistance where necessary;

c) seek actively the involvement of the wider Vincentian Family in accomplishing these objectives, and especially encourage the mutual distribution of publications through the Internet.

CONCLUSION

At the threshold of the new millennium, our commitments spring from our determination to try to understand deeply the evangelical maxims and to make them real in our lives.³⁰

As we gather these commitments together, we look toward Mary. She occupies a special place in the spiritual experience of the Vincentian Family.

- Contemplating on Mary's role in the mystery of the incarnation, we strive like her to be open to the transforming power of the Spirit, so that the image of Jesus Christ might be formed in us and so that we might always be able to fulfill the will of the Father in our lives.
- With Mary, missionary and pilgrim, we set out eagerly on the road toward the new millennium to bear the message of the gospel of charity to the poor.
- With Mary, in her Magnificat, we join in a song of thanksgiving to the God of history, because God has given us the grace to see ourselves as a Vincentian Family and to be able, like Mary, to renew our charism of following Jesus Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor.

³⁰ Cf. *Const.*, 49.

