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Responding together to the Cry of the Poor. Final Document, Commitment N° 2

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The Cry of the Poor

"The history of all societies which have existed until today is a history of class struggle" stated the Communist Manifesto in 1848. In a note to the English edition of the Manifesto in 1888, Engels clarified that the written history of class struggles was possible only after the investigations of Haxfausen about Russia, of Maurer about Teutonic tribes and of Morgan about the *gens* and the tribe in diverse parts of the world had shown that the predominant social organization in the non-written prehistory of humanity, "from India to Ireland," had been based for centuries on the socialized property of land and flocks of domesticated animals.

The dissolution of these forms of community social organization through diverse systems of private appropriation of the basic means of production resulted progressively in the differentiation of classes, above all in the fundamental differentiation, which depended on the possession or non-possession of the means of production. Beginning with this fact, history has been written always by those who possess, and by their comrades behind and on the backs of those who do not possess.

Effectively, history books studied in schools and universities in the last one hundred fifty years are full of high-sounding names of kings, counts, bankers, great industrialists, conquerors, artists at the service of the powerful, intellectuals.... not even the written history of the Church is free of this. Where in these books are the immense masses of those who possess nothing more than their own arms in order to produce ? It would seem they were born mute.

But they were not born mute. They also knew how to speak and shout because they were human beings, though at times it would not seem so. They cried out after their own fashion. For example, for sixteen years of the adult life of Vincent de Paul, from 1631 to 1647, there was in practically all the great cities and regions of France very violent and numerous local upheavals of farmers and city workers, enraged by the exploitations to which they were subjected.¹

¹See the maps at the end of the book, *"Les soulèvements populaires en France au XVIIe siècle"*, Boris Porshnev. Flammarion, Paris, 1972 (trans. Spanish, *"Los levantamientos populares..."*, ed. Siglo XXI, Madrid, 1978). Not only in France; also, for example, in Russia and in China during the same years. See R. Mousnier, *"Fureurs paysannes..."*, Calmann-Levy, Paris, 1967 (trans. Spanish: *"Furores campesinos..."* ed. Siglo XXI, Madrid, 1976).

What the dispossessed wanted to say with their violent outbreak was to Richelieu, prime minister of the king and cardinal of the Church, little more than a problem of public order which he tried to resolve with bloody repression. For Richelieu the outcasts had nothing to say; they were better silent and submissive, working for others as though they were mules. He himself classifies them as mules in his memoirs.

For a man such as Vincent de Paul, his contemporary, the poor were far from passive mules who ought to suffer with resignation the games and whims of the powerful. For Vincent de Paul the poor person is, though at times he does not appear human, the living image of Jesus Christ.² To work for them is a sure road which arrives at nothing less than the true God, summit of all human life, because *"to serve the poor is to go to God"*³.

But to think so, it is necessary to have faith, a real faith which can never seem to anyone like an "opium of the people". To see in the poor the living image of Jesus Christ did not impede Vincent de Paul from having a very subversive vision of 'profane' history (*"we live off the sweat of the poor"*) and also of 'sacred' history (*"among the poor is found true religion, the living faith"*)⁴.

For he who has faith, the outcry of the poor cannot be before all *"a ghost which threatens Europe"*, against which *"...the pope and the czar..., the French radicals and the German spy police"* have entered *"a holy alliance"*, as the Manifesto so provocatively states. For he who has faith the outcry of the poor cannot be anything else but a call of grace, an echo of the words of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth who invites those who believe in Him to dedicate themselves, as He does, to the evangelization and redemption of the poor. They are the true *"masters and lords"* who teach us what is the meaning of true history, the history of salvation. Salvation history has as its own object the salvation of humanity which ought to be realized already on the Earth. Final salvation, eternal life, the pure grace and gift of the God of Jesus Christ, is no longer history but rather the final consummation of history, post-history, the definitive end of history.

He who announces the Good News of salvation to the poor is an infallible sign that the Savior (the only savior) is acting already in history (Mt 11.5). A Daughter of Charity of the first generation saw it with total clarity, inspired no doubt by her founder⁵. The salvation of the poor is the vehicle of historical earthly salvation for the rest of humanity, though perhaps not as Marx and Engles expected from the salvation of the proletariat class. Also the poor are certainly the bearers of eternal salvation for those who work for their redemption and liberation, as Vincent de Paul so firmly believed⁶.

² XI, 32 / XI, 725 ed. in Spanish.

³ IX, 5 / IX, 25

⁴ XI, 201 / XI, 120-121.

⁵ IX, 61 / IX, 74

⁶ IX, 235 / IX, 241.

With great reason, the document of the General Assembly qualifies its vision as a "*prophetic teaching of Saint Vincent*", a teaching which joins with and continues the best of the ancient prophets and the best of the best, the greatest and last of them all, Jesus Christ, the one sent by God the Father to evangelize and redeem the poor without voice who do not seem to make history and certainly do not write it.

Responding to the Cry of the Poor

Responding to the cry of the poor is responding to the Spirit of God the Father who spoke first through the prophets and then definitively through His own Son on behalf of those whose cry does not appear in history books, though at times it does so appear as a subversive cry rejected by the Powerful of this world who want to control history.

To Saint Vincent de Paul this cry never seemed subversive and he did not reject it. All was just the opposite: hearing this outcry and trying to respond to it as a servant of those who cry out became the inspiring principle of his life from 1617 until his death in 1660. The General Assembly document states correctly, "*He has responded prophetically and creatively to the outcry of the outcasts of his time*"⁷. This evangelical model "*questions us once again at the beginning of the new millennium*"⁸.

The outcry of the poor does not just question the Vincentian Family. The entire Church of Jesus Christ will give proof of its fidelity to the Spirit which ought to inspire it always if it gives evidence not only of a concern for the poor but also of its "preferential option" for them. This is the best proof of its fidelity. "*What a blessing for us to show that the Holy Spirit guides its Church working for the poor!*"⁹.

Even with ups and downs and serious deficiencies, the Church of Jesus Christ has never stopped evangelizing the poor. It could not have done so without ceasing to be the Church of Jesus Christ, because evangelization of the poor is one of the 'marks' that, together with the four marks of classical theology, ought to define and characterize at all times the historical profile of the true Church.

Some years before the Communist Manifesto was presented to the world with the purpose of being the answer to the outcry of the impoverished, some voices within the Church itself had arisen to remind it (in light of an official policy geared to defend itself from other apparently more fundamental and urgent challenges) that the fundamental challenge to the Gospel and to the Church continues to be, as it had always been, the proclamation of the Good News in the world of the poor, a world which was, certainly, infinitely more encompassing than that held in mind by the authors of the Manifesto. This was defined as a sub-world of the industrial proletariat, above all in Europe. One of the voices; though not the only one, that defined the

⁷ Convictions, 2.

⁸ Commitments, 2.

⁹ XI, 37 / XI, 730.

problem with greater richness and decision was a voice with pure Vincentian tones, the voice of Frederic Ozanam.

Still the 'official' Church delayed some fifty years in fully owning the idea. But when it finally did so in 1891, it did so with clarity and courage in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*: "*It is urgent to provide for the good of peoples of humble condition, because the majority battle in miserable and calamitous conditions*"¹⁰. Leo XIII does not make this declaration motivated by politically strategic reasons in order to, for example, wrest support from leftist movements in the struggle on behalf of the poor. He does it motivated by his pastoral obligations as Vicar of Christ ("*the conscience of our apostolic office*")¹¹ to "*be watchful of common salvation*"¹², that is, for the salvation of all humanity.

Also, the encyclical of Leo XIII seemed designed to try to redeem above all poverty in the industrial world. Later documents until this very day, however, have widened the horizon, making it clear that the so-called Social Doctrine of the Church is intended to focus on the redemption not only of poor industrial workers exploited by their bosses and contractors¹³, but of the poor in the entire world.

Responding together to the cry of the poor

The Vincentian Family wants to participate fully in the vision of the Church. By doing so, it thinks it not only does not betray or distort the vision of its inspirer, but rather that it does so precisely to be faithful to that vision, adapting it to what evangelization of the poor in the next millennium demands of the Family itself and of the Church. It wishes to do so also precisely as a Family. Well then, will there be found among the ideas of Saint Vincent some base to speak today with a solid foundation about 'Vincentian Family'? Or will this be a concept motivated, for example, by a lack of vocations in some of its branches? Or will it have arisen from an obvious need to join forces in order to confront with greater pastoral efficacy the challenges presented today to the Mission, or those which will be presented in the now approaching new millennium?

The last two reasons, lack of vocations and pastoral efficacy, have also influenced without a doubt, the creation of the expression 'Vincentian Family' and the growing enthusiasm which is felt for it in many parts of the world. Yet Saint Vincent would also have supported without doubt some of this expression and enthusiasm. In fact he saw various foundations which depended on him (Congregation of the Mission, Confraternities of Charity, Daughters of Charity, Ladies of Charity) as institutions which, though diverse, ought to develop **in collaboration** one unified program of integral evangelization of the poor. So he expressed it with total brightness and clarity

¹⁰ *Rerum Novarum*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ "Handed over the workers, each alone and defenseless, to the inhumanity of employers and the unbridled greed of competitors" (op. cit., 1).

in one of his letters:

*"Our small company has given itself to God for the bodily and spiritual service of the poor people..., in such a way that at the same time it has worked on the missions for the salvation of souls, it has sought a means to alleviate the sick through the Confraternities of Charity...The Ladies of Charity are another witness still of the grace of our vocation...The Daughters of Charity have entered into the plan of Providence as a means which God has given us to do through their hands that which we cannot do through our own...; they dedicate themselves, **just as we do**, to save and help the neighbor. And if I would say '**with us**' , I would not say anything contrary to the Gospel, but rather something in conformity with the practice of the Primitive Church since Our Lord was served by some women who followed Him"¹⁴.*

The letter was written by Saint Vincent well toward the end of his life, in February 1660, seven months before his death. This implies that the text which we have cited should be seen as his definitive vision, a type of spiritual will for all the institutions which appeal to Saint Vincent de Paul as their founder and inspirer. The shortage of vocations in one or another of his institutions and the motive of greater pastoral efficacy can be very good legitimate reasons which bring the members of the Vincentian institutions to respond together to the cry of the poor. The letter cited demonstrates clearly that the Vincentian institutions experience something more fundamental in this theme: fidelity today to the true intention and to the true spiritual and pastoral vision of its original inspirer.

In conclusion let us add a final observation about some lines from the document of the General Assembly which directly affect the theme of this article. The text of the Assembly says (in III. Commitments, 2. Responding together to the cry of the poor, a):

"Collaborate with other members of the Vincentian Family dedicating more people, more time and more economic means to the evangelization of the poor, with the purpose of impelling their human and spiritual promotion".

The Vincentian institutions cannot be asked --- as these lines would seem to do upon first reading them--- to dedicate **more** people, **more** time and **more** economic means to the evangelization of the poor, because all of them have been founded to dedicate to this evangelization **all** their people, **all** their time and **all** their economic means. We do not think we make a false reading of this brief text if we think that the true intention, in the general context of the document, is not that more people, etc., be dedicated to the evangelization of the poor, but rather that the different Vincentian institutions ought to intensify in personnel and economic collaboration that which they are already doing in distinct parts of the world to respond together to the outcry of the poor.

(John Carney, C.M., translator)

¹⁴ VIII, 238-239 / VIII, 226-227.