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New Means of Communication

- Final Document, Commitment N° 5 -

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Vincent's Legacy of Inventiveness

Vincent left us a legacy of inventiveness in service of the poor. He did whatever was necessary to evangelize and serve the poor. Vincent marshalled all of the resources he could: young and old, men and women, clergy and lay, the rich and the poor themselves. His passion for the poor expressed itself through an empowering humility that invited others to share their gifts. He realized that effective evangelization and service of the poor required organization.

He moved through the corridors of power to evangelize and serve the poor. He accepted riding in a carriage when he could no longer ride a horse. His massive correspondence reveals how much communication mattered to him. (Just think what his telephone bill would have been had he had access to "modern" means of communication such as telephone or fax.)

His sense of mission led to creating new structures (keeping the Daughters out of the confinement of convents and organizing the laity in the Ladies of Charity) or doing traditional things in a new way (preaching of parish missions and creating a new seminary system and inaugurating Tuesday conferences for the formation of clergy).

As we enter a new millennium we are faced with some "givens" that call for us to tap Vincent's legacy of inventiveness.

1. The gap between the poor and the rich is growing wider.
2. Poverty has new, and previously unknown, forms.
3. We are a huge family that can be a powerful force in the service of the poor.
4. Rapid, almost instantaneous, communication is an increasing fact of life.

For Vincentians these "givens" must be a clarion call to meet the expanding "circle of poverty" with what should be an expanding "circle of solidarity" _ solidarity with the poor and all those who share our vision. These "givens" call us to continue Vincent's tradition of practical inventiveness in the service of the poor and to do traditional things in a new way.

As Roger Cardinal Mahoney of Los Angeles indicated some of these new forms of poverty are intimately connected with the rise of technology. There is a revolution going on and the poor are increasingly becoming marginalized and excluded. In an economy where the new measure of wealth is information those who have access to information increasingly control the fortunes of those who do not.

Those who control access to information will be more powerful than the largest multinational corporation.

Lack of access to information creates a new form of apartheid and powerlessness. Without access to information technology many are voiceless regarding decisions affecting their development.

- . Who will speak for the poor?
- . Who will enable the poor to speak for themselves?

Walter Brueggemann reminds us, "To be reduced to silence is to be eliminated from the flow of power."

The General Assembly and what is already being done

Our Final Document states:

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

The fifth and final commitment of the General Assembly challenges us to use creatively the new means of communication as powerful tools to create the conditions for collaboration with members of our Vincentian Family, and foster actual collaboration with this expanding "circle of solidarity."

These new means of communication provide effective resources in formation for our mission.

The Congregation has developed an increasingly rich tradition of using these new means of communication. Our confreres in Brazil have mounted a TV station which reaches vast numbers. Their work has been featured in an earlier issue of *Vincentiana*. Many provinces have made excellent use of the print media. CEME of the Province of Salamanca comes immediately to mind with their rich offering of documents, studies and audiovisual material. *Vincentiana* itself can be counted among our uses of the new media.

These efforts are relatively well known. The focus of this article is on the rapidly developing tools associated with computers and the Internet. The Internet is a way of connecting computers through telephone lines. Anything stored in a computer can be transmitted: documents, pictures, sounds.

Creative and appropriate use of computers and information technology can revolutionize our methods and means of delivering services and investigating the underlying causes and long term solutions to poverty.

Information technology will play an increasingly indispensable role as we carry out the other commitments of the Assembly. A primary concern is not only how to

use technology more effectively in our own work but also how to connect the poor with the skills and tools needed to have a voice in their own destiny.

The Limitations and Dangers of Technology

Before we go any further some healthy skepticism about computers is in order. Computers and technology do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or shelter the homeless. Computers do not take vows to serve the poor. People do. The poor can not eat mechanical mice, wear floppy disks, live in computer casings.

The Good News must be incarnated in flesh and blood. The human touch and contact will be all important if we are to be signs of God's love. We will always need that direct human touch as we break the bread of God's word and share our table with the poor.

We must also recognize that lack of access to computers can itself be an underlying cause of poverty.

Pope John Paul II, on World Communication Day in 1997, underlines his own concern: "We must hope that the gap between the beneficiaries of the new means of information and expression and those who as yet do not have access to them will not become another intractable source of inequity and discrimination."

Today Vincent's resourceful practical-mindedness calls us to examine fearlessly the two-edged sword of information technology and its impact on the poor.

Technology in the Service of Mission

Already computers serve to extend our Congregation's mission.

Experience with the Miraculous Medal web site is illustrative of the ministerial use of the net in another way (<http://www.amm.org>). Fr. Charles Shelby, Director of the Association of the Miraculous Medal in Perryville, Missouri in the USA, writes: "I think it has been one of the best strategic moves of my administration in this ministry." He explains that the site "has given us a worldwide reach." The Association adds about 800 names per month to their database drawn from those who have visited the website.

Fr. Shelby continues, "We get about 120 e-mails a day, responses to our surveys or general correspondence." The Website tells the Medal's story. The Bulletin newsletter presents spiritual instruction, testimonies, mission and Vincentian Family news, and offers devotional articles. The Shrine, the Association's center for prayer, can be toured "virtually" by Web surfers who look at an attractive combination of graphics and text. The site encourages e-mail feedback, which can lead to catechesis or ministry.

Most significantly, Fr. Shelby notes, "This is the first effective outreach we have had toward the young. The average age of people filling out our survey is

around 35, compared with average age of nearly 70 for our regular mailing list. The challenge is to adapt our site to their interests, values, and vocabulary without losing touch with any older viewers."

This brings up an important point. To address today's great barriers to social and economic justice, we need not only infusions of youthful energy, but also the technical literacy of the young who are much represented on the Internet. Already in 1989 Pope John Paul said "Let us trust the young. They have the advantage of growing up with the new developments, and it will be their duty to employ these new instruments for a wider and more intense dialogue among all the diverse races and classes who share this `shrinking globe.'"

General Assembly Use of Technology

Last summer's General Assembly was the first to make significant use of the Internet. At <http://www.famvin.org> on the World Wide Web, Vincentians around the world could see bulletins and up-to-the-minute photos of the Assembly. A number of delegates stayed in touch with the provinces by e-mail. Delegates learned that computers and e-mail greatly facilitate editing and laying out *Vincentiana*. Much of the work can now be done online, which saves an enormous amount of time compared to using "snail-mail" _ regular postal services.

An exciting prototype of a computer-readable disk (CD) showed the possibilities for expanding access to formative documents. This disk contained writings of Vincent, Louise, Frederick, and others of the Vincentian Family as well as pictures _ graphics for use in brochures and in other ways. A single CD-ROM can provide, at low cost and with minimal storage requirements, unprecedented access to whole libraries and to the best modern translations available.

Computer-driven information technology as used at the General Assembly effectively demonstrated the almost instantaneous communication from Rome to our houses around the world. With a keystroke, for instance, Fr. Pat Griffin notified our houses around the world of the re-election of our Superior General. He estimated that using the Internet at the General Assembly saved considerable time and expense, as compared to the more traditional means of communication. Think of how this means of communication could be used in times of crisis around the world. We can mobilize public opinion and speed much needed relief anywhere in the world.

E-mail

Before the General Assembly convened, some of us already had had the opportunity to use Internet technology in evangelization, in collaborating with other followers of Vincent, and in direct service to the poor. Although the Internet grows constantly in its ability to deliver information, e-mail continues to provide an important way for people to connect with each other.

Since 1996, St. John's University has hosted what is called an e-mail list which is named "Vincent." It permits English-speaking people with e-mail access and a

common interest in Vincent to communicate with each other. At present, about 400 people around the world share their thoughts and concerns. List members hail from the USA, Canada, Mexico, Panama, Brazil, Peru, the Philippines, Australia, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Turkey, Austria, Hungary, England, Germany, and Ireland. Some represent the international offices of the Vincent de Paul Society, the International Association of Charities, the General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission, the Generalate of the Daughters of Charity, representatives of various Seton communities, and more.

Our common bond is concern for the poor after the fashion of Vincent, Louise, Frederick, Elizabeth, and others of our heritage. Some days, there is no e-mail at all for the group. On other days, everyone will receive a message from someone in the group: perhaps a question, a thought, a book review, a prayer request. Discussions include practical matters: how should one respond to a request for help when one is almost certain that money will be used for drink or drugs? What strategies seem to be having the greatest impact on bringing about systemic change? Frequently the input from other corners of the world puts a global perspective on issues being discussed.

The archives of this e-mail list show the wide and deep interests of list members and the unexpected opportunities for collaboration. Recently someone needed help translating into English notices about a Vincentian youth meeting in South America; someone else needed resources in Spanish about setting up Spanish-speaking Vincent de Paul groups in the United States. E-mail to the list provided documents and details about the beatification of Frederick Ozanam and a calendar change for the international meeting of the International Association of Charities (AIC). In January 1999, the Provincial of Colombia, Gabriel Naranjo, C.M., sent word to the Vincent e-mail list of the plight of the Vincentian Family in with wake of the earthquake there. As a result, many members around the world came to its aid. Not only did some of the other branches of the family make major contributions directly as a result of this post, but also many smaller groups generated smaller gifts through a variety of fund-raising efforts in their schools, etc. And we have mourned the death of giants, such as Sr. Irene Kraus, D.C., a nationally recognized pioneer in the field of health care in the United States.

It has been a valuable tool in fostering collaboration, mutual support and formation in mission and charism.

Web sites

While each day seems to bring more Vincentian sites on line, I would draw your attention to some of the other more developed sites, especially those focused on the wider family.

To the author's knowledge _ and perhaps because it is closest to his backyard _ the first site attempting to encompass all branches of the Vincentian Family was begun under the auspices of the Vincentian Center for Church and Society at St. John's University in New York in December 1995 (<http://vincentian.stjohns.edu>). Now this and other sites have spread the story of Vincent and his followers as they serve the poor. There is a very well developed Vincentian Family Site originating in Spain (<http://www.familia-vicenciana.org/>). This Spanish language site is very

attractively presented and provides excellent background material on various branches of the Vincentian Family. It is also a rich source of graphics for these branches.

The list could go on and on with examples from other countries and languages describing specific works of the Congregation. For a further listing of Vincentian sites see the links page on the www.famvin.org site. We are continuing a long heritage not only of evangelization and direct service of the poor but of creativity unto infinity in the service of mission.

The Web allows for inexpensive storage, transmittal and retrieval of documents and graphics. The Web also can provide e-mail access and the ability to "converse" by way of keyboard between two or more people who are linked to the Internet at the same time from different places around the world. It sounds incredible, especially taking into account that the main cost _ aside from Internet access _ is the price of a local telephone call. But it is happening; thousands of people are "chatting" in just this way while you read this sentence.

The Center for International Formation intends to use the famvin web site to provide information and study materials helpful for charism formation programs around the world. These may include a Web-based "Virtual Tour of Vincent's Paris" and a Virtual Vincentian Museum which will allow worldwide access to many of the treasures of the Maison-Mère with its Archives and Relic Room.

Even as this article is being written there are plans to revise the General Assembly web site. It will no longer be merely a site for the General Assembly of the Congregation but a site which can be used by the entire Vincentian Family. Each branch of the worldwide family will have its own section on the site. The General Assembly section will be moved to the section pertaining to the Congregation of the Mission.

At the recent meeting in Rome of the leaders of the various branches of the worldwide Vincentian Family, all agreed to identify the web sites connected with their apostolates. These sites will then be "linked" to the appropriate section on the www.famvin.org web site. Each branch will be responsible for the content development and updating of its own sites. In effect the www.famvin.org site will become a gateway to whatever information each branch wishes to make available to the world. As such it should greatly facilitate awareness of each other and the works we are engaged in. This is an important step towards greater collaboration.

The section of this site devoted to the Congregation of the Mission will contain much additional information which is being developed. The site will provide easy access to the writings of Vincent, Louise, etc., as well as a collection of their images in art. CIF, as noted above, already has a section of this site. Over the next year it is expected the *Vincentiana* and other relevant publications, especially of the Curia, will be available.

A further phase in the development of the site will allow greater inter-activity. We can anticipate a worldwide family calendar in which each group can post notice and a description of its major international, regional and national meetings. This should facilitate planning for major events.

New Justice Issues

We must also seize opportunities to look with fresh eyes at the needs of the poor. Just as Vincent saw new needs arising out of the poverty that came with the abandonment of the poor country people and the rise of the cities, so also we must recognize the new dimensions of poverty in an information age.

Roger Cardinal Mahoney of Los Angeles points to "a statistical correlation between the lack of information technology in the less developed countries and the poverty in those countries." He aptly describes an "Information Apartheid" that develops as few of the world's people have access to increasingly necessary means of communication and learning and even earning a living.

Perhaps a simpler way of stating this: We are fond of quoting Vincent, "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. But teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime." But all this presumes that he has fishing tools to fish and a place to fish. Lacking these, all the knowledge in the world will not produce the next day's catch. Having information technology at one's disposal _ having access both to the tools and the knowledge is one aspect of the long term solution.

As Vincentians, some provinces more than others are strongly positioned to attract, train, and deploy resources to respond to what Cardinal Mahoney describes as "new justice issues." Is not this encompassed in the General Assembly's call for provinces blessed with more resources to share with those who have less? We must work together, both those who use technology to speak on behalf of the poor and those who seek to help the poor speak in their own voice.

No one at the previous General Assembly, held in 1986, foresaw the technological developments that shape our world today. We can only guess at what the developments might bring for 2004. But we know this: these changes will have tremendous impact directly and indirectly, positively and negatively, on the poor we are committed to serve.

Will the unstoppable growth of information technology be a further cause of marginalization of the poor? The poor have a right to sit at the table of the emerging measure of wealth and power _ information. It may well be that we need to re-imagine Lazarus as sitting at a distance from this new table of power begging for the crumbs that will be necessary to gain any measure of control over his destiny.

The recent approval of NGO (non-governmental organization) status for the Congregation at the UN will serve as the beginning of a Justice and Peace portion on the revised famvin site. This can be done in conjunction with the AIC and their deep involvement in NGO activities.

Evangelization

The opportunities for evangelization are manifold in what the Pope several times refers to as the "new areopagus."

Seekers from around the world are turning to the Internet looking for the spiritual dimension lacking in their lives. The Evangelical denominations have realized this and are rapidly evangelizing cyberspace. I have been amazed at the number of "hits" (as visits to a web site are called) to "virtual retreat houses." And who knows whether what has begun as a search for meaning may even lead to a vocation or some other form of service. Online contact is often the first step in the journey to a more personal encounter with a wisdom figure.

In her formal reflections, the Church has long acknowledged that communication media have a role in fostering community and in spreading the Gospel. "The media of social communication can contribute a great deal to human unity" (*Communio et Progressio*, # 9). "The Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect. It is through them that she proclaims `from the housetops' the message of which she is the depositary" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, # 45, 1975). "Since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church's authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the `new culture' created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the `new culture' originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques, and a new psychology" (*Redemptoris Missio*, # 37, 1990).

Will not this evangelization be part of the long-range solution to poverty as more and more people come to understand we cannot have God as Father without loving our sisters and brothers?

Opportunities

What does this mean on a practical basis?

The Bishops' Conference in Peru has said it well, "Social communication is the new global form of love of neighbor and people. It is a love shown mainly through information and formation, helping people to think rather than suggesting how to think, assisting them in making choices and in their quest for personhood" (Bishops' Conference of Peru).

Just as Vincent once mobilized volunteers from the pulpit, we now have opportunities to use the Internet to help in gathering, forming, and supporting volunteers of all ages. A decade ago Pope John Paul challenged us "Whether we are young or old, let us rise to the challenge of new discoveries and technologies by bringing to them a moral vision rooted in our religious faith, in our respect for the human person, and our commitment to transform the world in accordance with God's plan. On this World Communications Day, let us pray for wisdom in using the potential of the `computer age' to serve man's human and transcendent calling, and thus give glory to the Father from whom all good things come."

As I look at the Fifth Commitment of the General Assembly, it seems to me that it may well be a primary key in moving forward on our other commitments.

Wider use of information technology can facilitate the planning and networking that underlie and support effective collaboration. Electronic communication will never replace face-to-face meetings, but much can be accomplished in collaboration _ and at far less expense _ using emerging technologies. So many causes, such as AIDS, have no geographic bounds. The solutions also must transcend national boundaries.

People around the world who share Vincentian values can learn from each other and, together, find ways of enhancing and improving direct service to the poor.

This is what all the commitments of the General Assembly are about. Information technology is a tool in the service of these commitments.