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To the Artists of our Vincentian Family

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

I am delighted that you are meeting in these days to share your gifts and your experience as artists in the Vincentian Family. I am very grateful for your invitation to say a few words to you today and genuinely regret that I cannot be there with you personally.

Pope John Paul II, in a letter that he wrote to artists in 1999, said this:

With loving regard, the Divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of God's own surpassing wisdom, calling him or her to share in God's creative power.

So first, I thank God for the gifts you have been given. Your gifts as artists are a share in the divine artistry, the creative word that God is always speaking in the world. As God sat back and rested on the seventh day, the Creator looked at the masterpiece we call the universe, rejoiced in it, and knew that it was very, very good. It was beautiful.

The theme of beauty is decisive for the artist. St. Augustine, meditating on human existence, stated: "We cannot help loving what is beautiful."¹ The artist sees the beauty that lies at the core of creation and at the heart of the human person and gives expression to the transcendent mystery that underlies it. Poets, writers, painters, sculptors, musicians, architects, actors appreciate how beautiful life really is. The rest of us are often too distracted to notice. Perhaps the saints too notice, because the psalmist sings out²: "One thing I ask of the Lord, this I seek: that I may gaze on the beauty of the Lord and contemplate his temple." Of course that beauty is often hidden. But artists find beauty in both light and darkness, laughter and pain, life and death.

As you gather together today, may I suggest to you briefly three things:

1. A word on spirituality. Simplicity was the virtue St. Vincent loved the most.³ He called it his gospel.⁴ He proposed simplicity as a keystone for the

¹*Confessions* 14.3; *On Music*, 6.13.

²Ps 27:4.

³SV I, 284.

⁴SV IX, 606.

spirituality of every group he founded. In most of the great philosophical, theological, and spiritual traditions, beauty is intimately linked with simplicity. The most beautiful things have a unity, a coherence about them that expresses transcendent truth. The one, the beautiful and the true are all manifestations of the depths of the mystery of God.

I therefore encourage you to be simple yourselves in your spirituality. Contemplate the mystery of beauty as it lies in God's person and in the human person, and express it with a creativity that reaches out toward the infinite. Francis of Assisi expressed his prayer in these words: "You are beauty ... You are beauty!"⁵ St. Augustine, in a contemplative moment, cried out: "Beautiful is God, the Word of God. God is beautiful in heaven, beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb; beautiful in his parents' arms, beautiful in his miracles, beautiful in his sufferings; beautiful in inviting to life; beautiful in not worrying about death, beautiful in giving his life and beautiful in taking it up again: God is beautiful on the cross, beautiful in the tomb, beautiful in heaven. Listen to God's song with understanding, and let not the weakness of the flesh distract your eyes from the splendour of his beauty."⁶

I often talk about making our prayer "something beautiful for God and attractive to the young." I thank you today for helping us to pray as members of the Vincentian Family, and I ask you to continue to use your gifts generously to make our prayer beautiful. Paintings, statues, icons, music, poetry, drama, even just good reading are art forms that make prayer and liturgy come alive. Fifteen years ago at a college in England I heard a young woman, a member of the theater company, read the part of the woman at the well from John's gospel during a Lenten Eucharist. I remember it to this day. I encourage you to use your artistic gifts to express the deepest yearnings of the human heart. That is one of the principal aims of liturgy, and in the Christian tradition artists have always played a fundamental role in the expression of the Christian community's spirituality.

2. A word about the poor. The poor are often not just poor materially, but also culturally. I suggest to you today that, as artists, you have wonderful gifts to offer them. It is helpful to recall that in previous centuries drama and opera often provided space for the poor as part of the audience. Frescos and mosaics are still often referred to as the catechism of the poor of the Middle Ages. Art nourishes the soul. It opens the mind, the heart, the spirit to beauty. It raises consciousness and in that sense it is utterly

⁵*Lodi di Dio Altissimo*, verses 7 and 10.

⁶St. Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, 44, 3, as quoted in Timothy Radcliffe, *Sing A New Song: The Christian Vocation* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1999) 281.

liberating. A question that I pose to you is this: How can you, as artists, share your gifts directly with the poor? I am certain that they will love your gifts. When I was a boy in the sixth grade, a creative teacher took us to the music room once a week and introduced us to opera. I was only 11 years old. I still remember all of the pieces we listened to, many of which she taught us to sing. To this day I consider that as one of the great gifts in my life. Are there similar ways in which you can share the experience of beauty with the poor?

3. A word about youth today. All great art is an expression of the depth of the human spirit. Real beauty breathes spirit. It expresses soul, passion, longing for transcendence, yearning for meaning, for wholeness, for joy. So I encourage you as my brothers and sisters, artists in the Vincentian Family: Pass on the beauty that you contemplate to generations still to come, especially to the young. The beauty you share with them will stir them to wonder! It will draw them to contemplate the same mystery that is at work actively in your heart as artists. Help the young to nourish within themselves the life of the spirit. Genuine art will draw them into its depths. Stimulate them to contemplate beauty, as did St. Augustine, who expressed his prayer so well: “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you!”⁷

Dostoyevsky once wrote: “Beauty will save the world.”⁸ I hope that the beauty that you express will be a transparent sign that God is alive in the world and that the glory of the Risen Lord shines out like the rising sun.

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⁷*Confessions* 10, 27.

⁸F. Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Part III, Chapter 5.