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SOME OPPORTUNITIES FOR CREATIVITY IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION TODAY

Jesus was very aware that works speak to us more powerfully than words, that witness moves us more forcefully than commands, and that *symbols* engage us more profoundly than sermons. In fact, in reflecting about creativity, this was the point that St. Vincent most admired about Jesus. It is the origin of a text that is one of the most popular sayings of St. Vincent today and which appears on the front page of our Vincentian Family web site. The context is quite different from what we normally think of when we use this text. St. Vincent was speaking to a dying brother, encouraging him to trust in God's mercy. After describing many of the signs of God's tender love, he told the brother that Jesus, foreseeing his death, did not want to leave his followers alone, fearing that in his absence their hearts would grow cold. And so, he tells the brother, "since love is creative even to infinity ... Jesus instituted this venerable sacrament which serves as food and drink for us ... Because love is eager to do everything it can, he so willed it."¹

THE CREATIVITY OF ST. VINCENT

I suspect that Vincent himself would deny that he was creative. Many historians tell us that he was not a particularly original thinker. But my own judgment is that St. Vincent was remarkably creative in this sense: he listened well; he knew a good idea when he heard one and he was inventive in putting good ideas into practice. He had the capacity to shape good ideas into concrete forms, many of which have lasted for hundreds of years. I offer you three rapid examples.

First, in 1617, in order to meet the desperate needs of the poor of his parish, he founded the Confraternities of Charity, what have often been called the Ladies of Charity. He wrote rules for them. He worked at their formation. They still exist today, 384 years later, as the International Association of Charities. They have 260,000 members in 45 different countries. In many places they are a wonderfully dynamic group that works in concrete, self-help projects among the poor.

Secondly, the Daughters of Charity were a revolutionary foundation. St. Vincent was able to do what Francis de Sales and others were unable to do. St. Vincent and St. Louise fashioned this new type of community slowly and subtly, studiously avoiding the canonical bonds that kept women enclosed in the cloister. Vincent told the sisters that they would have:

¹SV XI, 146.

- *for monastery only the houses of the sick and the place where the Superioress resides,*
- *for cell a rented room,*
- *for chapel the parish church,*
- *for cloister the streets of the city,*
- *for enclosure obedience, going only to the homes of the sick or places necessary for their service,*
- *for grill the fear of God,*
- *for veil holy modesty.²*

Vincent and Louise released into great cities and into small villages what would soon become an army of generous women who vowed to give their whole lives to God in the service of the sick poor. Millions came to imitate the Daughters of Charity as countless apostolic societies sprang up in the Church after the model of this new creation. The service of generous Daughters of Charity over more than 360 years has brought health to the sick, knowledge to the uninstructed, a home to the abandoned, food to the hungry, life to those walking in the shadow of death.

Third, Vincent was one of the greatest reformers of the clergy in the 17th century, a century noted for reformers of the clergy. He founded 20 seminaries in his lifetime. He took part in the Council of Conscience for a decade, advising the king on the selection of bishops. Most of the great spiritual leaders of the time flocked to the Tuesday Conferences which he organized. Abelly states that more than 12,000 ordinands made retreats at St. Lazare during Vincent's lifetime.

As you know, Henri de Maupas du Tour, the preacher at his funeral, was so struck by Vincent's creativity that he stated: "He just about transformed the face of the Church."

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CREATIVITY TODAY

Today I would like to suggest some creative possibilities for us as Vincentians. As I do so, I am very aware of my limitations, but I am certain that you yourselves, in dialogue with one another, will come up with much more creative, more concrete possibilities than I will. So, I offer these ideas trusting in your own understanding. I hope you will regard these as simply a few thoughts to prime the pump for discussion.

Let me begin by saying this: a person does not always know that he is making a creative beginning. In fact, Vincent was surely not aware that the seeds he was planting would one day be great trees. He began the Daughters of Charity – it is so easy to forget this – as parish sodalities in which poor country girls could do some of the hard, hands-on work that richer Ladies of Charity could not do. Vincent never

²SV X, 661.

envisioned that they would become the largest Community that the Church had ever seen and that hundreds of other Communities would be born throughout the world imitating the Daughters of Charity.

What I am trying to say is this. Creative beginnings are usually recognized only later when they have grown into full-scale creative works. The seed is beautiful only in the flowering tree. So I say to you today: sow many seeds. Let your ears be open, as were the ears of St. Vincent, to new ideas. Take them and use them yourself. Support new initiatives of others. In these challenging times, encourage creativity, and be courageous and persistent in putting creative ideas into practice.

1. *Service to our Vincentian Family.*

Here I offer you just a brief picture of our Vincentian Family at present. Then let me suggest to you some opportunities for creativity as members of that Family.

NAME	DATE OF FOUNDATION	NUMBER OF MEMBERS
International Association of Charities	1617	260,000
Congregation of the Mission	1625	4,000
Daughters of Charity	1633	23,000
Society of St. Vincent de Paul	1833	530,000
Vincentian Youth Groups	1847	62,000
MISEVI	1999	30
Association of the Miraculous Medal	1909	1 million registered

Will the third millennium see the blossoming of the role of lay men and women in the Church? Whenever we find ourselves wavering about the importance of the laity in the Church's missionary activity, we should reexamine the Pauline letters and the Book of the Acts. These will rapidly dispel any doubts. Paul says that all the Gentile communities are indebted to Priscilla and Aquila, a married couple.³ It would be hard to find higher praise than that.

These two great missionaries appear on four occasions in the New Testament. What do we know about them? We know that they were:

- lay missionaries
- a married couple
- Jewish Christians (converts)

³Rom 16:4.

- expelled from Rome during the persecution of Claudius
- living in exile in Corinth
- working as tent makers (the same occupation that Paul had)
- hospitable to Paul, taking him into their home
- his companion missionaries in Ephesus and really the founders of the Church there⁴
- risking their lives for his sake
- hosts of the local Church in their own home (a house-church)
- catechizers of the great missionary Apollos.

Paul and Luke regarded this couple as outstanding missionaries. They appear in the letter to the Romans, the first letter to the Corinthians, in the 18th chapter of Acts and at the end of the second letter to Timothy. Priscilla, whom Paul calls Prisca, is twice mentioned ahead of her husband; this seems to be an indication that she had a more important role to play in the missionary activity of the primitive Church than did her husband.

What are such lay ministers asking of us. I suggest three things.

First, formation. They hunger for it. They are constantly asking for it. No other request is addressed to me as Superior General more frequently than the request for formation.

Secondly, prayer. They want to learn to pray and they want to pray with us. In the wonderful document *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, published just over a year ago, Pope John Paul II states this: “Our Christian communities must become genuine ‘schools’ of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly ‘falls in love.’ Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God’s plan.”⁵

Thirdly, practical service. Encourage lay people to be inventive in discovering the deepest needs of those they serve. Pose the question often: What is this poor person asking concretely? What is the deepest need of the person who is crying out to me? What are the children in the school or in the orphanage where I visit or work calling out for? What is the sick person in his or her home really seeking? What is the AIDS patient’s acutest pain? Then help them be creative in ministering to those needs.

⁴Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul, A Critical Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 171.

⁵*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 33.

2. *Form youth groups.*

Is there any sector of society that Pope John Paul II has focused on more clearly than youth? Sixty-four percent of the world's population is under 25. Young people are the third millennium. It belongs to them. If the Church is to be fully alive in the third millennium, it will be because it is energized by young people who believe deeply. The young will be the evangelizers and the servants of the poor in the third millennium. Most of us will hardly be there. If statistics hold true, I will not survive the second decade of the third millennium. But today's young people will be alive and energy-filled long after that. And so I suggest to you today that there is no apostolic goal more important for the Church and for the Vincentian Family than to reach out to and to offer young people a vibrant, Christian, Vincentian formation. We who live in the Vincentian Family have a wonderful gift to offer the young. Transmit it to them joyfully and generously.

Walt Whitman, a great poet from my own country, wrote this:

*Youth, large, lusty, loving — youth full of grace, force, fascination....
Day full-blown and splendid — day of the immense sun, action, ambition,
laughter....*

What can we offer young people? The same three things: formation, prayer, practical service.

Today in many countries there is a strong emphasis on engaging young people in service. Our missions, many of our parishes, and the schools of the Daughters of Charity work wonderfully at challenging the young to channel their energies toward the service of the poor. Groups like MISEVI and the Vincentian Volunteers do this for longer periods of time. I encourage you to work intensely at the formation of these same young people. I encourage you too to teach them to pray. I encourage you to create opportunities for them to serve in our foreign missions.

Interestingly, whenever St. Vincent formed a group, he wrote a Rule for it. We are all familiar with the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission and also the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity, but if you take the 13th volume of Pierre Coste's works of St. Vincent, you will find that we still have 19 other rules that he wrote. Surely there were many more. These are all for lay people.

So I pose to you the question today: what should "Vincentian Youth" look like in your country? If you had to write a rule for Vincentian youth today, what would you write? What should their life be like? What should their formation be like? What should their prayer be like? What should their works be like?

Form youth groups. Say to them, in the words of the message of the recent synod:

You, young people, you are “sentinels of the morning.” ... How is the Lord of history asking you to build a civilization of love? You have a keen sense of what honesty and sincerity require. You do not want to be caught up into divisive ethnic struggles nor poisoned by the gangrene of corruption. How can we be disciples of Jesus together and put into practice Christ’s teaching on the Mount of the Beatitudes?

3. *Champion the pastoral use of technology on behalf of the poor.*

Third world countries lament, often rightly, that progress in technology has meant further riches for the rich and an ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor.

The Congregation of the Mission, and the Vincentian Family as a whole, has responded remarkably rapidly to the call to get online. All of our provinces can be reached by e-mail. Many of our works and institutions have expertise and well-developed web sites. These resources present us with a number of challenges.

1. First, can we use our Vincentian technological resources to draw others to work with us in serving the poor and investigating the causes of poverty?
2. Can we continue to train confreres in computer technology?
3. Can we seek grants for setting up computer learning centers in the poorest countries of the world? Would some of the large foundations, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, be willing to fund such educational projects? I visited such a computer center in Madagascar, which many regard as the poorest country in the world. The students there were already very good in computer technology.
4. We often think of computers as the tool of the young, but I have seen many older, retired confreres who have learned to use computers very well. Can we devise ways in which older confreres can help in the service of the poor through computer technology?
5. Can we design web sites that are really attractive to the young? Are young people, who spend so many hours online, attracted by our Vincentian sites? Can we be ministers to the young online? Could we win a prize for the site that is most attractive to young people?

With computers, age and health and distance are re-dimensioned. A sick man’s room can become his pulpit. A computer becomes his microphone for preaching the good news to others.

There is a bubbling cauldron of new technology in the world. English is fast becoming the world's technological language. Internet is making this happen. Can we use this powerful instrument in the service of the poor?

4. *Create a vocation culture.*

Most of us in this room grew up a vocation culture, though it went unanalyzed for the most part, as do most cultural phenomena. Can we contribute to recreating a vocation culture in your country?

What are the elements in a vocation culture? In other words, if a young person is growing up in a vocation culture, what is it that supports his choice to become a Vincentian? I suggest six elements:

1. A positive image of our men, our life together, our prayer, and our ministries in the Congregation of the Mission. This element lies very much in our hands.
2. A positive image of priesthood and brotherhood. This element does not lie completely in our hands, but we can influence it.
3. Support for vocations within a community of faith. Of course, a young person's family is especially important in this regard. But support can also come in schools, or it can come from youth groups in a parish. We can help create such communities. We can also try to involve parents in vocation ministry.
4. Personal contact with role models and some concrete way of experiencing their life, prayer, and ministry. This lies within our control, especially if we have houses where young people can at times be with the confreres, pray with them, and share their works.
5. Invitations, both implicit and explicit, "to come and see," as John's gospel puts it.⁶ Such invitations can be accompanied gradually by personal and vocational counseling.
6. Prayer for vocations. Jesus says it explicitly: "Pray the Lord of the harvest that he send workers into the harvest."⁷ This too lies within our control. We can pray ourselves and we can invite parents and young people to pray for vocations to the priesthood and brotherhood.

5. *Creating a gospel-centered environment.*

⁶Jn 1:39.

⁷Mt 9:38; Lk 10:2.

St. Vincent was incredibly active. The Church holds him up as a model for those engaged in concrete, practical work among the poor. But it is striking that his contemporaries regarded him as a contemplative. His spirituality was deeply evangelical. He focused on the person of Jesus as revealed in the scriptures and cited his words again and again. “Learn from me that I am gentle and humble of heart.”⁸ “Be wise as serpents but simple as doves.”⁹ “If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”¹⁰

I suggest to you today that there is no more important service that we can offer to the Vincentian Family than the creation of a gospel-centered environment. I say this to each of you as individuals and I say it to the Congregation as a whole. Our works are very important, but our lives are even more important. What we do for the poor will have an enormous impact on the future, but what we are for the poor, the spirit we communicate to them, what we witness to them is even more crucial, drawing them to have hope in the future, to sense that they are being liberated from the bonds that hold them back, to find peace in their own hearts and to share peace with others.

And so the challenge is this: can we build local communities where evangelical charity reigns among us and then radiates out to the poor; where truth is spoken among us with simplicity, humility, and constancy and is spoken with those outside in the same way; where we engage in prayer peacefully, faithfully, and communally and then share our prayer naturally with others too; where we support one another and enjoy one another as friends and then share that friendship with the poor who surround us; where we listen well to each other and discern the will of God together and are also able to listen well to the poor and discern the will of God with them; where we encourage one another to renounce immediate gratification for the sake of more important goals and are able to manifest to those around us by our lives what really are life’s most important goals; where we are creative in expressing forms of love that are more lasting than sexual union and so witness to others that there are other very important vocations besides marriage?

I encourage you today, my brothers, to be creative in living the gospel yourself and in forming gospel communities. There is no greater gift that you can give to the Church and to our Vincentian Family.

Those are just five possibilities. Of course, there are many others.

John Rybolt recently reminded me of other traditional works that come from

⁸Mt 11:29.

⁹Mt 10:16.

¹⁰Mt 16:24, Mk 8:34, Lk 9:23.

the time of St. Vincent, like prison ministry and retreats. Can we find creative ways of ministering to prisoners or of helping work toward reform of the penal system? Confreres in some countries have already made creative contributions in this regard.

Can we create a specifically Vincentian form of retreat, something briefer that rivals the spiritual exercises in the Ignatian tradition?

No other era in history has known more migrants than our own. Can we be creative in ministering to waves of migrants that continue to roll across the borders of so many of our countries?

As you know, the worldwide Vincentian Family has launched a communal effort entitled, “The Globalization of Charity: The Fight Against Hunger,” beginning on September 27, 2001, and ending on September 27, 2003. Can we spread this campaign to lay people in all the institutions where we serve?

To do all of these things, of course, we need not just creativity. We need to be mobile. We need to support one another in community. We need to join one another in daily prayer that we might be nourished by the life of the Lord. We need to network with other branches of the Vincentian Family. Mobility, community support, prayer, networking – these are the conditions for creative ministry within the Congregation of the Mission.

More than two decades ago, long before most of us began to speak about the third millennium, a prophetic voice uttered these words as he envisioned the 21st century:

It helps now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church’s mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

That is what we are about: We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capability.

Those are the words of Oscar Romero spoken shortly before he was martyred in San Salvador in 1980.

My brothers, I say to you in closing: Go! I love the final words of Mark’s

gospel. Jesus, taking leave of the apostles, turns to them and says: “Go. Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to every creature.”¹¹ The key to being a missionary is mobility. Go, and be a presence of the Lord in the lives of the most abandoned. Go, and assist them in their deepest spiritual and human needs. Go wherever the Lord asks. Go, go, go, and be a sign of the Lord’s peace and of his self-giving love.

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¹¹Mk 16:15.