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The Vincentian Family in the World

*by Benjamín Romo, C.M.
Delegate for the Vincentian Family*

Branches of the same trunk

The followers of St. Vincent enter the new millennium conscious of being part of the Vincentian Family, especially for three motives:

- a common origin;
- a mission all of us share: to serve the poor both spiritually and materially;
- a common lifestyle, marked by simplicity, humility and a practical and effective charity.

Delegate for the Vincentian Family

In November 1998, the Superior General, following a petition from the General Assembly, asked me to collaborate in the animation of the Vincentian Family. I began this job in January 1999, a service which consists especially in maintaining communication with the different branches of the Vincentian Family and in making visits of animation and formation in the countries where they exist.

All began with St. Vincent

We all know about the giant work St. Vincent organized during his life, having recruited men and women, young and old, rich and poor. It was really an army of people ready to serve Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ.

St. Vincent made direct contact with the poor and sent anybody God sent him to the poor. Once he wrote to St. Louise:

Go, Mademoiselle, in the name of Our Lord. I beg of divine mercy that it accompany you, that it be your consolation on the road, your shade in the heat, your shelter in the rain and cold, a soft bed in your weariness, strength in your labors, and finally, it bring you back in perfect health and full of good works.¹

¹SV I, 73-74

As he sent her, St. Vincent, from 1617 until his death, sent many priests, laity, men and women to serve the poor, since Christ is in them and to serve them is to love God in an effective way.

The charism of St. Vincent has lasted all these years. The Holy Spirit keeps on raising servants of the poor after the Vincentian style: thousands of laity and consecrated religious desire to live their faith, surrendering to God by serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor, convinced that “we cannot assure ourselves of eternal happiness in any better way than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of Providence and in renunciation of ourselves to follow Jesus.”²

Our Constitutions

The Constitutions of 1980, speaking of the end of the Congregation, noted clearly a mission which has now become an urgent task:

*The members ... help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor.*³

By the Constitutions we are called to form clergy and laity toward a very concrete and clear end: participation in a greater way in the evangelization of the poor. This is fulfilling what St. Vincent used to say: “It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him.”⁴

The 1998 General Assembly

The paths of God are full of surprises for those who recognize that they are poor and hope for all from God. The Holy Spirit, at the end of the last millennium, wanted to prepare us for entry in the new millennium with a renewed spirit and with new paths to the mission. The Pope reminds us:

*Launch out into the deep! This call echos also today for us and invites us to recall with gratitude the past, to live the present passionately, and to open ourselves confidently to the future: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and always (Heb 13:8).*⁵

In this same sense, the theme of our 1998 General Assembly was: The Worldwide Vincentian Family and the Challenges for the Mission in the Third

²SV III, 392

³C 1, 3°

⁴SV XII, 262

⁵John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, No. 1 (6 January 2001).

Millennium. During the Assembly we were given new experiences and new ideas. We can mention the presence and participation of lay Vincentians who invited us to live in the spirit of the Vincentian Family, a spirit of collaboration, of common formation, of participation, and of a shared charism.

At the closing of the Assembly, the Superior General sent the entire Congregation on a new and clear mission:

*Go, tell the confreres confidently that with the members of our family we can be an enormous force in the service of the poor.*⁶

The 1998 General Assembly sent all the members of the Congregation to collaborate with other members of the Vincentian Family, responding together to the cry of the poor. Our mission does not end with just the personal or community surrendering to the poor. It goes farther and calls us to seek concrete ways of involving others, men and women, young and old, so that they, by discovering the richness of our charism, will serve the poor.

After three years, we now pause to analyze three realities:

- steps taking in different countries,
- possibilities and opportunities we now have to spread the Vincentian charism,
- dreams of opening together paths which the Lord wants the entire Vincentian Family to take.

So we ask:

What are the ways indicated by the 1998 General Assembly, in relation to the Vincentian Family, for the province, local communities, and confreres of my country, over the last three years?

I would like to reflect with you on the three aforementioned realities:

1. What has been done? A few facts:

a. On the level of collaboration

The desire for collaboration among branches of the Vincentian Family is a reality. Many signs indicate this. I cite only a few:

⁶*Vincentiana*, No. 4-5/1998 (July-October), 401.

- Moments for growing in mutual acquaintance have been held.
- Times for reflection and study of different types of poverty have been set aside, in order to seek practical and effective solutions together.
- Times for prayer, reflection, and gathering, to which those responsible nationally, taking advantage of the feast of St. Vincent, have been organized. Each time these have resulted better. They have helped in knowledge, unity, formation, and in mutual support in service to the poor.
- National Coordination of the Vincentian Family has been set up in more than 20 countries, which has resulted in greater mutual acquaintance and has created conditions for common formation and collaboration.
- A Coordination Commission of the Vincentian Family has been created in Latin America. Its function is: *to serve as a liaison between general and national Directors, stimulating unity and integration among the branches of the Vincentian Family for a better service to the poor, respecting the identity and autonomy of each.*⁷
- “Vincentian Youth: Rome 2000” was held, with youth from over 50 countries attending, to spend a week in Vincentian formation, prayer, and togetherness.
- Common prayer, prayed as a family.

b. Our formation in relation to the laity of the Vincentian Family

Vincentian laity request us to offer them formation. This is their clearest and most urgent petition.

Many positive steps have been taken in this sense. I mention a few:

- Editing of the book: *Spirituality for Lay Vincentians*, which is underway and to which different branches of the Vincentian Family have contributed.
- Organization of weeks of Vincentian formation, whose themes have been centered on Vincentian spirituality and action. Also, courses on Church social doctrine.

⁷Consejo Latinoamericano de la Familia Vincentina, Reglamento Interno, art. 3.

- Joint efforts for Vincentian formation, e.g.: a week of study in Salamanca, formation meeting by CLAPVI, groups for Vincentian animation in different countries.
- More formation material. Sharing it with other groups.
- Vincentian Family Web Site, now an instrument for members of the Vincentian Family. John Freund's work on this is to be admired.
- A "Document for Moderators of the AIC" has been drawn up and is proving very useful in clarifying the role of the priest and the Daughter of Charity in relation to the laity.
- A similar document is in the works for moderators of JMV.
- In July 2002 a "Vincentian Month for Moderators of Lay Groups of the Vincentian Family" will be held.
- In response to concerns about formation, a workshop for moderators of different Vincentian Family groups in Africa was held in the Republic of the Congo.

c. Concrete activities in favor of the poor.

- Participation in common projects has been increasing in many countries in a spontaneous manner, as a response to knowledge and common formation. Projects cannot be started without a family atmosphere where knowledge, prayer, reflection, and formation in common exist as a basis for joint action on projects of service to the poor.
- Project on "The Globalization of Charity: The Fight Against Hunger," coming out of the Paris meeting of leaders of the Vincentian Family this year.
- Help in emergencies (Mozambique and Central America).

Question:

What steps have been taken in your countries towards collaboration, formation, and projects in common with the Vincentian Family?

2. Reality and projects of some groups

AIC:

Reality:

- First group founded by St. Vincent (1617).
- Present today in 50 countries with 260,000 members.
- For the past few years has worked hard at the self-promotion of its members, enabling them to reach the most abandoned, and in their organized labors.
- www.famvin.org/aic

Motto:

Change is not an option, but an exigence.

Lines of action:

To become a critical and prophetic presence in society, an unceasing source of good news and a transforming force:

- in the Association
- for the poor
- in society.

Only by means of a firmer spirit of belonging to the Association, of experiencing direct contact with the poor, and of the participation of the entire society, will we be able to contribute to an international effort to eliminate poverty.⁸

SSVdP:

Projects and hopes:

- To advance in organization and professionalism of the international headquarters: the SSVdP is setting up a new administration which it hopes to have functioning in Rome within two years.
- To create basic elements of formation.
- To intensify internal communication.
- A project for information and formation of the SSVdP in Mandarin.
- Create a network of communication and formation on the web site: www.ozanet.org

⁸This sentence is taken textually from “Documento para facilitar la aplicación de las líneas programáticas,” March 1999.

JMV:

Reality:

Present in 49 countries. Great growth and organization over the last three years. The Daughters of Charity and the confreres have contributed significantly to the growth of the Association.

Achievements:

- International Assembly 2000. Two results: election of the first International Council and editing a Final Document.
- Creation of an International Secretariat in Madrid.
- Creation of a web site: www.secretariadojmv.org

Projects:

- Consolidate an international structure.
- Seek ways of putting into practice the Final Document in all countries.
- Elaboration of programs and material of formation.

AMM:

Reality:

- Seven countries with organized and recognized AMM.
- Five are drawing up their own Statutes.
- It exists in many countries where the CM and DCs are present.

Projects and hopes:

- Meeting in Rome (October 2001) of moderators and lay leaders.
- Strong efforts to establish in many other countries.
- Great possibility of the Association becoming larger with a significant evangelizing possibility.
- www.amm.org

MISEVI:

Reality:

- Officially recognized by the Church in 1999.
- In January 2001 held its first General Assembly: 16 countries represented. Its results: creation of an International Council and a Final Document.

Projects:

- Put the Final Document in practice.
- Maintain contact with countries interested in starting the Association.
- Continue to offer the entire Vincentian Family concrete ways to practice the missionary dimension of the Vincentian charism.
- Like the AMM, we hope to see this Association grow within the Vincentian Family, since the laity have the ability to strongly impel the missionary dimension of the Vincentian charism. Young Vincentians need this Association.
- www.misevi.org

The Superior General addressed the Visitatrixes of the Daughters of Charity in Rome:

I encourage you to look at the newest member of our Vincentian Family, MISEVI, Vincentian Lay Missionaries. It has a well worked out statute for sending people to mission countries to offer their service to the poor for from three to five years. Can MISEVI come to exist in everyone of your countries?⁹

Question:

What Vincentian lay groups exist in my country? What can I do to establish MISEVI and AMM?

3. Challenges

Looking to the future with desire to encourage our working with the laity, we surely are faced with many tasks to accomplish. Let us look at four realities, out of many more, which exist and are worth considering.

d. Studying the Vincentian charism here and now in our history.

Our charism is a dynamic and living reality, an interior stimulus, a light to illumine a reality formerly hidden. The problem with the charism is that we see it as backward or nostalgic, or as an unreal, futuristic dreamlike entity. The correct way is to live it right now and in those places the Lord indicates, in the manner adequate for those who need it. As the Spanish poet, León Felipe, wrote:

No one went yesterday, nor goes today, nor will go tomorrow toward God by the same paths I go. For each one there is a new ray of sunlight, a virgin path to God.

⁹Robert P. Maloney, C.M., Conference to the Visitatrixes of the Daughters of Charity, May 19, 2000.

The last General Assembly asked us to review our apostolic projects and community structures, seeking sincerely roads to conversion and fidelity to our Founder.¹⁰ We need a new language, that of the poor, which will identify us with the poor.

e. Encourage formation.

The last Assembly also told us:

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.¹¹

This means, among other things, being alert to learn from the laity, to listen, to accompany, to collaborate with them, in a mentality of Church, the “people of God.” Collaboration with the laity with faith in their possibilities and potentialities demands of us Vincentian missionaries attitudes of humility and attentive listening to them. It also means breaking with any clericalist attitude which favors paternalism and dependance. It signifies development of formation programs on missionary spirituality for laity, Vincentian spirituality which will affect family, social, labor, cultural, and political life. The laity ask us to reveal to them St. Vincent and his spirituality, and open to them the privilege of serving the poor.

f. Reaching the world of youth

Today’s youth are a great social force and evangelizing potential. They form a very numerous sector of society, especially in poorer countries. Many young people go through life searching for meaning, with a real thirst for God as well as for hope. Every branch of the Vincentian Family, including ourselves, has space for youth. To approach and listen to them, inviting them into our family, is possible and urgent.

We are challenged to create new groups within the branches of the Vincentian Family, especially among youth, inspiring them with our charism, that they also become servants and evangelizers in their own environments (school, university, world of labor, missions *ad gentes*). We must seek concrete ways to create local communities more open to the laity, and especially to youth, where we can share prayer and the apostolate of service with them

¹⁰Cf. *Vincentiana*, No. 4/5, July-October 1998. XXXIX General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, Convictions, No.3.

¹¹*Ibid.* Commitments, No. 1.

g. Forming, in ourselves, a mentality of collaboration

The Holy Spirit is moving us along the path of unity and of collaboration as a Family, respecting the autonomy of persons and groups. Our challenge is to work together against poverty, inequality, and the injustice which affect a great part of humanity: the poor; to act together in the struggle against the causes of poverty brought about by the exaggerated wealth of a few. The Vincentian Family united throughout the world will be able to inspire a worldwide struggle against hunger, poverty, injustice, corruption, and the loss of ethical values. Globalization, secularization, and other signs of the times, demand answers that are evangelical, concrete, and effective, to enable us to change all that is contrary to God's plan. The force of the Vincentian charism is revealing itself in the laity as a movement of the Holy Spirit which we are called on to encourage. We recall again the words of the Holy Father:

It means continuing a tradition of charity which has perdured for two millennia, but which today requires greater creativity. It is time for a new portrait of charity which promotes not only the efficacy of the helps offered, but which also brings us closer and more in solidarity with the sufferer, so that our gesture of aid be not felt as a humiliating alms, but as a fraternal sharing.¹²

The words of the Superior General, pronounced three years ago, are still urgent:

Go, tell the confreres confidently that with the members of our family we can be an enormous force in the service of the poor.¹³

(JOHN KENNEDY, C.M., translator)

¹²*Op. Cit.* No. 50.

¹³*Vincentiana*, No. 4-5/1998 (July-October), 401.