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## To Serve the Poor Spiritually and Corporally

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There are many ways of expressing the Vincentian charism. One way to define it is accompanying the poor in the construction of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is the center of Jesus' life and mission. It is the proclamation, by word and work, of God's victory over every form of evil. Jesus responds to people's experience of evil, the bad news, with the Good News that evil is being conquered. Paul VI put it like this:

*As the kernel and center of His Good News, Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is **liberation from everything that oppresses man** but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One, in the joy of knowing God and being known by Him, of seeing Him, and of being given over to Him (EN 9).*

The Church exists to evangelize (EN 14). It is within the context of that ecclesial mission that the Vincentian vocation to serve the poor corporally and spiritually has to be understood.<sup>1</sup> St. Vincent never tired of saying that we participate in the mission of Christ. We preach the Good News by word and work.

For Vincentians, charity and evangelization are inseparable. Our corporal and spiritual service is charity. We evangelize, make the Good News effective, through charity. In this talk I want to offer a few ideas about the spiritual and practical dimensions of charity. In reality these two dimensions cannot be neatly separated. For the sake clarity I have done so here.

### 1. The Spiritual Dimension

#### The encounter with others

Charity is an encounter between persons. It always has something to do with relationships, the way lives touch. For Vincentians it means entering

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<sup>1</sup> For other reflections, see: Jaime Corera, "Nueva Evangelización para Vicentinos Ayer y Hoy," *CLAPVI* 65 (1989), pp. 337-342; J. M. Ibáñez, "El Compromiso con la Justicia, Dimensión Esencial del Servicio Vicenciano" in *Justicia y Solidaridad con los Pobres en la Vocación Vicenciana*, (Salamanca: CEME, 1988), pp. 115-158; Alan McLellan, "Tradición Vicentina y Justicia Social en el Mundo de Hoy," *CLAPVI* 67 (1990) pp. 132-141; José Ubillús, "Nueva Evangelización," *CLAPVI* 76 (1992), pp. 214-228.

people's lives with God's love.<sup>2</sup> It is the concrete expression of meeting the poor as brothers and sisters and responding to their needs. We can pay people to do our work. But we can never replace the fraternal encounter with the poor. In every human encounter something happens to both parties. In the encounter with the poor something happens to them and something happens to us. What is Good News for them also becomes Good News for us.

### **What happens to the poor**

Charitable service touches the lives of the poor where they are most needy. At the very least it communicates a human concern for them as brothers and sisters. It alleviates their pain and suffering. When we go to the poor the focus of our attention is their needs and concerns. St. Vincent tells us that we are instruments of God's Providence and compassion. Frequently our works of charity are a witness to the presence of God's love. Our charity can provide an opportunity for people to hear God's message of salvation and experience his love.

### **What happens to us**

We say that the poor evangelize us. By that some people mean the so-called *good poor*, those who share in the midst of poverty and are examples of Christian living. The poor who are not so good, the ones that do not come to Church or live a moral life also evangelize us. They call us to love the unlovable. Charity here means expanding our horizons to include those who ordinarily we would not find attractive or agreeable. The encounter with those people evangelizes us because it points out where we need to grow in charity, humility and compassion.

Vincent says that the poor represent Christ for us. That is not a self-evident truth. It is a faith experience. When we go the poor, we see the poor. We attend to their needs. A prayerful reflection on those experiences enables us to encounter Christ presence there.<sup>3</sup> Another way of saying this is that if you open your life to the poor, Christ will enter the space to lead to salvation. If we listen attentively, he will speak his Word and point us in the direction of holiness.

## **2. The Practical Dimension**

The spiritual dimension of charity takes place within the practical

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<sup>2</sup> See: André Dodin, "Teología de la Caridad según San Vicente de Paúl" in *Vicente de Paúl y la Acción Caritativo'social*, (Salamanca: CEME, 1976), pp. 1ff.; G. Toscani, *Amore, Contemplazione, Teologia: Gesù Cristo Visto da San Vincenzo*, (Pinerolo: Alzani, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Ted Wiesner, "La Experiencia de Dios en los Pobres," *Anales de la CM 97* (1989), pp. 7-14.

dimension. Let me point out some practical characteristics for our corporal and spiritual service and some of the temptations that are frequently present.

## **A. Characteristics<sup>4</sup>**

### **1. Entering the world of the poor**

St. Vincent knew that the world of the poor, the periphery of society, is not the world of the center. He sent his followers to the margins to encounter the poor who dwell there. This implies more than a geographical change. It means listening to the concerns of the people, understanding their point of view. It is approaching the poor with respect and humility, without thinking we have the answers to all their problems.

### **2. From above or from below?**

If we are not poor our first reaction will always be to see reality *from above*. We are the products of the society and social class in which we were raised. We make judgments using the criteria of the dominant society and not the criteria of the periphery. How should we act? What do the poor need? How should the poor act? What is important and what is not? We have to learn to view things *from below*, from the perspective of the poor. We cannot presume that we know what the poor think or what is important to them. That only happens when we learn to listen.

### **3. From the perspective of faith or society**

Our society communicates many messages through culture and the media. Have more and use more! The poor are responsible for their poverty. There are rights, but no social responsibilities. Christ's message is different. The poor are my brothers and sisters. We are social beings with rights and duties. Love, justice and communion are the principal values. Most Christians accept this. But are these really the criteria we use to make decisions about life and ministry. For that reason prayer, theological reflection on the social teaching of the Church and reading the Scriptures with the people are indispensable. They allow us to view reality with Christ's sensitivities. They question us and our society.

### **4. Make others capable**

Undoubtedly there exist situations of such urgent necessity that the only possible response is to give something. Nevertheless, it is easy to create

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<sup>4</sup> Some of these ideas were presented in my article: "L'icone de St. Vincent de Paul," *Echos de la Compagnie* (February 1998), pp. 73-80.

dependencies. It is more difficult, but of more benefit, to act in ways that make people capable of taking their own steps. A key question is how can we work with people in such a way that they no longer need us?

### **5. Accompanying or directing others?**

Many of us pastoral agents are experts in organizing. The problem is that we make all of the decisions, give advice and resolve all of the problems all of the time. So, the people never learn to be self-directing and responsible. They never become aware of their own capabilities. It is also for that reason that many projects fail when we leave. We have to learn to be present, but quiet, to allow people to discover their own solutions — sometimes through mistakes. When the poor come looking for answers, we have to take the time to sit with them so that they become conscious of their own possibilities.

### **6. Poor means with poor people**

It is sometimes easy to obtain money for our projects with the poor. The question is are we really helping people in the long run with these funds? At times we skip steps in the process of liberation because the opportunity for organization and working together is lost. Sometimes we create an infrastructure — buildings, machines, programs — that the people do not need or cannot maintain with their own resources. We need to use the means of the periphery and not those of the center.

### **7. Patience**

The process of liberation is slow. Sometimes we impose our expectations which have nothing to do with the style of the people. We want to see results and move on quickly to the next project. Are we willing to give up quick solutions in order to accompany the poor according to their rhythm?

### **8. A socio-political vision**

The social sciences tell us that poverty is not the result of individual actions, but rather the consequence of an unjust system. Personal charity is important, but it is not enough. There is a socio-political dimension to charity which needs to be taken into account. The Vincentian Family has been very weak in this area. We fail to analyze the causes of poverty. We do not speak out or, worse, we put the brakes on people, allowing unjust situations to continue. We do not want any problems. We can no longer say that socio-political action is not Vincentian. Charity and work for justice are part of one process.

## **9. Inculturation<sup>5</sup>**

All of the recent Church documents about evangelization and mission highlight the importance of inculturation. In one sense this is respect for the traditions and expressions of the people. But inculturation is more than an appreciation for folklore. It is assuming the concerns of the people, their perspectives, their pains and joys. It is living something of their reality. I am afraid that sometimes we pass through the world of the poor without being sensitive to the people who live there. We have our criteria, our expectations and our projects which are not the same as those of the people. We have to learn to inculturate our charity.

## **10. Collaboration**

Collaboration is one of the key themes of this meeting. The various branches of the Vincentian Family can support each other in the service of the poor. There are many possibilities yet to be explored. The more we can do together the better. Nevertheless, the Vincentian groups are a drop in the ocean. We are not the only ones working with the poor, nor are we the best. Humility and the pressing needs of the poor call us to collaboration with other groups. There are other religious communities, lay movements and diocesan structures within the Church. There are also human rights groups, unions, etc., which are not specifically Christian, but work for the people. How can we work together with them? More than anything, we have to learn to collaborate with the poor. If they are the recipients of charity and not protagonists in the process, they will always remain on the periphery.

## **B. Temptations**

Evangelical charity is at the heart of our vocation and ministry. There are temptations which can impede our service to the poor. No one is immune to them. Let me just point out a few:

### **1. Comfort**

Vincent spoke often about mortification because he knew that seeking after comfort gets in the way of mission. Instead of concentrating on the needs of the poor, we can get lost in taking care of our own needs and wants. Comfort takes many forms. It is not just physical ease. We can be so comfortable in our ways of thinking and acting that we become unwilling to move in new directions for service.

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<sup>5</sup> John Prager, "The Shadow Side of the Vincentian Mission," *Vincentiana*, 39 (1995), pp. 185-196.

## **2. Power**

Most of us are not in positions of real power. Nonetheless the alliances we make with the economically and politically powerful in order to help the poor can stand in the way of service. The closer we are to power the harder it is to be critical.

## **3. Fear of Consequences**

Charity and justice frequently provoke conflicts. While no one looks for clashes, standing with the poor will give rise to them. Most often the conflicts are simply annoying. But, there are situations which are genuinely dangerous either to ourselves or the poor. Whether the consequences are major or minor, the temptation is to avoid whatever causes difficulties.

## **4. False Dichotomies**

There are ways of thinking and acting that create false divisions. They impede service because they offer a distorted vision of reality. They separate what needs to be joined: integration in thought and service. Some examples of these untrue dichotomies are: body-soul, God-world, work-prayer, spiritual-material, charity-evangelization.

## **5. Discouragement**

The poor have so much pain, so many problems and so many setbacks that it is easy to lose hope. Where is God present in the midst of so much suffering? What is the point of all this service? Discouragement in the face of unpleasant realities can paralyze us.

## **6. Reductionism**

Charity moves us toward partial realizations of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is never fully achieved in the present, but always looks to the future. That is why Paul VI cautions against identifying God's reign with any socio-political agenda (*EN 35*). The same can also be said about many ecclesial agendas and movements within the Church. The Church is at the service of the Kingdom, not the Kingdom itself.

## **7. Idols**

The great temptation for ancient Israel was creating idols, putting something else in God's place. They trusted powers other than God's Word. We

can also allow lesser things to usurp God's role. Some of the modern idols are presented to us by society. Others arise from within our own hearts. When God and his Kingdom fail to occupy the center of our lives, the service of the poor also recedes into the background as less important.

## **Conclusion**

There is no plan or set of structures that will work always and everywhere. The Gospels provide no blueprint for charity. Corporal and spiritual service of the poor is a challenge that we assume, recognizing the present situation, the demands of the Gospel and some of the temptations.