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Lent 2005

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**To the members of the Congregation of the Mission
Messengers of Peace**

M. Vincent, kneeling down, began this prayer: "O Savior of our souls, who, by your love, willed to die for all people, who in some way left your glory to give it to us and, by this means, make us like gods, rendering us like you as far as that is possible, imprint charity on our hearts that one day we may be able to go and join that beautiful Company of Charity which is in heaven. This is the prayer I offer up to you, O Savior of our souls" (SV X, 474).

Dear brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

Let this season of Lent be a special time of grace to help us reflect on and deepen our commitment to following Jesus Christ, Evangelizer and Server of the poor. One of the rich traditions to help us live out that reflection and continue our own personal processes of conversion is an exam of conscience. So I would like to make the letter this Lent an examining of conscience based on different aspects of our lives, beginning with the general and working toward the particular.

The Word of God (Hebrews 4:12-16)

Do I see the Word of God as dynamic, as an important part of my daily reflection? Do the daily readings of the Eucharist move me to want to change my life? Do they help me to deepen my commitment to following Jesus?

Prayer and Meditation (Hosea 2:16)

"So I will allure her, I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart." Our time for private prayer and meditation is a time in the desert, as are these 40 days of Lent. Do I see it as an opportunity to deepen my communion with God? Am I sensitive to God's presence in that moment of prayer? Do I let God speak to my heart? Do I understand that private prayer is a privileged place, a space to discern the movement of God in my life? In my prayer, am I humble

before God? Do I let go and trust in God? Do I allow God's mercy to purify my heart? (Paraphrasing a remark from Bishop Oscar Romero, martyr of El Salvador: Personal prayer is the process by which God takes us into the deepest part of our being, deep down into our hearts and there God speaks to us of his love for us).

The Sacraments, particularly the Eucharist (John 6:48-58) and Reconciliation (Luke 15:11-32)

In this year in which we are celebrating in a special way the Eucharist, our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, invites us to reflect on its significance in our lives, and so the following questions: Do I participate actively in the Eucharist or am I often distracted? Do I listen attentively to God's Word during the Eucharist and allow God's Word to confront my own life before I approach the altar of the Lord to receive Communion? Do I open my heart up to the Lord's mercy and forgiveness? Do I receive the Lord in the Eucharist with fervor? Do I see the Eucharist as food for the journey? Do I allow it to nourish me in order that I might carry out my mission? Do I truly understand the Eucharist as a communal celebration? Do I see the Eucharist as a privileged place of evangelizing or has it become for me just a matter of routine, lifeless and dull?

With regard to Reconciliation, the scripture text is the parable of the loving father (prodigal son). When was the last time I took advantage of receiving God's mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation? Do I prepare myself for this sacrament? Do I at times keep hidden some of my more serious sins? As a minister of God's mercy, am I compassionate and understanding or am I at times stern, or even worse, indifferent in hearing the sins of others?

Characteristic Virtues: Humility, Simplicity, Meekness, Mortification, Apostolic Zeal

Humility (Luke 18:9-14)

Do I recognize my dignity as a son of God, having the humility to see the gifts God has given me and do I use those gifts for his glory or for my own vanity? Am I able to recognize my own limits, my weaknesses, my shortcomings, my failings before others? Am I able to forgive others and ask forgiveness for my offenses?

Simplicity (Luke 18:15-17)

Is my heart only for God? Am I transparent, sincere in my dealings with others? Do I seek the truth or do I sometimes hide the truth so that my real nature will not be known?

Meekness (Matthew 11:25-30)

Am I gentle in my dealings with others or am I aggressive and offensive? Am I easily approachable or do I shut the door of my heart to others? Am I truly compassionate, able to suffer with others?

Mortification (John 12:24-28)

Am I willing to die to myself? Am I willing at times to forget about my needs and sacrifice myself for others? Do I at times do for others in a begrudging manner?

Apostolic Zeal (Matthew 5:13-16)

Am I enthusiastic in my apostolic works? Do I inspire hope in others and for others? Is my action refreshed with contemplation or do I fall into activism? Am I showing signs of burnout and an indifference in my dealings with others? Do I truly see the poor as my “Lords and Masters,” treating them with love and all due respect or do I fall into the trap of treating them like objects, as stepping stones to “my own greater honor and glory”?

Apostolic Life (Luke 4:18-19)

We are members of a Society of Apostolic Life.

Do I see my apostolic works and mission as part of the great whole of bringing about the Kingdom of God, which is a Kingdom of justice, peace, love and reconciliation? Am I faithful in the commitments that I have made in my mission? Do I follow through on these commitments or are they only lived out halfheartedly? Do I see evangelization and service of the poor at the heart of my apostolic life, even though I might not be involved directly in the service of the poor? Do I nourish my apostolic life with contemplation of the experiences I have with the poor? Do the poor really reflect to me the face and love of Christ? Do I have a true passion for Christ and at the same time a passion for humanity, especially the poor?

Relationship to the Local Church (1 Corinthians 12:12-28a)

Do I consider myself an active part of the local Church, as a collaborator of the bishop? Do our apostolic plans coincide with the apostolic plans of the local Church where I am located or at times are my apostolic activities and those of my community carried out in a parallel fashion with the activities of the local Church?

The Vincentian Family (Luke 4:18-19 and 2 Corinthians 5:14a)

Do I know members of other branches of the Vincentian Family? Do I even care to know them? Do I encourage the members of my own community to collaborate with other branches of the Vincentian Family? Do I reflect seriously on what our Constitutions say about collaboration with and knowledge of the Vincentian Family, as well as other documents that have been written? From time to time do I reflect on the first callings that we received from Fr. Maloney, seeing ourselves as a Vincentian Family, a great army that can harness its forces to do wonderful things for the poor? Do I recognize the autonomy of each of the branches of the Vincentian Family? Do I at times tend to think that my branch is better than others? Where tensions exist among the different branches of the Family, do I make an effort to work toward reconciliation?

Relationship with the Youth (Luke 24:13-35)

The Vincentian Family has highlighted and made this year for us the "Year of Youth." Do I make an effort to reach out to young people, making attempts to understand them, to listen to them, to share with them my faith, to share with them my hopes? Do I make an effort to invite young people into the life of my community or am I too wrapped up in doing my own thing and not having any time to give, especially to young people?

Relationship to the World (Matthew 5:1-12)

In the society in which we live, as well as direct service to the poor, do I make efforts at changing structures, especially those unjust structures which oppress the poor? Do I allow the attitudes of the world, such as nationalism, racism, and other discriminations, affect my way of dealing with God's people? Do I show a willingness to want to work with other groups that struggle for justice, work for peace? Do I believe in might makes right or do I truly think that an essential aspect of an evangelical way of living is the non-violent way? Do I see myself as a citizen of the world, as being more important than a citizen of any particular country?

The Vows: Stability, Chastity, Poverty, Obedience

Stability (Matthew 7:21-29)

Does my life reflect a faithfulness for life to the Vincentian charism in the Congregation of the Mission? Do I make every effort at deepening my belonging to the Congregation of the Mission? Am I dedicated to achieving the ends of the Congregation of the Mission of

following Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor, all the days of my life? Do I foster a spirit of dialogue and friendship with my brothers in community? Am I willing to collaborate with others committed to working with the poor? Do I take time to study and come to know the traditions of the Congregation of the Mission?

Celibacy (Luke 10:25-28)

Do I see the gift of celibacy as a special way of loving the poor? Would I consider my relationship with Christ an intimate relationship? Would I consider my first and best friends to be members of the Community? Do I have healthy relationships with women? At times do I presume on my own strength, reflecting a sense of self-love, selfish love for myself? Am I honest in my relationships with others or, even beyond that, am I honest in confession with regard to my relationships with others? Do I see loneliness as an enemy, rather than as someone I can befriend, coming to know better myself and then the God who lives deep within my being?

Poverty (Luke 12:32-34)

Can I usually be detached from my goods or do my goods possess me? Have I grown comfortable in my lifestyle? Would my lifestyle be scandalous to the poor to whom I am called to give witness and serve? Do I share with others the possessions I do own? Am I generous in what I have in giving it to the poor, sharing it with the poor? Do I know well the teachings of the Congregation with regard to the vow of poverty? Have I accumulated personal wealth without the knowledge of the competent authorities? Do I understand that all the goods of the Congregation are the patrimony of the poor? Have I ever shown a lack of respect for that patrimony?

Obedience (Luke 22:39-44)

Jesus, ever obedient to the Father, is the inspiration for our obedience. Do I consider my relationship sufficiently intimate with Christ as to know clearly God's will for me? Do I take time to listen to God as he speaks to me in the different events that occur in my daily life? Am I attentive to the signs of the times, clearing understanding that God reveals himself in all the different events that occur in the world in which we live today? Am I concerned about studying and doing social analysis of the reality that surrounds me and of this world in which we live? Am I open in my dialogue in community so that together as brothers we can come to discern God's will for us in our service of the poor? Do I actively participate in community projects and planning as well as in meetings and communications with the competent authority? Am I willing to sacrifice my own personal desires for the good of the mission and the needs of the poor, after a process of discernment and decisions have

been made, even though my opinion may be contrary to that of the competent authority? Am I willing to obey? Do I show a willingness to obey with regard to assignments, where I may be asked to move from one place to another? Do I make myself available?

Conclusion

This time of Lent is a time to open ourselves up to God's mercy, but at the same time to be aware of our own limitations and our own sinfulness. It is true that we think and act in ways contrary to the Gospel. Anyone who says he is in no need of conversion, being without sin, is a liar, as St. John clearly states, or even worse yet, is blind to his own situation. The season of Lent is a time when God, in his mercy, forgives us his children for having strayed from our own identity as Vincentians. Let us be willing to share with the Lord our failings and sins and at the same time acknowledge God's mercy.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Gregory Gay, C.M." The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General