Lenten Letter of the Superior General

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My very dear Brothers,

The grace of Our Lord be always with you!

May I ask you to think about death. It is a delicate subject, I know, since death is the darkest, most fearful, of human mysteries. Few of us are eager to peer into its depths. But we must not avoid reflecting on it in Lent, since traditionally the season begins with the stark admonition: Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return. Simultaneously, the Church, in a sacramental gesture so characteristic of Catholicism, signs our foreheads with the cross, using a graphic symbol of mortality, ashes.

Death is one of the principal Lenten themes. The cross of Christ casts its shadow over the entire season as we prepare to renew our baptismal commitment. St. Paul reminds us straightforwardly about what that involves: "Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life" (Rm 6:3-4).

Modern society seeks eagerly to flee from the thought of death. Television commercials suggest miraculous salves for wiping away the latest wrinkle and rinses for darkening graying hair. Modern languages creatively invent euphemisms to circumvent the mention of death. People pass away, they leave us, they move on. Yet the fact is: they die. All of us do. No one escapes the inevitable mystery of death.

But as Christians, we view death with resurrection faith. Death cannot be merely a mystery of darkness for us. It is, rather, the dawning of light. We believe that death is the door to life, a new beginning. It is the immersion of the human person in the transcendent mystery of God.

Two events, both connected with death, occupy my mind this Lent. May I ask you to reflect on them with me and offer you a practical suggestion in regard to each.

1. This year we meditate in a special way on the death of one of our brothers, John Gabriel Perboyre, whose canonization we will soon celebrate. In a few days I will be writing to you at greater length about this celebration. Four years before his
death, John Gabriel wrote: "We ought to be ready at any moment that our heavenly Father might want to call us. It is not wise to hope for long years, since a serious sickness or an unexpected death can always come upon us. Our whole life ought to be a continual preparation for a holy death."

John Gabriel recognized the truth that, even when we are living life to the full, we are always in the process of dying. He saw that it is crucial to confront inevitable death in a healthy way. Thus, the saints deal with death soberly. St. Vincent tells us that for the last 18 years of his life, he thought of, and prepared for, his death each day (Abelly, Book I, ch. 51, p. 251). St. Teresa of Avila once stated that we will never do anything worthwhile unless we resolve, once for all, to accept the stark reality of death.

My first suggestion this Lent is that each local community meditate and share its reflections on the death of Perboyre. He is so popular in the Vincentian Family because, it seems to me, his heroic martyrdom captured the imagination of so many of us from the time of formation. The people of China, some of whom I had the privilege of visiting just recently, continue to share in his passion today, as do countless others in Asia, Africa, and numerous countries throughout the world. Each of us too must one day come face to face with the relentless approach of death, even if in a less dramatic form than Perboyre's (my own, if statistics hold true, will occur within the next two decades).

2. This Lent we are publishing a new Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission. As you read it, I ask you to focus on the vows as a deepening of your baptismal commitment to enter into the dying and rising of the Lord. Our vows have many dimensions, but among the most striking of these is that they proclaim our faith in a transcendent God who raises the dead to life. In vowing to live simply and to share our goods with the poor, we recognize that the kingdom of God offers greater riches than material prosperity (cf. Mk 10:28-30). In freely forgoing marital intimacy and children, we profess our belief that God can multiply our offspring "like the stars in the sky and the sands on the shore of the sea" (Gn 22:17). In putting aside our own "self-determination" in order to serve the needs of others, we trust in a new order, in which "the one who loses his life will find it" (Mt 10:39). In making a life-long commitment to follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor, we express our conviction that the world is, in a sense, upside down, that the poor are the rich in the kingdom of God, that they are first, our "Lords and Masters."

The faithful living of the vows surely involves much dying. It is not easy to remain true to our promised word: to renounce marriage and family, personal wealth, a portion of our individual freedom. To be a servant of the poor to the very end costs us, even if it also has great rewards.
My second Lenten suggestion is this. Meditate on each of the four vows this Lent. Speak about them with others, especially a spiritual director. Find concrete ways to live them more fully and joyfully.

Lent is here once again, with its vivid recollection of the dying and rising of the Lord. The saints, martyrs like Perboyre, and the bearers of the cross today in so many countries surround us as a "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1) calling us to renew our baptismal commitment, our vows, our missionary fidelity.

I ask you to pray for me, as I will for you, that our Lenten journey together will bring us a fuller share in the Lord's risen life.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.  
Superior General