



Vincentian Family
Young Vincentian Meeting



"Vincentian, a life style for today"

VINCENTIAN YOUTH SHARE IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF OUR CHARISM

(Reflection document in preparation for the Gathering of Young Vincentians, Madrid, 2011)

WE SHARE IN THE ONE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

In recent decades we have become more aware of the reality that those who share the charism of Saint Vincent de Paul are members of a spiritual family that is called the Vincentian Family. This family is a missionary family that is present in all parts of the world and includes every type of person (woman and men, young people and adults, consecrated women and men, laymen and laywomen, Catholics and non-Catholics). The members of this family are organized in over three hundred associations or institutes.

This **pluralistic family, animated by the charism of Saint Vincent, shares in the mission** of proclaiming the gospel to all people, especially those people who are poor ... indeed, the poor are "our special heritage". We accomplish this mission from the perspective of our own spirituality and lifestyle and with a specific pastoral methodology which highlights organization and creativity. For this reason there exists a network of collaboration and coordination among the different associations of the Vincentian Family and with other groups in the Church and in society with whom we share the mission of making the gospel effective among those people who are most poor.

As Vincentians we are aware of the reality that the call to collaborate in this mission of the Church is a baptismal commitment and a revelation of the identity of the **Christian community which is by its very nature, missionary** (Vatican II Documents, *Ad gentes divinitus*, #2). Therefore if it is true that the Church is a "mystery of communion", then we cannot live a communion that is inattentive to the mission.

The Church is an **extroverted community**, one that does not withdraw within itself but rather is centered on the mission which it feels is urgent as a result of the task that has been entrusted to it by the Master: *Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations* (Matthew 28:19).

The historical reason for the Church's existence is to prolong the mission of Christ and to make this mission visible in the history of humankind. Without mission there is no Christian community. The mission which arises from the sending forth by Jesus is not simply one more task that the Church must engage in but is the one and only task of the Church. The Church does

not arise as a goal or an objective in itself but rather the Church exists and lives because of its mission, because it serves the Kingdom of God.

The Second Vatican Council affirms the missionary nature of the ecclesial community (Vatican II Documents, *Ad gentes divinitus*, #2 and #35). The whole Church is essentially missionary and evangelization is a duty of all the People of God. Previously when we spoke about missions, we viewed this as a work that was undertaken in foreign lands, beyond the borders of traditionally Catholic nations, a work that was carried out by a specific group of “missionaries”. Today we are convinced that every place is mission territory and that the mission of the church is one, despite its diversity of forms. Also in view of our baptismal vocation we understand that all the members of the Church are called to be engaged in the same mission.

THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY, EVANGELIZING AND EVANGELIZED

If we ask ourselves what is the **mission of the church in the world**, the overarching response that we can give is **to evangelize**. The fundamental task of the Church is to evangelize and this, in reality, has become the central focus of the pastoral action of the Church.

Jesus was aware of being sent by the Father to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. After the Easter experience his disciples realized that they were members of a community that made present and continued the saving mystery of Christ. The witnesses of the resurrection were also aware of the fact that they were sent to spread the Good News of the gospel throughout the world (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:18). Thus the reason for belonging to the Church is **to prolong the mission of Christ** and to make it visible in the history of humankind. Without mission there is no Christian community and as a result of the Second Vatican Council this mission has been identified with the concept of **evangelization**.

In the apostolic exhortation of Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi)*, evangelization is identified with the essential mission of the Church: *the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church ... Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize (Evangelii Nuntiandi, #14).*

What do we mean by evangelization? In summary we can state that evangelization is **the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ that is done through Christian testimony. This proclamation is directed to women and men so that these individuals, located in a specific place, might be converted and freed.**

VINCENT DE PAUL AND THE EVANGELIZING MISSION

Vincent de Paul reflected on the Church from the perspective of his historical reality and his mission and he highlighted the fact that his fundamental task was evangelization, especially evangelization of the poor and that is a continuation of the mission of Christ. For Saint Vincent de Paul evangelization is very much bound up with salvation: *God wishes to save people through other people* and the Church becomes the primary instrument of salvation by instructing others about the mysteries of faith (CCD, 10:403; XIIIa:164; VIII:348).

Vincent not only analyzed the reality but also recognized the importance of the Christological foundation and therefore he highlighted the evangelizing mission of the Church. **To evangelize is the office par excellence of the Son of God** and has to be the point of reference for the mission of the Church. *Our Lord asks us to evangelize the poor; that is what he did and what he wants to continue to do through us* (CCD, XII:71).

Today our evangelizing mission has to be distinct methodologically from that of Saint Vincent but the witness of his life provides us with some insights regarding our mission today. Among the different elements that we discover in St. Vincent's thinking and work we highlight the following:

- **The privileged place of the poor** as the preferred beneficiaries of evangelization.
- **Zeal**, which in today's language could be translated by the word **eagerness**, must be one of the virtues of the missionary. This zeal must be joined together with the need of proclaiming with our lives what we proclaim in word ... *do not undo by your actions the progress you have made by preaching* (CCD, XI:252). Zeal has to be manifested through the **theological virtue of charity** and ought to influence the whole life of evangelizers who should be persons of great charity toward those whom they open up to the universality of the Church.
- **The laity as protagonists** in the work of evangelization. Saint Vincent highlighted the fact that the pious associations of believers do not have as their sole objective growth in the spiritual life. It was for this reason that he involved the Confraternities in the physical and spiritual assistance of those persons who were poor. We also want to highlight here his work in the formation and promotion of the laity in the works of evangelization and charity.
- **Valuing and promoting women as evangelizing agents.** Saint Vincent not only relied upon women but also restored to them their role in fulfilling the mission of the Church. Saint Vincent recognized their autonomy and their qualities in their apostolic labors.
- **Union of evangelization and social-charitable work.** Saint Vincent worked with people who were in comfortable positions (many of the women in the Confraternities) but led them through a process of conversion that brought them in close contact with the poor. He spoke to them about honoring Jesus Christ in the person of the poor and recognizing the poor as their lords and masters. The exercise of charity that he proposed to them was not limited to the resolution of the immediate needs of the poor but he encouraged his followers to provide the poor with the means that would enable them to lift themselves up (CCD, XIIIb:73, 78). Vincent also worked with individuals involved in politics in order to combat unjust structures and in this way sought to uphold the integral good of poor people. **Today charity, in its broadest and most correct meaning, must accompany any process of evangelization and should be the factor that verifies the Christian authenticity of evangelization.**
- **New methods and expressions of evangelization in order to bring the gospel** to the ones intended to benefit from this process of evangelization. Saint Vincent reacted against certain methods and styles that were common during his era and counseled his followers *to proclaim to the people the Christian truths with the simplicity of the Gospel and the simplicity of the first ministers of the Church.* His **little method** of missionary

preaching placed the message within the reach of the listeners because the words were spoken in a familiar way so that everyone could understand what was being said. Saint Vincent wanted to *make the gospel effective* for its beneficiaries and therefore he insisted on a systematic catechesis which was continued with good sacramental practices and the organized exercise of charity through the Confraternities.

- **A global vision of the evangelizing work.** Without putting aside the work that had been begun in France, Saint Vincent sent his followers to plant the evangelical seed in new worlds. He did not limit his vision to the European world that had been evangelized but extended his work to other missionary lands.
- **Attentive to the separated brothers and sisters.** Through his action and the action of his followers he was able to bring about the reconciliation of some separated brothers and sisters and did this without entering into discussions and controversies.

The spiritual experience of Saint Vincent and the proper charism of his family have highlighted some aspects with regard to evangelization and throughout history has enriched the Church's understanding of her evangelizing mission. Some of the aspects that the Vincentian spirit is able to contribute to this theme and that have been accepted and integrated into the Church are:

- To evangelize **through work and action:** union of preaching-catechesis and testimony of life.
- To evangelize **in a preferential way the poor:** those most in need have to be first.
- To evangelize **the whole person:** providing for the spiritual salvation of an individual must be accompanied by serving a person's physical needs and promoting the whole person.
- To evangelize **from the perspective of the three actions of the mission of the Church:** prophetic, liturgical and charitable ... these three must be integrated while at the same time we highlight the fact that the ministry of charity verifies the authenticity of prophetic and liturgical action.
- To evangelize implies **an openness to being evangelized:** the poor evangelize us and that are also places for an encounter with God.
- To evangelize from the perspective of the **incarnation:** this involves entering the world of the poor, becoming inculturated in their world in order to draw near to them with the gospel message.
- To involve **women** in the process of evangelization, utilizing their special gifts and charisms: tenderness, solidarity, gratitude ... enabling women to place these gifts at the service of the gospel and of their sisters and brothers.
- The importance of **apostolic zeal** ... if the love of God is a fire, then zeal is its flame and ought to motivate every evangelizer.
- To evangelize with **simple methods, adapted** to the circumstances of the place and time. Here we also mention the importance of systematic catechesis and popular preaching.

THE SHARED MISSION IN THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY

Many institutes have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with the laity (John Paul II, *Consecrated life [Vita Consecrata]*, #54).

A shared mission can be defined as an ecclesial movement which fundamentally joins us with the laity and the lay vocation and leads to the conscious participation of all people in the one mission of the Church. This understanding is supported by the ecclesiology of communion and the leadership of the laity who participate in the one mission of the Church. The mission is one and all people, regardless of their vocation, have an obligation to carry out this mission.

In order to **share the mission in the Vincentian Family** it is necessary to share the life and the charisms among the distinct branches, thus this is especially true for the consecrated members who must share with the laity. In order to share our life we must examine our attitudes so that we do not give the impression that someone is viewed as a second-class Vincentian or someone has nothing to contribute. After we share our life and charism then we can engage in common projects so that we become more effective in our evangelizing and charitable mission.

In the Vincentian Family we have **experiences** of collaboration among the distinct Associations, between the consecrated members and lay members, between young people and adults ... experiences that reveal the fact that we share the mission and as a result we are all enriched:

- Formation programs that are done in common, especially programs of Vincentian spirituality and programs that deal with the Social Doctrine of the Church.
- Projects of direct service with the poor, such as “The globalization of Charity: a struggle against hunger” or “Coresponsible for life: together against malaria” or “The Alliance for Haiti” ...
- Gatherings of the International Leadership Teams of the Vincentian Family in order to share experiences and work more closely together.
- Annual meetings of the distinct branches of the Vincentian Family for the purpose of celebrating Vincentian feasts which also provides an opportunity to pray together, to know one another, to share life, to respond to the reality of poverty ...
- Coordinating commission of the Vincentian Family on the national and local level which help the coordination and coresponsibility of the distinct branches and at the same time organizes formation programs, apostolic projects and times of prayer.

But in the Vincentian Family, like other spiritual families in the Church, in which consecrated individuals and lay people share the same charism, there are also many challenges. These are some of the challenges that Father Benjamin Romo, C.M. places before us:

- **To share the charism with the laity** in order to grow and be renewed. Collaboration is the source of interior renewal of the communities.
- To live the charism **with the spirit of collaborators**, allowing the laity to occupy their place and exercise their responsibility. Embracing a position of joint dialogue and discernment and living with an attitude of giving and receiving and allowing ourselves to be transformed.
- Accepting together, laity and consecrated members, **the challenge of formation**. Formation is the soul and the motor of the mission and is a commitment to build up the kingdom of God.
- **Promote a lay spirituality**. A healthy lay spirituality implies a balanced interaction between prayer and action, a profound communion with God and a commitment to

transform the world. Our communities are called to be “schools of prayer” for both the laity and its consecrated members.

- To journey together with a **missionary spirituality**. The whole Church is missionary. Many lay people are called to go to mission territory *ad gentes* with the consecrated members. To accompany the laity in their mission is also a task of the community of the consecrated members. In a globalized world we must be willing to go where our charism is necessary for the mission.
- **To be with the most poor**, and to do this through a consistent lifestyle and an evangelical radicalness.
- **To create new areas** for the mission of the laity in the Church and in the world. To create, from the perspective of our charism, new areas so that the laity might share their life, the charism and the apostolate.

Young people are called to undertake a special role in the common mission. The New Testament and some documents of the Church make special mention of young people. Timothy and Titus, two great missionaries of the Primitive church, are young men. Saint Paul warns Timothy: *Let no one have contempt for your youth* (1 Timothy 4:12).

Today sixty-four percent of the world’s population is under the age of twenty-five, a fact that reveals the evangelizing potential that exists among young people. Therefore, **to share the charisms with young people and involve them in the mission is a great urgency during our era**. Pope Benedict XVI in his *Message for World Youth Day, Madrid 2011* recognizes this fact: *Dear young people, the Church relies on you. The Church needs your lively faith, your creative charity and the dynamism of your hope. Your presence renews the Church, rejuvenates it and gives it a new impulse.*