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A 'restavek' child seeking relief

The Season of Lent, 2012

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”.
(St. Augustine of Hippo)

To all members of the Vincentian Family

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

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

We live in a world filled with restlessness. Life's demands often come upon us at a fast and furious pace. Living with the realities of war, poverty, terrorism, political unrest, economic and ecological disasters, we are a people wearied by life. Our sentiments can be like the psalmist: *“How long, O Lord? How long will you hide your face from me?”* (Ps. 13:1)

In the midst of these challenges, the Church offers us a precious gift: the season of Lent. It is a sacred space, a time beckoning us to pause, draw back from life's daily grind, and drink more deeply of Jesus' story of our salvation: his life, passion, and resurrection. Simply put, Lent is a time of sabbatical for the soul.

As a people claimed by Christ and committed to the charism of St. Vincent de Paul, this holy season can help us better live out our Catholic faith and the Vincentian way. Like Vincent, our identity is rooted in Christ. A reading of the first Sunday in Lent tells us Jesus *“suffered once for our sins, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God.”* (1 Peter 3:18) These forty days of Lent are not only a time for prayer, penance, and almsgiving, but also for reflection, connection, and action.

A Time for Reflection

The Sunday Gospels in Lent give us much food for thought as they reveal the person and power of Jesus. He is seen as a mystic emerging from the desert, a Messiah transfigured before the apostles, a prophet driven to decry injustice in the temple precinct, a wise teacher willing to dialogue with a Pharisee, and a suffering servant ready to glorify God by embracing his Passion. From these Gospels and in the daily Scriptures for the Eucharist during Lent we find the stories of God's love and mercy to Israel, and Jesus' words and deeds in proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

By praying the Lenten Scriptures and partaking daily in the Eucharist, we open ourselves to the great mercy of God, manifested in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It was Vincent de Paul's willingness to reflect deeply on Jesus' life and teachings, and his eagerness to integrate them into his life that made him a "mystic of charity". Vincent was imbued with a drive to serve the poor, and he motivated and empowered others to do the same. But what fed his restless soul were not ideas and accomplishments, but a mind and heart given to reflection and contemplation:

"We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of Providence, and with genuine renunciation of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ." (St. Vincent: CCD, Vol. 3, p. 384, Letter 1078, 4 December 1648)

Vincent's personal conversion in making the teachings of Jesus his own and his founding communities and organizations to serve the poor were the fruit of his life-long commitment to prayer and reflection. In making time for reflection, we are like the Greek elders who asked the apostle Philip: "*Sir, we would like to see Jesus*" (Jn.12:21). And as Vincent's life teaches us, God never refuses an invitation to commune with us. Lent is the time for us to do so.

A Time for Connection

The fruit of time spent in reflection and prayer is a deeper connection with God, oneself, our neighbor, and the poor. In a restless world of discord and disconnection, Lent helps us to deepen our discipleship with Christ and better live our Vincentian charism. We can learn from Vincent, whose genius in connecting people to achieve the common good endures today. The Lenten Gospels portray Jesus as always fervently doing the Father's will. By his prayer and in his Passion, Jesus always remained connected to God.

Years ago, a popular advertisement in the USA used as its slogan "*We're all connected*". In today's digital age, this refrain is all the more relevant. Our faith and charism challenge us to connect Jesus' command to love God and serve our neighbor more profoundly. Lent calls us to examine more clearly the presence of the suffering Christ in the world so that we might understand their plight and be Christ to them.

As Superior General, I have the privilege of visiting the Vincentian family throughout the world and witnessing how our charism connects the poor to Christ. Allow me to share two such encounters. Both are ministries coordinated by the Daughters of Charity, serving vulnerable at-risk children who live in poverty.

On a trip to Haiti to view the progress of our Zafen Project, I visited a school started by Daughters of Charity begun in response to the plight of the *Restavek children*. It is truly tragic: between 175,000 to 300,000 of these children come from families unable to take care of them, and so are sent to work as ‘indentured servants’ for relatives, acquaintances, or other Haitian families. Called “*Restaveks*”, (French-Creole for “rester- avec - to stay with”), their lives are not restful, nor do they belong ‘with’ the family they serve. Often mistreated and abused, *Restavek children* cannot attend school, and lack food, clothing, and health care. At the Daughters’ school for *Restaveks*, they are fed, taught to read and write, and treated with a respect and dignity they have never known. To learn more about the *Restavek* children, go to: <http://www.restavekfreedom.org>.

In Ghana, as with many developing nations, the exploitation of children is ever present. In Kumasi, Ghana’s second largest city, many homeless children live on the streets and survive by begging or day labor. Often beaten and abused, many become victims of human trafficking. The Daughters of Charity, with the Archdiocese of Kumasi, founded “Street Children Project”, a drop-in center providing respite from the perils of the street. It offers them a place to rest, (basic, simple floor space), the use of bathrooms to shower and wash, clean clothes, literacy classes, day care, outreach, and alternatives for these children. It is a quiet space amidst a harsh life of exploitation. To learn more about this work, go to: <http://www.streetchildrenprojectksi.org>.

I think you would agree that these two Vincentian works would be near and dear to the hearts of Sts. Vincent and Louise. They stand as wonderful example of “grass-root” efforts to respond to the cry of the poor and forgotten with the Good News of Jesus. Lent is a time not only to reflect on Jesus’ life, but to connect with God’s poor and act on their behalf.

A Time for Action

“What must be done?” This was the question Madam de Gondi posed to Vincent in 1617 as both witnessed the spiritual plight of peasants on her vast family estate. His answer to that question redounds in today’s world in the priests, brothers, sisters, and laity who are the living, organic heart of the Vincentian Family. Ours is a global reality with an outreach much greater than Vincent and Louise could ever have imagined.

But the Lenten season reminds us that the suffering Christ in his Passion is present in our world in countless ways. As disciples of Jesus, it is our task to act on their behalf. “*Whatever you did for the least of my brethren, you did to me.*” (Mt. 25:40) It is our task, both individually and collectively as bearers of the Vincentian charism to respond in love and service. While there is always much to keep us busy, let me to suggest another type of action

At our recent General Assembly, the Congregation of the Mission adopted a five-year strategic plan with yearly objectives to better live out our Vincentian vocation and the charism for the Vincentian Family. The objective we are focusing on this year is “Systemic Change”, which we define as working to not only alleviate the conditions of the poor, but to change the societal structures which engender poverty. To encourage our confreres to make systemic change part of their provinces and ministries, there are suggested strategies. While some are specific to the Vincentian Community, I will share with you several strategies I believe can be used by all branches of the Vincentian Family:

- *To favor works that promote systemic change in society, develop local self-government, formation of self-help groups and indigenous micro-credit programs;*
- *To provide legal assistance to defend the poor and promote justice;*
- *To create programs that counter human trafficking and promote life, access to universal health care, care for the environment, the dignity of women and children, the rights of migrants, and participation in civil society.*

These strategies for ‘System Change’ from the Congregation’s plan offer you with a rich diversity of ideas for action. Systemic change is an important goal for the Vincentian Family. I believe we can all find ways to adapt it to our works and educate others of its importance.

In Lent and throughout this year, we have the opportunity to grow in our faith by reflecting on God’s Word and partaking in the Eucharist which deepens our bonds of connection in service of the poor. It is a daunting task, but as members of the Vincentian Family, our “mystic of charity” inspires us to remember whom and why we serve:

I beg Our Lord that we may be able to die to ourselves in order to rise with Him, that he may be the joy of your heart, the end and soul of your actions, and your glory in heaven. This will come to pass if we humble ourselves as He humbled Himself, if we renounce our own satisfaction to follow Him by carrying our little crosses, and if we give our lives willingly, as He gave His for our neighbor whom he loves and whom he wants us to love as ourselves.” (St. Vincent: CCD, Vol. 3, p. 616, Letter 1202, 27 March, 1650.)

Our restless world, along with the plight of the *Restavek and Kumasi children* can seem at times to be overwhelming. But our faith in Jesus and the Vincentian charism provide us with renewal, strength, and confidence to face the future with hope. Through the intercession of Mary, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, I pray this Lent will be a time when God’s grace and goodness may be more fully manifested in your life and the lives of all whom you serve.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General