**The Heart of Vincentian Higher Education**

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*At an Academic Convocation Celebrating Adamson University’s 80th Anniversary*

*and the 150th Anniversary of the Vincentians working in the Philippines*

Thank you for your great kindness. It means a great deal to me to be here at Adamson University, an institution I very much admire. I’ll say more about that in a moment. First, though, permit me to tell you about a small moment in the life of St. Vincent de Paul.

In 1656, St. Vincent held one of his periodic meetings with the leadership of the Daughters of Charity. St. Louise was there of course and so were “three or four” other sisters, presumably her Council.[[1]](#footnote-1) Such meetings typically had several agenda items – often particularly complex matters that required Vincent’s knowledge, connections or simply his advice to sort through. The agenda for these meetings was generally brought by St. Louise and her sisters, to which Vincent reacted, sometimes confirming the sisters’ own thoughts and decisions on the matter, but sometimes disagreeing and recommending harder decisions than the sisters were at first inclined to take – particularly when it came to dismissing certain Daughters from membership in the Company. Time and time again, Vincent would recommend removal of sisters from the Company, when the sisters were inclined to keep giving their sisters more chances to change. Today, however, those roles would reverse.

At this particular meeting of August 13th, there was only one item and it appears that St. Vincent himself had called the meeting. They gathered in the parlor of Saint Lazare, the great Vincentian headquarters, and he looked squarely at the Sister in charge of the Foundlings and asked “if she would soon be able to present some of the older girls from that house to become Daughters of Charity.” It was a shocking question, for these were “foundlings,” that is, children who had once been abandoned as infants and often “found” on the church steps, assumed to have been born out of wedlock - no small matter in 17th century France. They were the “wages of sin,” the walking embodiment of their parents’ scandal, carrying for the rest of their lives a social stigma beyond our own century’s understanding.

The sister to whom Vincent posed the question admitted that the girls were of sufficient age, but warned that permitting them to enter the Daughters of Charity “might cause pain to our Sisters, and could lead people to conclude that all the Daughters of Charity were foundlings.”

Vincent was roughly 76 years old the day of this meeting and that Daughter’s response was a reaction he had faced all his life. The earliest Ladies of Charity could not bear their charity being used for these infants. Vincent repeatedly had to encourage and teach his Daughters to see these infants as the very children of God.[[2]](#footnote-2) But this meeting on August 13th, 1656 pushed the question to a level that even the sister in charge of the work with the foundlings found disconcerting.

In such meetings, it was Vincent’s general practice to linger over each matter-at-hand, drawing out the pros and cons of each decision before settling on a course of action. Not infrequently, he might defer the matter to another day altogether, hoping that prayer and time would bring more insight. But not this day. Vincent’s response to the sister was so startlingly brief and immediate as to signal the conversation’s end. He simply recalled Saint Peter’s vision recorded in the Book of Acts, Chapter 10, where St. Peter saw all sorts of culturally forbidden meats presented to him, and heard the Lord’s voice to say “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” Peter, of course, understood that vision to signal God’s love and unconditional acceptance of those outside the Jewish tradition. For Vincent, the story also settled this matter. “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

No one else is recorded to have spoken at that meeting, and it appears that the meeting was concluded in short order. Vincent merely gave them permission to implement this quietly and confidentially, and the minutes end there. And so does the historical record. We don’t actually know if foundlings became Daughters of Charity thereafter. What we do know for certain is Saint Vincent’s mind on the matter. And it’s that mind that forms a key part of the work that all of us have done in his name ever since.

I’ve been asked on various occasions what St. Vincent would think if he were to come back today and see universities run by his priests and brothers. My answer is that I think he would be quite surprised. It’s not that Vincent was anti-intellectual or thought ill of universities. He personally sought extensive higher education and held multiple degrees. No, St. Vincent’s surprise would come from the vastly changed role of universities in society since his time. In his day, universities were not required or even able to achieve his ends for the poor. What Vincent WOULD recognize, I think, is the continuation of the insight he had that day for his precious foundlings.

As those abandoned children grew from infants toward adulthood, St. Vincent saw stifled possibility, but possibility all the same. He saw a future for them beyond their present circumstances and socially-imposed limitations. That day, August 13th, he opened one more career path for the young women among them – the possibility of joining the Daughters of Charity - but he had been doing that all his life. With the Daughters and Ladies of Charity’s assistance, he trained foundlings to read. He trained them in job skills. He arranged for them to be apprenticed or to be placed as servants. He didn’t just find nurses for infant foundlings, he saw that they were raised and educated and that a path was created for them. It’s no accident that so many statues picture St. Vincent surrounded by children. These weren’t just any children. These were children with possibility but no futures, and he sought pathways to give them a future.

That is, of course, exactly what Vincentian universities attempt as well. Pathways. Our time might even call it “mainstreaming.” It’s more of course. Universities in our age are powerful platforms for the intellectual life, and able to play a strong social role in shaping social policy, in moving a populace’s social commitments through the arts, humanities or social sciences; in improving the living conditions of so many through scientific and applied engineering advances; or in creating a student and alumni deeply imbued with the religious and social values that care for the poor, in a world that too quickly ignores the poor in favor of their own well-being.

And that is perhaps what I most admire about Adamson University.

I tell my colleagues in the United States about your contributions to chemistry and engineering in this part of the world. I talk about the nurses you educate, and the many other excellent fields of study for which you prepare your students. I talk about the many students who come from modest circumstances who look to Adamson to help them reach a life where they can support themselves and their families. But what I most often tell them is about the typhoon of several years ago.

I start by describing the students and staff who were trapped on your upper floors while the first floors of the university were flooded and effectively destroyed. I tell them how your library, computers, files and records, furniture, and even your new gym floor, were all lost. But then, I surprise my hearers when I tell them what you did first as the waters subsided.

Students, faculty, staff and Vincentian priests and brothers went further up the river to the poorest who had always lived in makeshift quarters alongside the river, and who lost everything in that flood. Whether it was burying and praying for the dead, comforting the survivors, helping the newly homeless find shelter, food and clean drinking water, or simply clearing the debris, Adamson’s first act was to care for the poor before you cared for your own institution’s needs. I was incredibly moved by that. Vincent’s heart was alive. And it was here in Manila, in Adamson University.

That university’s concern for the social well-being of the poorest among you continues to this day:

1. Your School of Good Governance for Social Development trains grassroots leaders from among the urban poor and informal settlers for leadership and ethical governance. Many universities train the wealthy but there is hardly any school that purposely goes to the community leaders in the poor urban areas or slums. Adamson has a program for them.
2. Your Academic Service Learning program teaches students their fields of study, but by applying it in situations that assist the poor. I’m especially moved by the work all of you do for the rehabilitation and organization of slum dwellers or the urban poor who have been displaced from living along the railroad tracks. Some people are often forgotten once they are relocated, but Adamson never forgets, and students and faculty alike are making a real difference
3. Even your St. Vincent School of Theology is intentionally designed to provide theological education from the "margins." Future priests and lay leaders are well trained here to work with the poor, and to see this world and the next through their eyes.

All of these are but examples of something far grander, namely your commitment to put the resources of a great university to the service of the poor.

The truth is that “Vincentian higher education” has at least three aspects. (1) The provision of an excellent education to those who society is not inclined to assist; (2) the direction of our considerable intellectual resources to the great social problems and challenges of our day, especially on behalf of those at our societies’ margins; and (3) the creation of a vast alumni who themselves leave our institutions with a Vincentian heart, wanting to make a real difference in their communities.

It has been my own great joy to spend my life in Vincentian education. Working in Vincentian Universities combines my love for the intellectual life with a desire to serve the poor that I myself received because I attended a Vincentian university in my youth. My life took a direction I never could have imagined because I went to a Vincentian university, and I’ll forever be grateful for those who saw something I didn’t at the time.

That’s ultimately the heart of a university, isn’t it? To see possibility in the young. And it’s the great heart of a Vincentian university to see possibility in ALL the young, especially in those who society is all too willing to leave to their own devices. But not just the possibility that they might become fully contributing members of this society, but that they too might be “Vincentians;” that all who walk through our doors, our collaborators and students, can be brought into the great project that Vincent saw and to which Vincent invited everyone.

Everyone should have an opportunity. Everyone should be brought into the great work. That’s the heart of it.

Notice that St. Vincent’s startling question in 1656 did not ask WHETHER foundlings should be admitted; he merely asked how soon it would happen. He saw possibility in the young people of his time. And so must we who continue his great work.

You have built an institution of great heart. I wish you continued blessings as you celebrate your anniversary year. May the young always find their possibility recognized and welcomed here and their intellects well taught and formed, so that they themselves may be sent forth to be a great blessing to the world. May God richly all of you who are Adamson University, and through you, a waiting world.

God bless you.

1. *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Marie Poole, DC and Evelyne Franc, DC, et al, “Council of August 13, 1656,” (New York: New City Press, 1985) 13b:353. [Hereafter cited as CCD] cf. CCD, “Conference of February 2, 1653,” 9:463. Thanks to Rev. John Rybolt, CM for drawing my attention to the minutes of the Daughters of Charity’s councils and to Sisters Evelyne Franc, DC and Marie Poole DC, as well as Revs. Patrick Griffin, CM, Robert Maloney, CM, and Edward Udovic, CM for their insights on St. Vincent’s work with the foundlings. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. e.g., CCD, “Conference of December 7, 1643,” 9:104-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)