

ADDRESS TO THE DELEGATES

POPE JOHN PAUL II

Dear Father General of the Congregation of the Mission, dear Vincentian Fathers,

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Blessed be the Lord! He it is who gives us the grace of this meeting for a better service to the Church. Let us likewise turn our hearts and minds towards Saint Vincent de Paul, a man of action and prayer, of administration and imagination, of leadership and humility, a man of yesterday and of today. May this man from Landes, who by God's grace became a master of charity, help us all to put our hands to the plough once again, without ever looking back, for the only work that counts: announcing the Good News to the poor.

This prayer does not allow me to forget to thank Father Richard McCullen for his good work as general and to offer my prayerful best wishes to him on his re-election to this post, that he may accomplish to the best of his ability the mission which Divine Providence has reserved for him in this demanding period for societies of the apostolic life. To you, also, who have been sent as delegates by your forty-eight provinces, I express an ardent wish: accomplish the impossible in order to share with the four thousand members of your Congregation the renewing spirit of this thirty-seventh Chapter.

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As I was acquainting myself with the synthesis of the responses to the questionnaire which was designed to prepare for this meeting at Rome, I noticed the very high percentage of participation from the provinces. What likewise struck me is the unanimous will to go forward together in three principal directions: a more distinct commitment to the service of the poor, a renewal of community life and a necessary revision of the formation for the mission.

Without interfering in the course of your labors, it is my responsibility to encourage you in the name of Christ and of the Church.

With regard to your first goal, you are completely in accord with the spirit of your Founder, who wrote: *We are the priests of the poor. God has chosen us for them. This is our principal work, all the rest is accessory.* Again I quote this sentence which is so much in his style: *The poor person must be approached as one who approaches fire.* Your desire for a new recentring on the primary service is likewise in keeping with the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.

From the very first lines we read that the Church wishes to be present in the midst of people who toil and are suffering. It is, in short, the spirituality which Monsieur Vincent never ceased to fathom and to pass on to his disciples; the adoration and imitation of the Incarnate Word. *The Missionary of the Father sent to the poor.* Since the 17th century, the forms of poverty have changed. It could be said that they have not regressed. The advent of science and its applications, industrial development and the often haphazard growth centers have begotten a new class of poor who suffer as much as and, undoubtedly, more than the rural and town populations of past centuries. Without monopolizing charity and social action, Monsieur Vincent would

move heaven and earth to go the aid of today's poor and to evangelize them. Dear Fathers and Brothers of the Mission search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short and long term solutions; adaptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so, you will work for the credibility of the Gospel and of the Church. Without waiting further, however, live close to the poor and see to it that the Good News of Jesus Christ is never lacking to them.

(3)

The desire to renew community life, which has arisen from all sides in the Congregation, has also caught my attention. You know how Saint Vincent used to speak or write with evangelical fervor regarding the fractiousness and egoism of certain communities. Above all, he sought to set ablaze the heart of his Brothers of the Mission by begging them to go to the very source of community life; namely, the depths of the mystery of the Trinity. What would he say today when new communities which are arising everywhere are the sign of the need for the warmth of community life in a society which is easily anonymous and cold? Your Constitutions (chapter 1) make perfectly explicit the spirit and the ways of the common life such as were taught by your Father. It is up to each community to form its plan well. It depends on each member to make it succeed. I offer you lively encouragement to set aside a special time every week or every fortnight to search more deeply into the mystery of prayer, to immerse yourselves in the writings, so contemporary, of your Founder, to evaluate calmly your apostolic activities, to examine carefully your community life. If you speak of co-responsibility in community, let it be correctly understood. The members of a community cannot reduce the office of superior to that of subscribing to all their proposals. They must help him to steer a good course according to the demands of Saint Vincent with patience. May your guests, may your neighbors bear witness, I dare say be unsettled by your simplicity and your dignity, by your poverty and your joy, by your understanding of the problems of the times and by your apostolic zeal! May exchanges between communities, between provinces, perhaps better organized, be a source of life for the whole Congregation of the Mission.

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Finally, I offer you my foremost encouragement for an emphasis on and a renewal of the formation for the Mission. Without the least doubt, if Saint Vincent were alive today, he would uphold, in the face of all opposition, intimacy with God, a feeling for God. He would strongly re-echo the conciliar text inviting priests to found the unity of their life and action in the pastoral charity of Christ, the one Shepherd. Regarding the precise plan of formation, he would draw abundantly on the Decree for the Formation of Priests. I will not dwell on the obvious: namely, the present and future changes in society. Let us think only of the popular missions which Saint Vincent, together with Saint John Eudes, promoted in so remarkable a manner. What language and what methods would they use today? The attempts undertaken in the course of the last twenty years, in the West, have often run up against considerable socio-cultural changes. That is why I unreservedly support the program you are studying for giving the future priests and future brothers of the Congregation of the Mission a spiritual, doctrinal and pastoral formation which is profound, solid and adapted to the needs of our times. Your concern for the formation of the directors of formation is also of prime importance. It is up to you to see if temporary work on the part of your young candidates for priesthood with a good pastoral team of priests would not help mature and strengthen them. It is up to you, finally, to decide on the establishment of

regional centers or of an international center for Vincentian studies. Obviously, this program can help the renewal in unity. Moreover, does the motto given to this thirty-seventh Assembly: *Unum Corpus et unus Spiritus in Christo*, include all your present and future efforts.

Dear Sons of Monsieur Vincent, today's Church needs you very much. She will not be disappointed! It is in this hope that I invoke on the Congregation of the Mission, on its leaders and all its members God's most abundant blessings and the maternal protection of Mary Immaculate, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.