

Rome, July 18, 2008

*Anniversary of the first apparition of the Our Lady
to St. Catherine Labouré*

To all members of the Vincentian Family

My dear sisters and brothers,

“167 children who had been sold to Chinese factories as a cheap labor source were recently set free. They had been living in conditions bordering on slavery, working 300 hours a month for 50 cents an hour.”

“Thousands of immigrants are fleeing recent outbreaks of violence in South Africa.”

“The UN has launched a dramatic appeal against hunger. Some 800 million persons lack adequate food due to rising costs.”

“A mother who has been abused, and is now pregnant and homeless seeks help to avoid losing custody of her five children. She is in desperate need of a job and a place to live in order to be able to keep her children.”

In my letter to all the members of the Vincentian Family concerning our day of prayer associated with the feast of Saint Vincent, I decided to begin with these press headlines. When I read them and others like them, I often ask myself: What is being done to alleviate the suffering that exists in our world? What am I doing, and what more can we do, as persons of good will, followers of Jesus Christ and members of the Vincentian Family? We are called to action, and there is much that we can do, if we take inspiration from the life of Vincent de Paul, whose feast we will be celebrating once again on September 27.

Saint Vincent de Paul himself, in speaking to the Missioners, said:

*“What! to be a Christian and see a brother afflicted **without weeping with him, without being sick with him**, would be to be without charity, to be a mere picture of a Christian, to be without humanity, to be worse than the brute beasts!”*

(Coste XIb, Conference of May 30, 1659)

Allow me to also recall the words of Pope Paul VI in his inspiring Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*:

*“No one is permitted to disregard the plight of his brothers living in dire poverty, enmeshed in ignorance and tormented by insecurity. The Christian, **moved by this sad state of affairs**, should echo the words of Christ: ‘I have compassion on the crowd.’” (Populorum Progressio, 74)*

It is from this perspective that I would like us to prepare for the feast of Saint Vincent this year, 2008. I will concretize these ideas more, inviting you to participate in something that is commonly called “interpreting reality from a faith perspective.”

In an atmosphere of prayer, after having called on the Holy Spirit and **being fully aware of the presence of God** in the midst of the group gathered together in the Lord’s name, I invite each of you to share situations that you know about, either because you have experienced them personally, or because you have learned about them through the various means available to us today. I don’t know if it is too daring to suggest that, when possible, the actual person who experiences the situation of suffering and/or risk be the one to share it with the group.

The second part consists of allowing ourselves to be “touched,” **letting ourselves be “affected”** by the suffering of our brothers and sisters, as Saint Vincent, Saint Louise, Sister Rosalie Rendu, Frederic Ozanam were “touched”... along with so many other prophets in the Vincentian Family who have gone before us in faith, inspired by the Vincentian charism.

Acknowledging the presence of “the Poor God” in our gathering, and being aware of God’s love for each one of his sons and daughters, cannot leave us indifferent. It will bring us to the next step of **commitment** to a concrete action. This involves the truly Vincentian attitude of passing from “affective love” to the practice of “effective love,” that is modelled on the word of God, Vincentian documents and the documents of the Church, especially its social doctrine.

In entering into this dynamic, the text of chapter 25 of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, one of Saint Vincent’s most cherished passages, takes on new dimensions. The expression “*I was hungry*,” will resonate in us as more than hunger for material bread, as a plea for the bread of the Word, for Life in abundance. The words “*I was thirsty*” will speak of the thirst for justice. “*I was naked*,” will also mean: clothe me with the right to be a person, to be your brother or sister, to be a son or daughter of the same Father!

This is the mystique that Saint Vincent has passed on to us; he has taught us to be contemplatives in action. We are called to a profound experience of God who cries out for words of justice and life through persons who are impoverished, excluded, forgotten by the system. This God impels us to create a new society that is truly

humane, one that is penetrated with Gospel values. In this way, our charity will be creative and our life will carry a message that speaks to those around us.

This is what I propose to you in connection with the feast of Saint Vincent, so that in the offertory in the Eucharistic celebration on September 27, you can present on the paten the fruits of your reflection and the concrete actions to which you have committed yourselves in favor of persons who are poor.

During this process, which can take place in a series of sessions, **refer once more to the five reflection themes prepared by the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change which were sent out last year in preparation for the feast of Saint Vincent.**

I would also invite you to use the prayer for systemic change which is part of the reflections that I just mentioned, which I include below:

We praise and thank you, O God, Creator of the Universe.
You have made all things good and have given us the earth to cultivate.

Grant that we may always use created things gratefully,
and share them generously with those in need.
Give us creativity in helping the poor meet their basic human needs.


Open our minds and hearts so that we might stand at their side
and assist them to change whatever unjust structures keep them poor.

Enable us to be brothers and sisters to them, friends who walk with them
in their struggle for fundamental human rights.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. AMEN.

As we celebrate the solemnity of Saint Vincent this year, let us ask the Lord of Life to help us to be creative in serving persons who are poor.

In gratitude for all that God allows us to do together as a Family and with appreciation for your generosity,

I remain your brother in Saint Vincent,



G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General