

ADDRESS TO THE LADIES OF CHARITY, USA
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Giving in Faith and Love

Opening Remarks

President Lucy Saunders and board members, planning committee for this National Assembly, members of the Ladies of Charity, speakers, and honored guests:

I am happy- indeed privileged - to be here with you this morning as keynote speaker for this National Assembly. When asked to be your keynote speaker, I felt a little reluctant at first. A keynote address is viewed as a pivotal speech, one that sets the tone for the gathering of a group. And that creates a little pressure of sorts, wouldn't you agree? However, the root of 'keynote' is key, which implies an opening or passage to another way of thinking. And sharing my key to open the door into the charism we share as members of the Vincentian Family excites me.

Another reason why this "keynote speech" is a joy for me to share with you is your affiliation with the AIC, a group which has been a key example of Catholic spirituality and Vincentian service to the poor for nearly four hundred years! Reflect on this for a moment: the first and most enduring work of St. Vincent DePaul was with lay people like yourselves in small parish groups serving the poor in their midst. A decade before he founded the Congregation of the Mission, and two decades before he founded the Daughters of Charity, St. Vincent de Paul entrusted this 'keystone of caring' of Christian service and catechesis to your forebears.

From that small start at Chatillon des Dombes, the first Vincentian work of faith and service, the AIC today includes members in 52 countries. The Ladies of Charity, USA have been present here for over a century and a half, due to the vision of Catherine Harkins, who in 1857 began to serve the poor in St. Louis. Today, you serve in 25 states making up five regions. The Ladies of Charity, like the AIC, are a unique group, due not only to your shared history and heritage, but because of what you stand for: *to provide Vincentian leadership to women acting together against poverty*. (Mission Statement, LC-USA web site, 2012)

The Meaning of "Giving in Faith and Love"

Your theme for this National Assembly, "*Giving in Faith and Love*" is an apt one for today. We live in a nation where giving is encouraged; indeed, it is part and parcel of our civic

duty. Both as individuals and a country, we Americans are a most generous and giving people, especially in emergencies. But our theme today is not just about ‘giving’ in and of itself.

“*Giving in Faith and Love*” goes to the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ and a bearer of the Vincentian charism. Jesus’ life was one of complete ‘giving in faith and love.’ It led him to make the ultimate sacrifice –his life- to bring us salvation. Mark’s Gospel says it best: “The Son of Man has come not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for the many.” (Mk.10:45) The lives and deeds of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac give us the “raison d’être” for the Vincentian charism we claim today. As with each of us, Vincent and Louise began with the greatest gift of all: the gift of self. That gift, made strong by their faith in Jesus Christ, gave them a capacity to love all people, especially the poor.

Thus, your theme not only sets the tone for this gathering, but it is a summation of what it means to carry on the Vincentian charism as a Lady of Charity today. Being committed to Christ and the poor is not only about having information and taking action, but it also involves personal conversion and transformation of society. And your Mission Statement says it well: “To provide Vincentian leadership to women acting together against poverty... and to serve rather than to be served in humility, simplicity, and charity.” (Have we heard that piece on service before? Yes!)

Two Crucial Issues for Women Today

Vincentian leadership is crucial in today’s world, not only to carry on the charism of Vincent and Louise, but to join in alleviating the tremendous, constant suffering of the poor. As you know from your work, and from the excellent written and digital resources provided for you by this organization, there are several key areas of concern calling out for us as members of the Vincentian Family. Let me focus on two areas of concern to help raise awareness about them. They are the **feminization of poverty** and **human trafficking**.

These two areas are problems that are simultaneously international and local. The feminization of poverty is not a current catch phrase: it is a reality I am sure you encounter in your service as Ladies of Charity. Across the globe, women comprise 70% of over one billion people living in poverty. Here in the USA, it is a fact that women are often underpaid, limited in their access to education and advancement, and face greater obstacles as single parents and sole providers for their families. Indeed, the feminization of poverty has occurred alongside another misery which includes both women and men; namely, that of the working poor.

These are the people making minimum wage, often without health care, and at the mercy of an economy relying on ‘outsourcing and downsizing’ as strategies for growth. No matter how long or hard they work, they never achieve financial stability. One lost paycheck or layoff, and they and their loved ones are at the mercy of the economic elements. These factors account for

the steady rise both in unemployment and homelessness among families. A July 2012 survey by the Associated Press of a dozen economists in anticipation of the Fall, 2012 Census report noted that the poverty rate has risen over 15%, the highest in thirty years. Over 47 million people - or one out of every six Americans- is classified as poor. Women often bear the brunt of this reality.

Human trafficking is another area that has come to light as a disgraceful and pervasive problem. Originally believed to occurring largely in developing nations, we now know how prevalent it is throughout the world. It has destroyed the lives of so many young women and girls. Often lured into foreign countries and unfamiliar circumstances by promises of work and a new life, these women and girls are misled into menial labor and many are forced to become modern day “sex slaves”. To keep them in this state, they are often intimidated, drugged, and beaten. It is a soul-destroying experience for each person affected.

It is also a reality on our own shores, with estimates of nearly 18,000 people who are trafficked yearly to the USA. Among these people are the most vulnerable, including minors and the undocumented. Sadly, human trafficking appears to be a lucrative enterprise for organized crime. It is no wonder the federal government and international law enforcement agencies are actively involved in combating this evil. Both the feminization of poverty and human trafficking are problems that go back to the era of Vincent de Paul.

That is why I am edified by your corporate stance on these issues, and your willingness to address them locally and nationally. At times, issues such as these can seem too overwhelming for us to make any lasting change. That’s where our Vincentian charism is indispensable. It is our ‘heritage of hope.’ In any situation where we are called to serve, we must do so with faith in the redemptive power of Jesus Christ and recall the dedication of Vincent and Louise. And we must always remember that hope begins with one- one person, one situation, and one response.

The Vincentian “Triple A” for Today

While the AIC counts over 250,000 members world-wide, it began in 1617 in one parish, with one family, to meet one need. Similarly, the Ladies of Charity with over 8000 members began with one woman with a dream and a desire to serve. The lives and deeds of Vincent and Louise remind us that our mission is both spiritual and temporal. We must always be ready to meet the needs of the poor. Yet, to be ready to serve as Jesus and our founders did, I suggest a three-fold way I call the “Vincentian Family Triple A”: *accompaniment, action, and advocacy*.

I hope the well-respected other “Triple A USA” (Automobile Association of America) won’t mind my borrowing their name for a moment. I think our “Vincentian Triple A” is a great support for disciples of Jesus and followers of Vincent and Louise who desire, in the words of

Mother Teresa, to do “something beautiful for God.” Let me briefly explore the meaning of our “Vincentian Triple A”: accompaniment, action, and advocacy.

Accompaniment- the first ‘Triple A’

Accompaniment is a word rich in cultural and religious meaning. It starts with openness to ‘letting go’ of one’s preconceived ideas and feelings about a societal issue, an ethnic group, or even a person. It involves the gift of presence, the art of listening from the heart, and allowing the experience of the “other” to filter into my mind and heart. When this happens, one is able to truly accompany a person and to experience and accept their reality.

In the Gospels, Jesus is a model of accompaniment, especially with those shunned by the people of his day: the poor, lepers, public sinners, and tax collectors. His accompaniment with such persons was a cause for scandal. At first drawn in by Jesus’ words and mighty deeds, the Pharisees and Scribes found his accompaniment of the poor and the outcast a stumbling block they could not accept: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Lk.15:2)

Rooted in Christ, Vincent and Louise are our models of Christian accompaniment. Their conversions occurred by allowing themselves to be led by the Spirit of Jesus into accompanying the poor. Vincent’s way of accompaniment was to show “gentleness and cordiality, remembering this is why God has sent you.” (Vol. IX, 199) Louise thought the same way: “Gentleness, cordiality, and forbearance must always be our practice.” (L. 377, SW, 406). It is noteworthy one of the three AIC mission goals (and of the Ladies of Charity), is “to accompany women in specific ways in their search for empowerment and autonomy.” (LC Web Site, 2012) This goal will assist the poor you serve, and will also strengthen your Christian faith.

Action- the second ‘Triple-A’

Accompaniment leads us into action. We realize that once we have cast our lot with the poor, we cannot stand by idly and wait for others to do the work God calls us to do. This is where another of your mission goals comes into play: “to fight against all forms of poverty and exclusion by actions and projects of transformation.” (LC, Web Site, 2012). Let me focus on one key word in this goal: transformation. Action on behalf of the poor is best achieved when change comes about not only for the person in need, but for the betterment of the community and society at large. This is transformation at its best, as we see in the legacy of Vincent and Louise

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac lived in an era of horrific poverty, famine, and war. They saw first- hand the terrible needs of the poor. Their assistance was meant to empower the poor to become self-sufficient. Vincent said that “the aid contributed should be organized in a way that beneficiaries are gradually freed from their dependence on others and become self-

sufficient.” (Conf. July 11, 1657) As Ladies of Charity, you must not only provide emergency help- which is Vincentian at its core- but promote strategies and actions that empower the poor.

Advocacy- The Final “A”

Advocacy is a word evoking many reactions. What is an advocate? In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples that he will send the Holy Spirit to be their ‘Advocate’ after he is gone. Interestingly, the word ‘advocate’ is also translated as *helper* and *comforter*. As advocates for the poor, you must be informed of the social, political, and economic issues that impact their lives. To do this, you must be willing to move beyond your comfort zone.

Consider this part as ‘accompaniment of the mind’, if you will. You become an effective advocate by digging deeper into issues that affect the world of the poor. You are willing to look beyond slogans and media sound bites and educate yourself on the world of the poor and the structures that restrict them. By using your God-given powers of intellect and common sense, you learn how to advocate for the poor in the public square. A true advocate seeks fairness and equality and takes a prophetic stance against popular opinion or the status quo.

As advocates for the poor, you realize that behind every statistic, there is a person. Every underpaid or unemployed worker is a human being with the same economic needs as you or I. Every uninsured person is someone who wants to stay healthy. Every undocumented worker is an aspiring citizen with a future dream. Every homeless family is parents and children without a secure place of their own. Most of all, despite the negative stereotyping of people in these predicaments, we know these persons are creatures of a loving God, created with human dignity.

Systemic Change and the Vincentian “Triple A”

A contemporary way to understand and incorporate the “Vincentian Triple A” into your life and activity as Ladies of Charity is by a methodology called “Systemic Change”. It has become an important tool for reflection and action within the Vincentian Family. I am pleased to see it as a resource on your website and a workshop at this assembly. Blessed Frederic Ozanam, the founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, captured well the purpose of systemic change in his observation, “Charity alone is not sufficient. It treats the wounds, but does not stop the blows that caused them. Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveler who has been attacked, but it is Justice’s role to stop the attacks.” (Vincentiana, 2012, No. 1, p.32)

As Ladies of Charity and members of the AIC, you are familiar with its third mission goal: “To speak out against injustices, put pressure on the structures and decision makers, and to fight against the causes of poverty.” (LC web Site, 2012) This is the final fruit of entering into the process of systemic change, the third part of the “see, judge, act” framework. I urge all here at

this National Assembly to prayerfully reflect on this “Vincentian Triple A” that I have outlined. May I also suggest you learn more about systemic change, and take time to explore how to make it a part of your work individually, and together as members of the Ladies of Charity.

Consistent with our charism and the call we share to ***accompaniment, action, advocacy, and systemic change***, I invite you to extend your collaboration to all members of the Vincentian Family, whenever possible. In preparation for the feast day of St. Vincent de Paul on September 27, I ask you to reflect on how we can better bring about **collaboration and evangelization**. To this end, I offer you this prayer intention: ***“Lord, help us work together to share the Good News and bring life to those who are poor.”***

Mother Teresa’s “Gift” to us

As I conclude, I want to thank you for your presence here today as members in the Ladies of Charity. Each of you embodies in your own unique way what it means to ‘give in faith and love. As Ladies of Charity, you are a witness to hope in a fragile and broken world. Your call to service is best seen in a line from the parable in Matthew’s Gospel on the Last Judgment: “Whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.” (Mt. 25: 40).

It isn’t easy to serve the poor and to give of yourself day after day. It is tiring, wearing, and frustrating, as well you know. That is why your spiritual storehouse must be replenished through prayer, reflection on scripture, and the Eucharist. They will ultimately remind us that our efforts must be aligned with God’s will and conformed to the life of Christ. Otherwise, we can lose sight of who calls us to service and who sustains us. St. Vincent de Paul said, “God asks first for the heart, then for the work.” Although known as a man of action and organization, Vincent’s daily schedule revealed that of a man who spent much time during his busy day in prayer and reflection. Please continue to make use of the spiritual supports the Church and the Ladies of Charity provide for you, and you will know a strength and peace that will sustain you.

Allow me to end with a prayerful insight attributed to Mother Teresa. I think it speaks well to our theme of “Giving in Faith and Love”.

*The fruit of silence is prayer;
the fruit of prayer is faith;
the fruit of faith is love;
the fruit of love is service;
and the fruit of service is peace.”*

May the Lord bless and gift each of you with faith, love, fruitful service, and peace.

