

GOING WITH GOD'S FLOW: THE CHARITY OF CHRIST IMPELS US

Can you feel the ENERGY in this room? Take a minute to be aware of it, to tap into it, to align yourself with it, to open yourself to it. It's the energy of all of us whose lives center around the Charity of Christ. The energy of that outpouring love – amazing and overwhelming and beyond anything we can ask or imagine – is what preoccupies us and focuses us and impels us.

In Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical, he talks about that very mystery of Love, of Charity, in words that we really need to ponder – we who follow Vincent, Louise, Elizabeth Seton, Catherine Spalding, Frederic Ozanam, Rosalie Rendu, in the way of Charity. “The love which God lavishes upon us and which we in turn must share with others...” The Pope is talking about the energy of God's love, the flow of love, and the ripples, the circles, the tidal waves that happen when we share that energy of love with others.

I want to talk with you today about ENERGY. No, this isn't a pitch to turn down the thermostat or rely less on oil or buy a hybrid car (though that's certainly not a bad idea). This is about the energy of the Spirit, the energy and life and power that comes to us from the Risen Christ, the kind of ENERGY we celebrate at Eastertide.

1. My first point today is this: GOD'S ENERGY IMPELS US TOWARD RELATIONSHIP, CONNECTION, COLLABORATION, PARTNERSHIP.

2. But, even though God never stops calling us to move in harmony with God's energy, we find so many ways to block and resist that energy. So in the second part I'd like to reflect with you on the taste and feel and shape of RESISTANCE. I'll invite you to explore how RESISTANCE IS AN INVITATION, a doorway that can lead to transformation. We'll see what can happen when we turn resistance around, redirect its energy, and “go with the flow.”

3. Lastly, in our rich tradition of Charity we have a great resource to help us harness the energy of resistance and tap into the flow of God's energy. We have the gift of the LIFE & WISDOM OF OUR VINCENTIAN FOUNDERS. And we have the great Vincentian word: “AND.”

As we move through these days, let us never forget that all of our reflection is taking place in a world that is so much bigger than ourselves. What kind of world are we immersed in – as incarnations of God's energy? It is a world that cries out for God's energy to be released. (E.g., 2005 was the first year on record when a full-time worker at minimum wage could NOT afford a 1-bedroom apartment anywhere in the country at average market rates. E.g., nine months after devastating hurricanes in our Gulf Coast, millions of people, many of them poor, are still homeless or displaced, and government agencies seem unable to deliver needed services. E.g., the list of dead and wounded in Iraq continues to mount – ordinary civilians as well as military personnel.)

I. GOD’S ENERGY IMPELS US TOWARD RELATIONSHIP, CONNECTION, COLLABORATION, PARTNERSHIP, BELONGING

The God we believe in is a God with a definite bias for community, a God of the group. The story of God’s relationship with us that we read in our Scriptures tells us that salvation is something that happens to us together, not individually. We are meant to live and grow and build a better world and make our way to God together, not separately. Is that messy? slow? annoying? inefficient? Does that fly in the face of our cherished American individualism, our Lone Ranger mentality, our deep-seated belief that if you want anything done right you have to do it yourself? Of course it does.

But that doesn’t diminish the power of the Word of God: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” That doesn’t negate the dream that Jesus called “the reign of God.” That dream was all about a new way of being in relationship, a transformed community, a new kind of family, a way of connecting and collaborating at the deepest level we could imagine. He never tired talking about it, showing us what it might look like, and demonstrating how we must live if that dream is ever to be realized. Jesus’ dream is all about BELONGING. His vision: Good news to those on the margins – sick, prisoners, poor, immigrants, forgotten, powerless – THEY BELONG.

Jesus’ dream took flesh in the story of a man and a woman, Vincent and Louise, in 17th century France, in whom the dream of serving God’s poor burned strong and wouldn’t let them rest, in the story of simple country girls who caught that dream and came to Paris, and spread like fire throughout France and the world. That story is a spark that has caught fire in us, a burning, impelling energy of Charity alive.

Vincent and Louise wrote another chapter in the story of BELONGING. Their vision: Christ meets us in the poor who have a claim on us. We need one another; we BELONG to one another.

In her own world of 19th century America, Elizabeth Seton added another color to the vision. So did Catherine Spalding in frontier Kentucky; so did Thomas Judge, CM, in Brooklyn and Alabama. Each of them taught us: We are meant to meet our grace, by living, praying, and working together in deep, caring relationships of BELONGING that impel us to lives of service.

And in mid-nineteenth century France, Frederic Ozanam and Rosalie Rendu were caught up in the flow: We need to bring the warmth of Christ’s love to a cold world, to make it into a place where all BELONG.

All kinds of people today are urging us to think in terms of belonging and connection. Scientists tell us that interbeing, interconnection, is the basic song of the universe. Every creature is linked with every other, and each is connected with its environment. Organizational consultants like Margaret Wheatley remind us to notice that “*Life opens to more possibilities through new patterns of connection,*” and in it all there’s lots of “fuzziness, unexpected turns, bursts of creative insight.”¹

¹ Margaret Wheatley, A Simpler Way (Berrett-Koehler, 1999)

The tides, the shore, the cosmos, the earth, tell us that everything that exists is profoundly connected. The fundamental direction of creation moves from “I” to “We”, from “my” to “ours”. The movement of connection (which can end up as one creature being someone else’s lunch!) becomes, in the Spirit’s working, a movement toward interdependence and mutuality.

We are rooted in this earth-awareness that we are not alone, and we are all related. What if we took this seriously, as God’s Word to us in the Vincentian Family of Charity? We are born out of the grace that was given to our founders, each in their moment of time – the grace of KNOWING WE BELONG, especially to those in need. We are kin to them, we share the one life, which is the life of our God whose name is Love. Like them, we are called to break boundaries that seem given – boundaries that divide rich and poor, even boundaries that divide our groups, our congregations, provinces, one from the other. How are we being called beyond these boundaries? Can we enlarge our understanding of the boundary-breaking energy that is God’s flow toward the “We”? What does the WE of God’s dream look like in our midst?

In the unforgettable words of Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara, *“We are food and drink for one another. We are one another’s body and blood. We are one another’s salvation.”*²

II. A LOOK AT RESISTANCE

Does this vision of the Charity of Christ IMPEL us – or sometimes, does it REPEL us? Does it evoke our resistance? And what is going on when that happens?

I suspect that you and I know a lot about resistance. We know that all living things resist what they perceive as threats to their survival. Most humans resist change of any kind. Each of us knows the feel of persistent resistance: neck stiffens, back “goes up”, stomach tightens, eyes narrow, arms fold. We have a vocabulary of resistance: stiff-necked, tight-lipped, hard- or stony-hearted, a face that could stop a clock, digging in your heels, hitting your head against a wall.

Institutions of their nature are resistant to change. They seek to preserve the status quo. They have a built-in resistance to the new, to the free spirits. Examples: a male-dominated church resists women, a corporation resists changing its product line, a school faculty complains, “We’ve always done it this way,” a clerical church resists the laity. We know resistance well.

Let me remind you of some examples of resistance in our Charity story:

1. Back in the time of Vincent and Louise, some in the Church resisted their attempts to think and operate out of the box. “Women living together and not calling themselves religious? Not making perpetual vows, but renewing them every year? Not having the protection of cloister, but going out onto the streets to serve the poor? What is to be said about this radical innovation?”
2. In the 13 congregations of the Sisters of Charity Federation, there are lots of myths we continue to tell ourselves about our stories. “Elizabeth Seton NEVER wanted union with France”; “She ALWAYS wanted union with France”. Those who cherish their Setonian

² Ivone Gebara, Longing for Running Water (Fortress Press, 1999)

roots need to remember that there were other pioneers – Catherine Spalding, Fr. Judge, and others – who enfolded the charism of Charity in other parts of the United States. Sometimes our need to preserve our group’s independent identity, to tell ourselves that we were the first, or the best, or the ones who have REALLY kept the true spirit, builds walls instead of bridges, creates mountains instead of moving them, and blocks instead of freeing us for mission.

What do we know about resistance? For one thing, it’s a marvelous teacher. “EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED THROUGH MY RESISTANCE!” I’d like to develop three points about resistance, and then invite you to think about what moves you and your organizations through resistance, to new places of freedom and transformation, new embodiments of affective and effective love.

A. Resistance usually marks the place where we are afraid.

Resistance usually springs from fear: fear of getting close to God, fear of getting close to others (“What will they ask of me?”), fear of losing control of our lives (as if control were in our power!), fear of losing ourselves in the immensity of God/the other, fear of death.³

Resistance signals our growing edge, the place of our wounds. That is always a privileged, holy place where the Spirit is mightily at work, where God waits to meet us. One writer believes that change doesn’t really start with a beginning, it starts with an ending. Something has to end, die, move on, let go, to make space for the new. And don’t we resist it mightily!

Resistance is at work in every place that I label “non-negotiable,” where I am tied down, stubborn, stuck, in every area of life that I refuse to open to discussion. “If there is such an area, love is liable to bring it on to the table.”⁴ The point is to keep making more of my life available to the Spirit of God, with unrestricted readiness for God’s work, Jesus’ mission.

Is our deep fear that God won’t be enough for us? Does that fear lie at the root of our resistant attitudes and behaviors, the ways we choose to narrow our focus, to attend to things within, things immediate, and turn our eyes away from the bigger picture/possibility?

Isn’t this what I did when instead of listening to a program on the genocide in Darfur, I shut the radio off and read a Newsweek article about the movie *The DaVinci Code*? Isn’t this what our government does when it flexes its muscles and tries to impose terms on the rest of the world, whether the issue is immigration policy, foreign aid, the Middle East, or privatization of water? Fear narrows our vision and blocks the Spirit’s energy that always stretches us beyond.

Another face of resistance shows itself in the ways we can circle our wagons and focus energy in on ourselves. Michael Downey points to this danger. “In times of great transition or of perceived crisis, some groups tend to safeguard and strengthen identity – personal, corporate, or national – by way of contrast to the other, or others.”⁵

³ Cf. William Barry, *God’s Passionate Desire and Our Response* (Ave Maria, 1993)

⁴ Iain Matthew, *Impact of God* (Trafalgar Square Press, 1995, 43

⁵ Michael Downey, “Participating in the Mission of Word and Spirit,” *Church*, Winter 2005, 6

Do you ever see this tendency to shore up your identity by contrasting it with others in your community, organization, branch of the Vincentian family? In his Lenten letter of 2005, Fr. Gregory Gay, Vincentian Superior General, asked us pointedly:

“Do I know members of other branches of the Vincentian Family? Do I even care to know them? Do I encourage the members of my own association to collaborate with other branches of the Vincentian Family?...Do I reflect on the first callings that we received from Father Maloney, seeing ourselves as a Vincentian Family, a great army that can harness its forces to do wonderful things for the poor?....Do I at times tend to think that my branch is better than others?”

Are we in the grip of fear that we won't have or do or be enough – that God won't be enough for us? And how might the bonds that unite us as a Vincentian Family be God's answer to that fear?

B. Resistance also has a positive face.

Think of examples of resistance against injustice: the Underground Railroad in the U.S. in the mid-19th century, the non-violent protests of Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, the United Farm Workers, Dorothy Day, peace activists, those who demonstrate against the School of the Americas in Georgia that trains military leaders in methods of torture; the Mothers of the Disappeared in Latin America.. What about the resistance from the middle ground of Catholicism that Voice of the Faithful is offering? “Where institutions fail, resistance groups spring up.” There is a prophetic call to stand against the “principalities and powers” beyond us and within us, to work for change in oppressive and dehumanizing systems.

Feminist writers speak of “the power of anger in the work of love” – resistance as a healthy defense mechanism. Think of the women you know who have summoned the courage to leave their abusive spouses. Remember the Daughters of Charity in China or the women religious in Eastern Europe who remained faithful to their God and their mission during long years when they could not live their vocation in public.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa gives us a wonderful example of creative resistance. In the days after apartheid he was walking by a construction site where there was room only for one person to pass by. A white man stood in his path and wouldn't move, saying, “I don't give way to gorillas.” Tutu stepped aside and said, “Ah, yes, but I do.”

A wise woman offered me this insight: “Resistance is the dragon that guards the precious treasure.” It's not always bad to resist. The question is: What is the treasure that we are guarding so passionately?

C. Resistance plays a key role in the lifelong ebb and flow of conversion & transformation

We know that God's energy keeps nudging us toward conversion and transformation. God has this way of hollowing out space in us, over and over, space for new life.

Remember times in your life when you felt like you had lost your identity – you didn't know who you were anymore – all that you thought you knew, and counted on, and took for granted, all the hard-won certainties and assumptions that you had come to, seemed to vanish, and you were left in a strange, unfamiliar place -- after a time of loss or trauma, perhaps, or as part of your growing pains into adulthood, or mid-life. Remember, too, how slowly, eventually, you discovered that a new self was emerging from the cocoon of chaos – you began to recognize parts of yourself, familiar but somehow transformed.

Now, can you imagine that groups, communities, organizations, go through the same dark night of wandering lost in a dark wood, feeling their cherished sense of self crumble, being propelled by forces within or outside themselves to make radical changes – not just in logos and letterheads, but in their core identity? Of course you can. Our Church, our communities, our organizations, our societies, have been living inside this reality for 40 years! From one perspective, it feels like disintegration, dying, loss of everything; from the other side of the tomb, or the cocoon, it feels like conversion, transformation, new life.

I daresay that it's part of the human dynamic to meet every invitation to conversion – personal and communal -- with resistance. We fold our arms, clench our teeth, dig in our heels. “Me? Change THIS aspect of myself? Let go of THAT? NO WAY!! You’ve got to be kidding!” But this is exactly how and where the Spirit of Jesus leads us.

OUR WOUNDS, OUR PLACES OF RESISTANCE, ARE DOORWAYS INTO CONVERSION. “We must be so careful to meet our grace,” advises Elizabeth Seton. That says to me that I should meet my grace in the place of woundedness, in the very place where I feel resistance bristle. “I/we can’t...because...” A Buddhist teacher advises: *“Anything you are attached to, let it go. Go to places that scare you.”*⁶

Margaret Wheatley uses the language of organizational transformation instead of conversion, but she's talking about the same movement when she invites us to “surrender certainty” that defines our very sense of self, to be willing to let go of “our most cherished beliefs, our greatest clarity” in order to clear the space to create something new. “Look for the differences, those ideas and perspectives we find disturbing,” she challenges us. “What if, at least occasionally, we came together in order to change our mind?”- to be “brought together by our differences rather than separated by them”.⁷ How about that as a goal for your next meeting – or for this gathering of the Vincentian Family?

Loss, or the threat of loss of something precious, breaks us open, makes space, stretches us, expands us to be able to receive more. It can be hard to trust that, in the midst of being broken open, when the taste of loss is real. But when God invites us to let go, surrender, to lose, it's always with the promise that we'll find something more. *“When you sacrifice something precious, you're not really losing it. You're just passing it on to someone else.”*⁸

⁶ Quoted by Pema Chodron, The Places That Scare You, Shambhala, 2001

⁷ Margaret Wheatley, “Disturb Me, Please!”, The Works: Your Source to Being Fully Alive, Summer 2000

⁸ Mitch Albom, The Five People You Meet in Heaven, (Hyperion, 2003)

What is precious to us? And what are we being called to let go, to give away, to hand over? Could it be that resistance signals that a new door is opening, that it is showing us a new treasure that God is inviting us to receive? That the space created by whatever we are being asked to let go and move beyond will be filled by something even more wonderful and precious?

D. What moves us & our communities through the doorway of resistance to self-giving? What moves us to conversion and transformation?

What moves us to allow more of our lives to be available to God, so God's dreams for humankind and creation can be realized? ANSWER: The same thing that always sets free the Company of Charity – the same energy that impelled each one of our founders. What moves us to a new place? Opening our eyes to the need of others, and others in need -- the heart of our Charity charism -- the poor. We are always set free by sitting at table with the poor, the powerless, those routinely ignored and taken advantage of (like the home health workers in our area who make barely the minimum wage and have no benefits).

The poor move us to the margins, with them. They teach us, if we'll listen, to understand how our inner poverty, our personal and communal wounds, our not-enough-ness, is gift. They remind us that we have more to fear from abundance than poverty. The poor, who have a unique claim on us in the Company of Charity, tell us in no uncertain terms, *"We are food and drink for one another. We are one another's body and blood. We are one another's salvation."*

To be saved, literally, we need each other, in all our complexity and differentiation. We need the ones different from us, who puzzle us, disturb us, challenge our certainties, muddy our clarities. Especially we need the poor, who call us ceaselessly beyond ourselves, who teach us who would be teachers, heal us who would be healers, minister to us who would minister. And especially we need each other, and the unique gifts that each of our groups brings.

Remember, the place of resistance, the place of our wounds, is a holy place, a place where God is always very active. What is in the way, says Sr. Anne Harvey, Halifax Sister of Charity, becomes the way.

III. WISDOM OF OUR FOUNDERS: THE VINCENTIAN "AND"

As Vincent, Louise, Elizabeth, Catherine, Rosalie, Frederic, and Thomas listened to the Word of God and pondered God's ways with humans, something happened, something clicked. As they contemplated Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, source and model of all charity, they had the intuition that the WAY TO GOD IS THE WAY OF BOTH/AND, not either/or. As they faced the tensions and conflicts of their times, as the Spirit opened their eyes wider and wider to see the face of Christ everywhere, they planted themselves firmly in the "AND." Not with their heads in the sand, but with their heads and hearts and bodies in the "AND."

AND is a key Vincentian word.⁹ Our founders were people who lived at the extremes and chose to hold them together:

⁹ Cf. Hugh O'Donnell, C.M., "Vincentian Discernment," Vincentian Heritage 15, 1

Love God AND love the neighbor
Rich AND poor
Action AND prayer
Solitude AND community
Head AND heart
Now AND not-yet
Charity AND justice
Service that is material AND spiritual

All of our ancestors to whom we look for guidance on this Vincentian way found energy there, in the AND. At times when we touch our truest self we know that too. Real life happens in the in-between, in the connections, in the struggle to live connected, to live an integrated, whole, holy life, not simply on either end. We get off balance, sidetracked, when we resist the work of integration and opt for one side or the other. It's a place outside of the COMFORT ZONE for most of us, isn't it, a place where we often meet our own resistance.

In my own life, I know that most often I get stuck right there in the AND. Often I gravitate to the place of either/or, one or the other. My head says, "I can't manage to hold both ends, to pay attention to local AND global needs, to the person right next to me AND the neighbor half a world away." My heart says "There's not enough room to love all. Pick and choose. It's easier to point to one group as bad guys and the other as good: politicians are bad, poor are good."

AND is a place of grace for us in the Vincentian family. It's a place of BELONGING, of INCLUSION, of COMMUNION. We speak of our vocation to live on the margins. I'm suggesting that one way to understand this today is to live with the extremes, holding them in creative tension, resisting the pull to stay on one end or the other, choosing to live in the in-between.

The word AND pushes us, prods us, propels us into one house, one room, one table. AND is all about BELONGING. Our Vincentian call is to create places of BELONGING. The founder of the JustFaith program has said that, "When love gets big", when it reaches out far and wide, it leans toward those on the margins, on the edges, those who are invisible and hurting. And as it does this, it reflects God.¹⁰

Our founders Vincent and Louise gave us a revolutionary, radical insight. They took a daring step; they paid very close attention to their world, to the way things were, to the categories people used to describe and regulate how things were, in society, in church. As they paid attention, they kept saying, "There is MORE – there is another way to name reality, there is more to see, more to do." They placed what they saw and heard against the bigger horizon of the Gospel, the life of Jesus who gave a new name, a new definition to their reality. They were forever stretching us beyond the place where we would settle into comfort. It's always bigger than we think.

That's true even in our respective organizations within the Vincentian family, isn't it?

¹⁰ "Undoing the heavy burden of scandal," editorial, National Catholic Reporter, 2/10/06

I'm a Sister of Charity of New York; you're a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, or a Vincentian lay volunteer, or a Daughter of Charity or a C.M. from a particular province. Most days, it's enough for me to pay attention to my own circle of belonging, my family or local community and its daily demands; my own congregation or province or conference or chapter of Ladies of Charity. Don't ask me to think beyond.

Yet our call always nudges us to do precisely that. Enlarge the circle, make room for more at the table, think outside the box, dream bigger, color outside the lines, scan the horizon and look always beyond ourselves. Ask questions like: Who else needs to be part of this conversation, this planning? Whose wisdom are we missing? What if we invited XXXXXX to join us?

And the reason for doing this – for heeding the call to conversion that translates into being servants of hospitality and communion and belonging? It's not just because it's a nice thing to do – it's part and parcel of the Gospel challenge. It's the way we must act if God's dream is ever to be realized – the reign of God, the Kingdom that Jesus never tired talking about, and showing us what it might look like.

Jesus' vision: Good news to those on the margins – sick, prisoners, poor, immigrants, forgotten, powerless – THEY BELONG.

Vincent & Louise's vision: Christ meets us in the poor who have a claim on us. WE NEED ONE ANOTHER – WE BELONG to one another.

Ozanam's vision: Our world isn't meant to be cold and heartless, but a place where all BELONG.

Elizabeth Seton's vision: We must live, pray, work together in deep, caring relationships lived in lives of service.

Our call is to develop our capacity for hospitality, for communion. And isn't this countercultural? Doesn't this put us at one extreme of our U.S. society? Look at our immigration policy that fits a land of exclusion more than a land of opportunity, a policy that focuses on keeping out people who seek merely a better life for their families in a place that won't oppress them because of their politics or religion – people like your great-grandparents and mine – and punishing them for trying to fulfill that dream.

Doesn't this put us on the margins of our church, at least in some settings? We sing "All Are Welcome," and then start to limit the list. We sing, "Gather us in, the lost and forsaken," and then hear ourselves saying, "Sorry, that doesn't mean you, or you."

The Vincentian AND places us right in the face of structures that seek to minimize, even to blaspheme, Jesus' message of belonging, hospitality, inclusion, communion. As Pope Benedict XVI has written: "Communion draws me out of myself toward [Christ] and thus also toward unity with all Christians."¹¹

IV. CONCLUSION

¹¹ "Deus Est Caritas"

Where is the Charity of Christ impelling us? What can we do together that none of us can do alone?

We gather in the great fifty days of Easter, when all is new, when possibilities abound. We taste and feel the energy of the early community of believers, the admittedly rosy picture of a community where no one claimed anything for self, but all belonged to all.

The Spirit speaks to us this Eastertime in the words of the Risen Christ: “I am with you always.” Those familiar, comforting words cut right to the heart of the matter. Today, here, now, in this Vincentian Family Gathering, I hear them as our greatest challenge. For they say to me, to us, when we would rather do it alone (whatever “it” may be), “Remember that you are never alone.” For we are meant to be involved in each other’s lives, in the lives of the poor, as our God is involved in our lives.

One obstacle to collaboration, one form of resistance, is closing our eyes, refusing to clean our glasses, not bothering to take a good look. This Sunday, the Second Sunday of Easter, we will hear about Peter’s judgment on the leaders who in their blindness put to death the author of life. Poor eyesight – closed eyes. They (like us, sometimes) saw what they wanted to see, saw what they thought was all there was to see. We see what we’ve always seen, what we expect to be there, the “same old same old.” And all the time, God invites us to look beyond, to see so much more. We block the flow of God’s life when we close our eyes, because that leads to a closed heart and mind and way of acting. It’s the Spirit’s work to unblock our sight, to let in the light.

Let us pray for this light. Please join me in this closing prayer.

“God of relationship, deepen in us the conviction that we are one another’s food and drink, one another’s salvation. God of connections, turn our resistance into suppleness. God of the “AND,” turn our self-sufficiency into a deep desire to be about Your mission together. Make us pliable in Your hands, ever-creating God, and unrestricted in our readiness to serve Your energy, to go with Your flow, to be re-shaped and refashioned in Your image of collaborative community, wherever You lead us. Amen.”

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Vincentian Family Gathering
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