

SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND THE POOR

In one of his lectures on commercial law¹, Frederic Ozanam stated: "Charity is not sufficient. It treats the wounds but does not stop the blows that cause them ... Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveler who has been attacked. It is justice's role to prevent the attacks."

Earlier this morning at Mass, I spoke with you about the importance of visits to the poor in the life of a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul; the goal of those visits is charity, direct assistance to the impoverished to help them with their immediate needs. In this conference, I have been asked to speak about "Systemic Change and the Poor." It's a topic related to justice. It is also a topic that all the branches of the worldwide Vincentian Family have been emphasizing over the last several years. In your new Rule, it occupies a very prominent place.

Let me speak about the Poor and Systemic Change in three steps: 1) some background; 2) the notion of systemic change; and 3) my hopes for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

I. BACKGROUND

1. The naming of a Commission for Promoting Systemic Change and its mandate

In 2006, with the encouragement and support of a foundation, Fr. Greg Gay, the Superior General, named a Commission for Promoting Systemic Change and gave it the following mandate:

To help bring about systemic change through the apostolates of the members of the Vincentian Family, especially those ministering to the oppressed poor.

2. The members of the Commission

Fr. Norberto Carcellar, C.M.

Founder of the Homeless Peoples Federation of the Philippines (HPFP). His training in social development and microfinance has enabled him to focus on systemic change projects like the one at Payatas in Manila.

Sr. Ellen Flynn, D.C.

Until recently, Chief Executive of the Passage, a multi-faceted program for helping homeless people in central London.

Fr. Joseph Foley, C.M.

NGO representative of the Congregation of the Mission at the United Nations.

Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M. (Coordination of the Commission)

Coordinator of Project Dream, a collaborative project of the Daughters of Charity and the

¹ *Notes d'un cours de droit commercial*, in *Œuvres*, VII-*Mélanges*, II, 2d ed., Paris, 1859, 513.

Community of Sant'Egidio against AIDS in Africa, and now the Chairperson of the Vincentian Family Board for the Micro-Credit Project in Haiti.

Mrs. Patricia Nava (AIC)

Formerly the International President of AIC and formerly its representative for relationships with the international Vincentian Family.

Fr. Pedro Opeka, C.M.

Founder of Akamasoa ("Good Friends"), an extraordinary systemic change project which I will tell you about in a few minutes. Pedro was recently named a Knight of the Legion of Honor, the highest honor awarded by the French government.

Rev. Mr. Gene Smith (SSVP)

Formerly the national president of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States and the Executive Director of Seton Institute in Daly City, California.

3. The choice of Systemic Change as the theme for the Vincentian Family

Each year at their annual meeting, the international leaders of various branches of the Vincentian Family choose a common theme for reflection and action for the year ahead. The theme is then launched on September 27th, at the annual Family Day of Prayer.

In 2007 the leaders of the Family, gathered in Rome, invited the members of the Commission to make a presentation at their meeting. Afterwards the leaders chose "Systemic Change" as their focus for three to five years. Since then, all the branches have been working on this theme actively.

4. The goals of the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change

When Fr. Greg named the members of the Commission, he asked us:

- To study available material concerning Systemic Change
- To discuss our own involvement in Systemic Change
- To formulate a series of effective strategies (called "best practices" in some cultures) which would subsequently be shared with the members of the Vincentian Family
- To propose how the effective strategies might best be disseminated among the members of the Vincentian Family throughout the world.

5. The procedure we followed

To respond to its mandate, the Commission started to reflect about Systemic Change and about how to share the results of its work.

- At the beginning of the process, each of the members of the Commission wrote a story, based on his or her own experience, about a work in which Systemic Change has taken place.
- In each of the stories presented, we identified effective strategies that might be used in working toward Systemic Change in our projects among the poor.
- We placed particular emphasis on self-help and self-sustaining projects, so that the poor themselves are active participants in the planning and realization of the projects.
- We stressed the spirituality that lies behind the Vincentian Family Systemic Change approach

6. What has been done so far

We have focused on different ways to communicate the work done by the commission:

- A book. Its title is *Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change*. It is now available in English, Spanish, French and Portuguese. It is currently being translated into Italian, Korean, and Vietnamese.
- A Tool kit. Besides the book, we wanted to give people tools for teaching others about systemic change. At first, we envisioned a box, containing documents, brochures, questionnaires, and DVDs with films and PowerPoint presentations, etc. But, finally, we wound up with a 2 gigabyte memory stick containing all those materials, so that those who receive it can modify the materials to fit their own culture. It was distributed for the first time in Mexico in 2009 and is available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.
- The FAMVIN website. For the last three years, the FAMVIN website has been publishing articles on systemic change regularly and has been gathering these in an encyclopedia (called a Wikipedia) as a resource for the members of the Family. It is an extraordinary collection of articles.
- Start-up Grants. A foundation has enabled us to offer \$100,000 each year for three years in start-up grants to members of the Vincentian Family who design systemic change projects. In 2008, one of those grants went to a project designed by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Guatemala.
- 6 continental workshops. These workshops aim at training leaders, or "multiplying agents", to give other workshops on systemic change. Four have already taken place. They have been scheduled for:
 - 1) Mexico – February 2009
 - 2) Brazil – June 2009
 - 3) Cameroon – July 2009
 - 4) Bangkok – November 2009
 - 5) USA – November 2010
 - 6) Europe – dates to be fixed in 2011

That's the background. In our book, *Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change*, we tell the stories of many systemic change projects that have transformed the lives of the poor. The contents of the book are as follows:

Prologue

1. Akamasoa, a Community of Good Friends
2. I Have a DREAM
3. Mission-Oriented Strategies
4. The Perfect Storm
5. AIC Madagascar, a Story of Systemic Change within an Association
6. Person-Oriented Strategies
7. The Story of the Passage
8. The Homeless Peoples' Federation of the Philippines
9. Task-Oriented Strategies
10. The Clancy Nightshelter
11. The Mindoro Project in the Philippines
12. Strategies Directed toward Co-responsibility, Networking and Political Action
13. The Vincentian Mission at the United Nations

Epilogue

II. THE NOTION OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The basic idea

Today, those working among the poor speak more and more of the need for systemic change. In order to understand a systemic-change approach better, some analysis of the idea may be helpful.

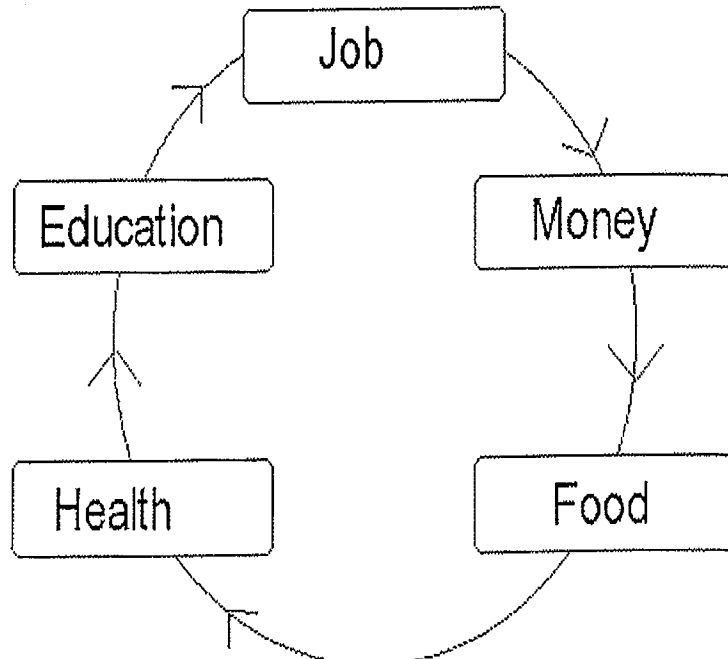
Essentially, a system is a whole, a unified composite of things that work together. As a system's parts interact, they affect each other constantly, either for better or for worse.

Today scientists focus continually on "systems". Astronomers view the universe as a system. If a star explodes, everything else in the universe feels the effect. Doctors view the body as a system. If my blood is diseased, it affects everything else. Economists and sociologists view society as a system. If the economic and social elements that make up society function together positively, people thrive; if one or several of those elements are functioning badly, the whole system begins to break down.

So, basically, systemic change thinking affirms that "everything is connected to everything else." Recognizing this, it becomes clear that, in order to change the situation of the poor, we must focus not only on one particular problem, like supplying them with food, important as that may be at times, but on the overall circumstances of their lives. Experience teaches that "quick fix" solutions, while temporarily helpful, prove inadequate in the long run.

An illustration of how systemic change works

Each of us lives within a socioeconomic system whose parts interact with each other. If the system is working well, it favors personal growth. If not, it thwarts growth and accelerates decline. If, for example, I don't have a job, I don't earn money. If I don't earn money, I can't buy food for my family. If my son doesn't have sufficient food, he suffers malnutrition. If he suffers malnutrition, he can't study well. If he can't study well, he won't graduate from school. If he doesn't graduate from school, he may not get a job. If he doesn't have a job, he doesn't earn money. So the cycle begins again.



The challenge for a systems thinker is to know where and how to break the cycle. In Akamasoa, Fr. Pedro Opeka began by creating jobs. These, in turn, generated revenue. Gradually, people were able to buy food, build homes and send their children to school. Their lives improved dramatically. In other systemic change projects, the point of intervention is different. In San José de Ocoa, water was the key. Clean water brought improved health. Irrigation brought crops that provided nourishment and also revenue. Revenue led to better homes and sanitation. With the Homeless People's Federation of the Philippines, micro-credit was the key. It enabled people to buy land, build homes, and organize other projects like digging wells, creating a sewage system and opening shops.

Criteria of Systemic Change Projects

As is evident from what I have said, not every project involves systemic change. Many good projects address urgent, immediate needs, but do not go beyond that. Different from these, a systemic change project has, among others, the following characteristics:

1. Wide-ranging social impact on the life of the poor person

This is the most basic characteristic of systemic change: that is, that the project helps change the overall life-situation of those who benefit from it.

2. Sustainability

The project helps create the social structures that are needed for a *permanent* change in the lives of the poor, like employment, education, housing, the availability of clean water and sufficient food, ongoing local leadership, etc.

3. Replicability

The project can be adapted to solve similar problems in other places. The philosophy or spirituality that grounds the project, the strategies it employs and the techniques that it uses can be applied in a variety of circumstances. Concretely, this is demonstrated when the project actually spreads beyond its initial context and is put into effect successfully in settings other than the place where it began. For, example, the project of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in San José de Ocoa has been replicated in 120 villages.

4. Innovation

The project brings about social change by transforming traditional practice. Such change is often achieved through the implementation of a pattern-changing idea. To use a phrase often attributed to Albert Einstein, systemic-change thinking helps us "to learn to see the world anew".

SOME EXAMPLES - VIDEO WITH 4 STORIES

Having looked at those systemic change projects, let me state an important, fundamental distinction. Immediate assistance to the poor and systemic change projects are:

- ❖ not either/or options
- ❖ but both/and imperatives

Sometimes immediate assistance to the poor is an urgent necessity that we cannot neglect. So, there are good works among the poor that are not systemic change projects. But still, it is imperative that we go beyond immediate necessities to long-range solutions.

III. CHALLENGES FOR THE SOCIETY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL

As we reflect on the topic of systemic change today, let me place before you five hopes for the SSVP in the years ahead:

1. *I hope that, in addition to engaging in numerous practical works of charity, which play such an important role in your tradition, the Society will stand actively at the side of the poor in their struggle for justice.*

I opened this conference with a quotation from Frederic Ozanam about justice. In that quotation, he was stating precisely what systemic change thinkers today are telling us: that Luke's parable of the Good Samaritan dramatizes the principle that love of God is displayed in love of neighbor. But today we recognize more and more that effective love involves not just binding up the individual victim's wounds and pouring oil on them, but also making sure that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is safe for all in the future.

Ozanam was so convinced of the need to struggle for justice for the poor and their basic human rights that he founded a newspaper, called *The New Era*, which started up in 1848. It was meant to speak the truth impartially, without adherence to any particular political party, and to promote social justice for the poor and working class.

Your own Rule speaks eloquently on this subject. It states (7.1): "The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need, but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it. It is, therefore, committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and to contributing to their elimination." It adds: (7.4): "The distinctive approach of Vincentians to issues of social justice is to see them from the perspective of those we visit who suffer from injustice." And then it states (7.6): "Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements."

So I ask you today: What are the issues, both internationally and in each of your countries, in which the Society wants to stand at the side of the poor and be advocates with and for them in the future?

2. *I hope that the Society, with its 750,000 members, will grow as a collaborative networker, building bonds both among yourselves and with the worldwide Vincentian Family – creating a united force in the integral human promotion of the poor.*

You, as a Society, are a remarkable institution. Your numbers are those of an army, a peaceful army in the service of the poor. You have ideas, effective projects, and economic and personnel resources.

Before this era of worldwide consciousness, the tendency was for each Conference or Council to live and serve in relative isolation. But now your Rule (4.1) states very clearly: "Conferences and Councils help others in need, both at the national and international level. This is one of the activities most cherished by the Society. The awareness of acute poverty in a great number of countries and the Vincentian preferential option for the poor spurs Conferences and Councils to assist others with less resources and in particular situations. The direct link between two Conferences and Councils, consisting of sharing prayer, a profound friendship, and material resources is called twinning." Twinning, which has proved so successful in the Society, is a

wonderful example of networking. I encourage you to create other ways of networking nationally and internationally.

Your international website states eloquently: "Enfold the world in a network of charity," such was the ambition of a handful of young men (in 1833)." Would Frederic Ozanam and his companions ever have imagined that the Society they founded would today be serving the poor in more than 140 countries? If they were alive today, what would be the networking possibilities that they would envision for the Society today?

Besides networking within the Society, you are also active members in the network of the worldwide Vincentian Family. If, as an international family, we can channel our resources in the service of the poor, we can have an enormous impact. Today, our Family is thinking very creatively. We are going to new places and undertaking new works, often together. Collaboration is at times not easy, but it is one of the keys to the future. What further projects can the international Vincentian Family engage in together?

3. *I hope that the formation programs of the Society will help members to combine prayer and action harmoniously.*

The name "Society of St. Vincent de Paul" is synonymous with works of charity. But do people see us you a group that combines prayer and action harmoniously? Do people say of you: "The members of the SSVP are faith-filled people. They know how to serve the poor with love, and they really know how to pray too!"? I ask especially: Do the young people who come among you feel attracted by experiencing how faith-filled you are?

The Commentary on your Rule 1.7 speaks very concretely about the importance of prayer in the lives of the members of the Society. It says: "... some moments of inner recollection are absolutely necessary, recollection to ask the Spirit for his gifts; Wisdom to understand the situation, its priorities and the deeper needs; Fortitude to persevere, not to give up; Counsel to tackle the problem appropriately; Piety to feel, to feel compassion, which is nothing other than feeling what the other feels; Reverence and awe of God to visit with humility ..."

Extraordinarily active men like Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam were also wonderful pray-ers. Their contemporaries readily recognized how well they combined prayer and action.

My hope is that in all your countries, in all your Conferences and in all your Councils, you will support one another in meditating on the word of God daily and that your prayer will really be "something beautiful for God", attractive to the young, and the source of your zeal in the service of the poor.

4. *I hope that the Society will continue to be inventive in developing systemic change projects, like the micro-credit project in Haiti.*

Today, I want to say a word about the pilot micro-credit project that you, along with the other branches of the Vincentian Family, have chosen to celebrate the 350th anniversary of the

deaths of St. Louise and St. Vincent. Even before the tragic earthquake on Jan. 12th, the situation in Haiti was disastrous. Here is a quick picture of conditions in Haiti before the earthquake:

- ⊗ 9.8 million people
- ⊗ Poorest country in the western hemisphere
- ⊗ 7th poorest country in the world
- ⊗ 54% of the people live on one dollar a day; 80% live on two dollars a day
- ⊗ 47% of the population is illiterate
- ⊗ Unemployment is estimated at 60-70%
- ⊗ Life expectancy is 52 for men and 56 for women
- ⊗ In 1923, more than 60% of land was forested; in 2010, less than 2%

The center of our Vincentian Family project is a micro-credit website. The site is in three languages – English, French and Spanish – and provides an attractive, easy-to-use way for people throughout the world to help the poor of Haiti. It contains projects submitted by groups of people in Haiti. These projects are carefully screened by a Business Analyst and a Steering Committee and judged to be sustainable.

The main audience for the site is the worldwide Vincentian Family and the worldwide Haitian Diaspora. They, and anyone else, are able to make interest-free micro-loans and donations to projects in Haiti. They are also able to offer scholarships (e.g., \$50 a year to send a child to primary school, plus giving him books and a back-pack).

If you lend on the site, you can follow your money as it comes back. Then you can re-lend it or take it out. You can lend as an individual or you can form a lending group (e.g., a parish, a school, an office, a conference of the SSVP, etc.). You can give micro-credit to others as a gift. For example, I gave my niece \$100 in micro-credit for her graduation. She loved it. She told me recently that the full \$100 of her loan has come back.

The site became fully functional on April 1st. Within a month, we had provided 1000 scholarships to grammar school children in Haiti and fully funded 12 micro-credit projects.

What can we learn from this pilot project? Are there similar collaborative projects through which we can help the poor significantly in Haiti and in other parts of the world?

5. *I hope that your Society in the future will be active in sowing seeds of peace.*

Both Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam knew the cost of war. In a repetition of prayer on July 24, 1655, Vincent lamented that war was widespread in France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Ireland, Scotland, and England. "War everywhere, misery everywhere," he cried out. "So many people suffer!" he said in frustration. Besides his words, Vincent also responded to the devastating war in Lorraine with massive relief efforts.

But it is often forgotten that in addition to his vigorous relief efforts, Vincent was also engaged in behind-the-scenes peacemaking. He intervened personally, going right to the top.

Brother Ducournau, Vincent's secretary, relates a striking episode.² In 1649, during the civil war, St. Vincent left Paris quietly, crossed battle lines and forded a flooded river (at almost 70 years of age) to see the queen and to beg her to dismiss Cardinal Mazarin, the Prime Minister, whom he regarded as responsible for the war. He also spoke directly to Mazarin himself. But his pleas went unheeded. Vincent attempted to speak with leaders on both sides and at times felt that a settlement was near, but ambitions and intrigues thwarted his efforts. His attempts at peacemaking earned him the enmity of Mazarin, who, in his secret diary, records him as an enemy. By the time peace finally came, Vincent had been removed from the Council of Conscience, the group that advised the queen.

Ozanam too, during the Revolution of 1848, labored strenuously to bring about peace. He knew that, in war, it is the poor who suffer most. Experience proves this again and again.

In 7.2, your Rule presents a striking vision of a civilization of love. It says: "As citizens of one world, Vincentians listen to the voice of the Church which demands their participation in creating a more equitable and compassionate social order, promoting the culture of life and the civilization of love. In this way, the Society shares the Church's mission to evangelize the world through visible witness, in both actions and words." Your Rule uses a phrase of St. Vincent. He said that good news must be proclaimed "by words and works" (SV XII, 88), works of charity, justice, systemic change, and peace.

How can the Society serve the poor by being an instrument of peace? Can it help eliminate hunger, which is so often the root-cause of wars? Can VinPaz volunteers be ambassadors of peace in the countries they go to? Can the Society help mediate peace, as the lay Community of Sant'Egidio did in Mozambique, so that what is now spent in buying and selling arms can be spent for programs that benefit the poor? That's a huge challenge.

How can the Society be a peace-maker in the world?

Those are my hopes for you as you look to the future. How I want to encourage you today to be on fire to help the poor both in their immediate needs and in the promotion of justice and systemic change.

How I want to encourage you also to have spiritual *fire* within. Fire brings light into the night. It warms us. It is the energizing center of homes. It prepares and gives taste to the food that we eat. In the chemical world, fire purifies and refines metals, like gold. It forges steel, making it strong. It molds pottery so that it becomes beautiful and lasting.

Frederic Ozanam's love for the poor was like a forest fire that quickly jumped from tree to tree, from town to town, from country to country, a fire that he has communicated to you, the leaders of the Society today. Like Ozanam, be confident that the Lord loves you deeply in

²P. Collet. *La Vie de St. Vincent de Paul* (Nancy, 1748) I, 468. Cf. SV III, 402. Cf. also, Coste, II, 447.

calling you to serve the poor, that the Lord is sharing with you his own vocation and his own vision. Let the spirit of Christ, the Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor, dwell in your heart, as it dwelled in the hearts of Frederic and his companions. Let it set you on fire. I encourage you today to be grateful and joyful that Christ has called you to this wonderful way of serving others, and I urge you to communicate the Lord's presence, his joy, and his fire to your companions and to the poor in your own countries, so that they might transmit it to others.



"I would like to embrace the whole world in a network of charity"

Blessed Frederic Ozanam
Cofounder of the SSVP

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