



The Prophetic Dimension of the Vincentian Charism in the Light of the Social Doctrine of the Church

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1. Introduction

We have just asked the Lord to give us a heart like that of Vincent de Paul. It is said that we are able to love more that which we know better and so this morning we are going to try to know a little more about the heart of Monsieur Vincent.

Some time ago José Vicente asked me to share with you during this time when the members of the Province gather together. He asked me to take on the responsibility for the formation element of the program, but I was very resistant to this idea. Earlier this year, however, when I was formally requested to make this presentation, I passed on this request to Father Gregory, who wrote under my words: you can count on my support as you undertake this work. At that moment I was unable to refuse ... and so here we are.

José Vicente told me that he would like me to deal with the social doctrine of the Church and he knew that this was a theme that I was very interested in ... this is a vast field for study and we only have about two hours ... so what should I do?

Last May, at the request of the Formation Councilors, I gave a mini-course to the young Sisters in Spain. This course lasted two and a half days and should have had a duration of at least four days. In the final evaluation, under the heading of negative aspects, the participants said that the material was very dense and that they did not have sufficient time for reflection ... they had every reason to make that criticism. The evaluation was done on the final morning and they had to classify the different statements from 0-5 ... the lowest mark that was given was a 4. The theme that was developed during that gathering was: the prophetic dimension of the Vincentian charism in light of the Church's social doctrine.

We began the morning by reflecting on the evangelical counsels as described in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. We then related this material to the statements in our Constitutions where this same matter is discussed. Then instead of reflecting on our vow of service to the poor, we studied Saint Vincent, Saint Louise, the first Daughters of Charity, Sister Rosalie Rendu, Mother Guillermin ... again this study was done in light of the Church's social doctrine.

Reading between the lines of the evaluation, one of the things that I was able to deduce was that while the Sisters were very interested in the social doctrine, they also hoped, desired and had a need for points of reference within their own Congregation.

Today we do not have the time to embark on a reflection on the material that I have just mentioned. What I proposed to José Vicente was to focus on Vincent de Paul, synthesizing and adapting material so that we might be able to have a rich sharing during this day when the Province gathers together to celebrate the birth of the Congregation of the Mission. Since we are unable to examine in detail the sources and roots and processes that led to the formation of the social doctrine of the Church, I ask you to be mindful of the fact that the first "official document", the first social encyclical, was written by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, that is, two hundred and thirty years after the death of Saint Vincent.

2. What do we mean by prophecy?

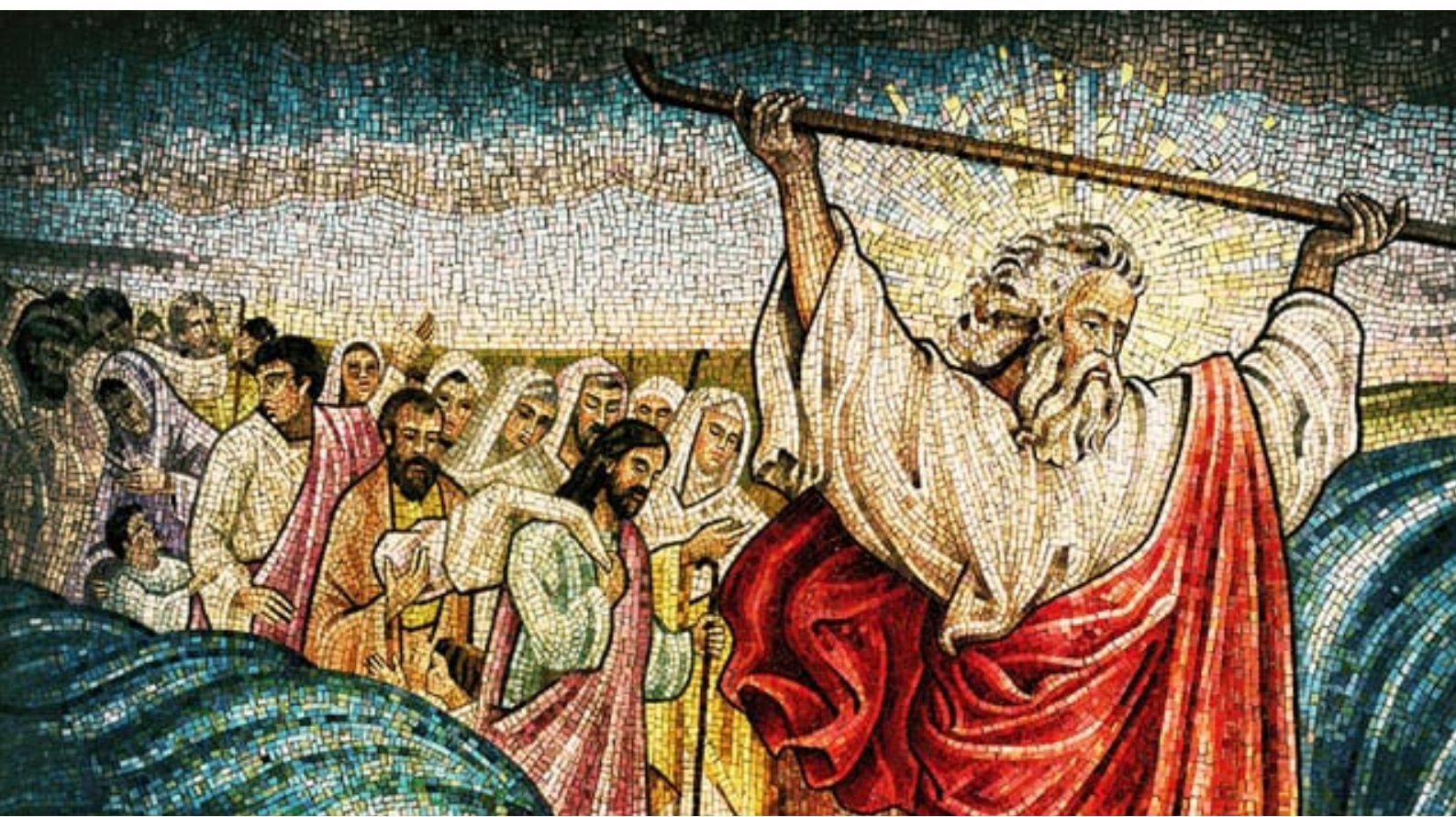
El Nuevo Diccionario de Espiritualidad [The New Dictionary on Spirituality] states: The constitutive element of the prophetic experience is the experience of being chosen, set apart, and sent forth by God. The prophets speak in the name of God and as a result of their calling become instruments within the framework of the plan of salvation history. The prophets feel compelled to fulfill this difficult mission. (Nuevo Diccionario de Espiritualidad, Ediciones San Pablo, Madrid, 1991, p. 1610).

The prophets are, first of all, charismatic, individuals who are aware of the fact of being sent forth by God. For this reason the prophets speak in the name of God and base their words on their own experience of the God who sent them forth. Prophets are individuals who are also committed to the social question: they have discovered the will of God and they want to fulfill God's will. Therefore they denounce the evils of society, they proclaim the judgment of God and they endeavor to lead people to respond to the word by changing their lives.

If we examine the writings of the prophets, especially Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah ... we see that they never spoke about God in abstract or impersonal concepts, rather, with the totality of their lives they communicated the passionate love and the great holiness of God.

In their time both monachism and the appearance of religious orders became elements of the Church's prophetic response. Today we ought to remember that the most fruitful responses in the Church are those that are inspired by charity and marked by a holiness of life ... these are signs of salvation. Let us reflect on the importance of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac for the Church.

As I said before, we are going to try to engage in a reflective reading of some aspects of the Vincentian charism in light of the social doctrine of the Church. We will see how Vincent de Paul, his teaching and his life were centuries ahead of the Church's magisterium.



3. Saint Vincent and the dignity of the person

The fundamental principle of the Church's social doctrine, that is, the dignity of the human person, is based on the fact that men and women are created in the divine image (Genesis 1:27). Here we recall the cry of John Paul II in the inaugural address at Puebla: Respect the human being who is the image of God! Evangelize so that this may become a reality, so that the Lord may transform hearts and humanize political and economic systems (John Paul II, Opening Address at the Puebla Conference, January 28, 1979, III.5)

More than three centuries before Vincent told the Missionaries: It is not enough for me to love God, if my neighbor does not love Him (CCD:XII:215).

The human person is the center of the church's social teaching. In addition to the Genesis account, the social doctrine of the Church makes reference on numerous occasions to the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew and thus that chapter establishes another foundation for the dignity of the human person. John Paul II stated: Christ's words "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40) were not intended to remain a pious wish, but were meant to become a concrete life commitment. Today more than ever, the Church is aware that her social message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of actions than as a result of its internal logic and consistency (Centesimus annus, #57).

For Saint Vincent that gospel passage, together with the mystery of the Incarnation, became the foundation for his following of Jesus Christ. Even though Vincent's thoughts are in our hearts and minds, let us reread some of the many texts in which he reminded the Daughters of Charity about their calling: Servants of the Poor is the same as saying Servants of Jesus Christ, since He regards what is done to them as done to Himself, for they are His members (CCD:IX:256). In serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ. How true, Sisters! You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here (CCD:IX:199).

For Vincent de Paul the experience of God was mediated through his encounters with the poor. Benedict XVI, in the paragraph in which he makes reference to Saint Vincent, expresses the same principle: Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God (Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, #15).

Leaving it to the experts to discuss whether we can speak about a Vincentian spirituality, nevertheless if we understand spirituality as a set of ideas and attitudes that characterize the spiritual life of a person or a group of people, then yes, for Christians a Vincentian spirituality becomes a concrete way of following Christ. Therefore the spirituality of Vincent de Paul, his concrete way of following Christ, is rooted in his powerful encounter with God and with Christ in the world of the poor. This led him to experience two key principles as he lived the gospel message: (1) to serve those who are poor is to go to God (CCD:IX:5); (2) to serve those who are poor is to build up on their behalf the kingdom of God and his justice (CCD:XII:110-126).

For Vincent de Paul these principles are an unequivocal expression of fulfilling God's will and continuing the life and the mission of Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor.

Saint Vincent insisted on this fact not only when speaking to the Missionaries and the Daughters but also when he spoke with the Ladies of Charity. On July 11, 1657, in his report on the state of the works Vincent referred to their identification with Christ and their continuing his mission: He Himself willed to be born poor, to welcome poor persons into His company, to serve those who were poor, to put Himself in their place, even going so far as to say that the good and the harm we do to those who are poor He will consider as done to His Divine Person. What more tender love could He show for persons who were poor! And, I ask you, what love can we have for Him if we do not love what He loved! That being the case, Ladies, loving those who are poor is to love Him in that way; serving poor persons well is to serve Him well; and imitating Him is to honor Him as we should (CCD:XIIIb:434).

Continuing the mission of Christ implies fulfilling the will of the Father which, for our Founders and for us, ought to be seen as a hunger and thirst for justice, a desire to build the kingdom of God and his justice. One of the proper and original characteristics of Vincentian spirituality is found in the relationship that our Founder established between the kingdom of God and the will of God. By the way he lived his life Vincent showed us that the will of God is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is built up only through action.

Christianity has always defended the oneness of the human person while Greek philosophy viewed the human person as composed of body and soul. Using the words of Father Ibáñez, this dichotomy between body and soul led to living a schizophrenic Christian life which separated the interior life from the struggle for justice and a social-political commitment on behalf of those persons who are poor. Following the thought of Father Ibáñez we read: Vincent de Paul's faith and experience led him to discover that while Christianity continues to be nourished by spiritualistic attitudes, the struggle for justice and the defense of the poor moves along paths that are quite distinct from the paths of the Church of Jesus Christ (J.M. Ibáñez, *La fe verificada en el amor*, Ed. Paulinas, 1993, p. 65)

Saint Vincent affirmed that we must serve all people and serve the whole person. The separation between the spiritual and corporal needs of the person seems to have created problems during the seventeenth century. In a conference on the objectives of the Congregation of the Mission, Vincent told the Missionaries: So then, if there are any among us who think they are in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, "Come, beloved of my Father; possess the kingdom that has been prepared for you, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was naked and you clothed me; sick and you assisted me." To do that is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, and that is the most perfect way; it is also what Our Lord did, and what those should do who represent Him on earth (CCD:XII:77-78).

Three centuries later and with different words the Compendium speaks about integral salvation, salvation of the whole person, something that for us, the sons and daughters of Vincent de Paul, should not be new: The social doctrine has its own profound unity, which flows from Faith in a whole and complete salvation, from Hope in a fullness of justice, and from Love which makes all mankind truly brothers and sisters in Christ (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, p.2:#3).

Vincent could not image a spirituality that was not incarnated in reality. Again we return to his conferences to the Missionaries and even though the following reference is rather long, I believe it is important to be familiar with the whole text: Let us love God, brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows; for very often many acts of love of God, of devotion, and of other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and desirable, are, nevertheless, very suspect if they do not translate into the practice of effective love. "By this," says Our Lord, "is my Father glorified, that you may bear much fruit." We have to be very careful about that; for there are many who, recollected exteriorly, and filled with lofty sentiments of God interiorly, stop at that, and when it comes to the point of doing something, and they have the opportunity to act, they come up short. They flatter themselves with their ardent imagination; they are satisfied with the sweet conversations they have with God in meditation and even speak of them like angels; but when they leave there; if there is a question of working for God, of suffering, of mortifying themselves, of instructing poor persons, of going in search of the lost sheep, of being happy when they lack something, or of accepting sickness or some other misfortune, alas! they are no longer around; their courage fails them. No, no, let us not fool ourselves; Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit [All our work consists in action] (CCD:XI:32-33).

Our fidelity to the poor makes us more open to universal love and to the great causes of humankind; it also makes us more useful to the Church of God and more fruitful for the kingdom of God and his justice. It is not necessary to repeat and do exactly what Saint Vincent did ... what is important is our creative fidelity to the charism that we have received as a heritage, a new "creativity" in charity as John Paul II tells us: This means carrying on the tradition of charity which has expressed itself in so many different ways in the past two millennia, but which today calls for even greater resourcefulness. Now is the time for a new "creativity" in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by "getting close" to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters (Novo Millennio Ineunte, #50).

In the chapter dedicated to the creation of the human person in the image of God the Compendium reflects on the reality that both men and women share the same dignity and have equal value. Here we refer to the text of the two documents that John Paul II dedicated to women: the apostolic letter, *Mulieris dignitatem* (1998) and the beautiful Letter to Women (1995) that was written on the occasion of the IV World Conference on Women that was held in Peking. We cite the text of the latter document in which John Paul II refers to Jesus' relationships with women: Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness. In this way he honored the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love (Letter to Women, #3).

In Vincent's time women were seen as second class citizens and this applied to their social status as well as their position within the Church. They were subordinated to men and had no legal rights as individuals. Vincent de Paul broke the mold and separated himself from the anti-human ideas in which women were forced to live. He began to discover that women were indispensable in overcoming the situation of misery in which the poor found themselves.

Let us look at an example of how Vincent was able to move beyond the existing norms of his time. Using today's language we would say that he was counter-cultural. We find this example in the rule for the Confraternity of women in Châtillon-les-Dombes which was presented to the members at the end of 1617. This was the document that formally established the Confraternity and was written more than three hundred ninety years ago. In said rule Vincent stated: Because there is reason to hope that there will be foundations made in aid of the confraternity, and that it is not appropriate for women to handle them on their own, the Servants of the Poor will elect as their Procurator some pious, devout priest or an inhabitant of the town who is virtuous (CDD:XIIIb:9-10).

In a short time Vincent realized that the cultural norm of his era was not valid. In 1630 he wrote to Louise de Marillac: Experience has shown that it is absolutely necessary for the women not to depend on the men in this situation, especially for the money (CCD:I:70).

What is Saint Vincent teaching us here? Two things: in this regard Vincent is simply following the example of Jesus Christ as described to us by John Paul II and when we are dealing with doing something that will be beneficial for the poor we should not hesitate to act in a counter cultural manner when necessary.



4. Saint Vincent and justice

Another characteristic trait of the spirit that Vincent has passed on to us is that besides seeing the poor as persons who have their own proper dignity and rights, we also owe these people justice and not pity.

In the document produced as a result of the 1971 Synod of Bishops we read: In the Old Testament God reveals himself to us as the liberator of the oppressed and the defender of the poor, demanding from people faith in him and justice towards one's neighbor. It is only in the observance of the duties of justice that God is truly recognized as the liberator of the oppressed (Justice in the World, #30).

For Vincent de Paul the poor are always and above all else individuals who live in a situation of misery and exploitation and marginalization and injustice. When he established the Confraternities, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity he did this to make the priests and the laity aware of the fact that they love God or betray God in persons who are poor.

Let us return to the Synodal document: Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbor (Justice in the World, #33).

At the same time let us recall here how Vincent described the relationship between charity and justice: justice may be accompanied by mercy (CCD:I:449); there is no act of charity that is not accompanied by justice (CCD:II:68); the obligations of justice have priority over those of charity (CCD:VII:633); God will grant you the grace, Monsieur, of softening our hearts toward the wretched creatures and of realizing that in helping them we are doing an act of justice and not of mercy! (CCD:VII:115).

For Vincent de Paul, openness toward the poor and their integral promotion depended primarily on justice. It is a response to a right that the poor possess.

As often happens, Vincent's position was revolutionary for his time; he was not a revolutionary but his thinking and way of acting conflicted with that which was believed and lived by "respectable" men and women.

What was unheard of during the time of Saint Vincent, has today become part of the magisterium of the Church, a demand that has been placed on our Christian way of acting. Let us look at an example of this, an example that is found in the Compendium: Those who think they can live the supernatural virtue of love without taking into account its corresponding natural foundations, which include duties of justice, deceive themselves. Charity is the greatest social commandment. It respects others and their rights. It requires the practice of justice and it alone makes us capable of it. Charity inspires a life of self-giving (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, p.331, #583) ... and profound links exist between evangelization and human promotion: these include links of an anthropological order, because the man who is to be evangelized is not an abstract being but is subject to social and economic questions. They also include links in the theological order, since one cannot disassociate the plan of creation from the plan of Redemption. That latter plan touches the very concrete situations of injustice to be combated and of justice to be restored. They include links of the eminently evangelical order, which is that of charity: how in fact can one proclaim the new commandment without promoting in justice and in peace the true, authentic advancement of man? (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, p.36-37, #66).

Justice and charity are in harmony with one another and mutually complimentary. Charity in no way wishes to cover over and hide the obligations of justice but rather wants to make it very clear that we have an obligation to assist those in need. Charity does not annul the demands of justice but rather makes them obligatory. Justice is based on love and moves out in the direction of love.

Saint Vincent intervened directly and indirectly in politics but his personal vocation was that of evangelizing the poor but in an attempt to be faithful to his vocation he intervened in political matters. He intervened in order to obtain the well-being of poor men and women who were condemned and dying of hunger.

Sisters and brothers, political neutrality does not exist. In an inter-related world such as ours every action (whether active or passive) has a political meaning. Silence, when confronted with an unjust situation, supposes that one tolerates and allows said injustice to continue and thus is a passive way of participating in an injustice.

In Saint Vincent's writing we have many examples that reveal how he inculcated in his followers this sense of justice and defense of those who were poor. We will look at just one example, that which is found in a letter of July 21, 1657 that was written to Monsieur Charles Ozenne: Our Consul in Tunis has been expelled by the King for refusing to grant him something that was against his conscience. The Consul [in Algiers] is in prison because a merchant from Marseilles who went bankrupt, left town, as did a renegade and three or four other slaves (CCD:VI:346).

Fortunately we also have the letter that the Saint addressed to Monsieur Jean Barreu, the consul who had been accused: May the Holy Name of God be ever blessed for having found you worthy of suffering --- and suffering for the sake of justice --- for by the grace of God, you have given no cause for this ill treatment! (CCD:VI:345).

My dear brothers and sisters, the defense of truth and justice and the willingness to suffer in their defense ... such actions are constitutive elements of Christian action on behalf of building up the Kingdom of God. We, the children of Vincent de Paul, if we want to be found worthy of such a father, ought to give meaning to the words that are found in the Synodal Document: Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation (Justice in the World, #6).

I do not want to conclude without mentioning Vincent's sense of justice which led him to protect the welfare of those employed by the Congregation, something that was unheard of at that time. Three centuries before social security came into existence Vincent wrote to one of the superiors of the Congregation: If you can pay your servant's wages for the four months during which he was ill, as well as the expenses of his doctor and medicines, I think that will be a good idea, since he is a poor man and a good servant (CCD:VI:97). Vincent said the same thing regarding some workers who suffered an accident in another house of the Congregation (Cf., CCD:VI:344).

We could continue with an endless list of examples that reveal how our Founder was a defender of justice and the rights of the poor but let us now conclude this section by saying that the life of Vincent de Paul was completely consumed by the fire of charity, which led him to affirm the manner in which we must serve the poor in their time of need. Remember the text? We are to run to meet the spiritual needs of our neighbor as if we were running to a fire (CCD:XI:25).

5. Saint Vincent and the management of material goods

All the documents of the Church's social doctrine insist on the social function of private property. From the beginning the Church has defended the universal destiny of productive goods. An example of this teaching is found in the encyclical of Pope John XXIII: Private ownership of property, including that of productive goods, is a natural right which the State cannot suppress. But it naturally entails a social obligation as well. It is a right which must be exercised not only for one's own personal benefit but also for the benefit of others (John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, #19). We also read in *Gaudium et Spes*: God destined the earth and all that it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity (*Gaudium et spes*, #69).

Two centuries before public assistance and three centuries before social security, Saint Vincent put in place a number of works and services for the poor ... services that were totally free of charge. Therefore Vincent had to find resources in order to continue these works and services.

As part of his organizational strategy Vincent was able to convince the powerful, those who held political, economic and social positions, of their moral obligation to protect the weaker members of society and to help them recuperate their dignity. We are aware of the fact that he was a member of the Council of Conscience, that he pleaded with Queen Anne of Austria to provide protection to the peasants against those who were plundering their lands (CCD:IV:421-422) and that he sought the intervention of Pope Innocent X during the Fronde (CCD:IV:445-447).

As Vincent confronted the political powers of his day he was not one who was opposed to the system nor was he a servile executor of the system but rather he was a faithful disciple of Jesus: (give to Caesar what is Caesar's) but even more faithful to the poor and to God (give to God what is God's).

He obtained donations from the king and queen (CCD:II:92-93; 532-533). He found resources for his establishments, that is, he was able to obtain money and land for a wonderful purpose and this income guaranteed the continuation of the work. We know that the de Gondi family contributed 45,000 livres for the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission (it is estimated that one livre is equivalent to 60 euros). The total income from Saint-Lazare, with all of its possessions, was more than 40 or 50 thousand livres annually. Vincent received other monies from members of the nobility, from agricultural investments and from investments made in transportation. We ought to include here monies from other benefices and from the donations of many benefactors.

Vincent saw material goods as necessary in order to care for the poor and this in no way meant that spiritual goods were to be neglected. He said: O my God, necessity obliges us to have these perishable goods and to preserve for the Company what Our Lord has placed in it; but we have to apply ourselves to this in the way God himself applies himself to produce and preserve temporal goods to adorn the world and feed its creatures, so that He takes care to provide for even the tiniest insect. This does not hinder His interior operations, by which He engenders His Son and brings forth the Holy Spirit. He does those things without omitting the others (CCD:XII:95).

This need to rely on material resources led Vincent to go to court in order to defend his right to certain properties. He stated: We go to court as little as possible and, when we are obliged to do so, it is only after having sought advice both within and outside [the Community]. We prefer to relinquish what belongs to us rather than scandalize our neighbor (CCD:III:69).

Today when we speak about the universal destiny of material goods we realize that Vincent saw these goods as belonging to the poor and they belong to the poor precisely because they belong to God. Let us listen to Vincent as he speaks to the Daughters who administered these goods: We are obliged to manage [these goods] well and to use them conscientiously. First, because they belong to our good God, since they are the property of the poor. That is why you have to take good care of them, not only because they belong to the poor, who need them badly, but also because they are the property of Our Lord Jesus Christ (CCD:X:245).

The administration of material goods takes on a mystical dimension which Vincent understood as meaning "a life united with God", that is, having the same will and non-will as God (CCD:XI:286). Vincent not only found God in the poor but also in the administration of goods, in the ingenuity and creativity that was needed in order to assist such a large number of poor people: abandoned children, orphans, infirm, peasants living in misery, refugees, etc.

Administrators who fulfill their mission and have been purified by detachment and the Vincentian spirit, become an image of God, Creator and Provider. We recall anew the text from Saint Matthew which was so beloved by Vincent: Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me (Matthew 25:40)

As a result of this, to serve the poor is to serve Jesus Christ. This is so because God dwells in us and when we serve the poor it is God who is serving the poor through us ... it is God who is caring for the infirm, the elderly and the orphans ... we simply make present the action of Divine Providence. So that this might continue to be a reality in our own day let us lift up our minds and hearts to the Lord with the same words that Vincent spoke: So then, my God, allow us, in order to continue our ministries for Your glory, to work at the preservation of temporal things, but to do it in such a way that our spirit may not be contaminated by them, nor justice wounded, nor our hearts encumbered (CCD:XII:95-96).

There is a phrase in the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* and I am not sure if we are familiar with these words or not nor can I foresee where the fulfillment of these words might lead us ... and perhaps it is precisely for that reason that we may not be so familiar with the following words: Faced by cases of need, one cannot ignore them in favor of superfluous church ornaments and costly furnishings for divine worship; on the contrary it could be obligatory to sell these goods in order to provide food, drink, clothing and shelter for those who lack these things (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #31).

Have you read those words before? Have you paused and reflected on those words? Have we thought of the implication of those words? If such words are unheard of for the majority of people, then for the sons and daughters of Saint Vincent de Paul they ought to sound quite normal since three centuries ago during a conference on poverty Vincent spoke to the Missionaries and said: But, for the Company --- the poor Company --- nothing special should be permitted either in food or clothing! I make exception, as always, for the sick. Oh, the poor patients! For them, even the chalices of the Church should be sold . God has given me tender feelings in that regard and I ask him to give this spirit to the Company (CCD:XII:334).

Someone could think that the expression might be the result of a moment of fervor, but in reality it was a deep conviction of our Holy Founder that he expressed on more than one occasion, including his letters. In 1639 he wrote to Monsieur Pierre du Chesne, the superior of Monsieur Dufestel who was ill: I am writing to him and asking him to do all he can and to spare nothing for his medical care. I entreat you, Monsieur, to be sure that he does so and, for that purpose, see that the doctor visits him every day and that he lacks no remedy or nourishment. Oh! how I hope the Company will provide for his needs with a holy extravagance! I would be delighted if word were sent to me from somewhere that someone in the Company has sold chalices for that purpose (CCD:I:521).

Having examined the attitude and the praxis of Saint Vincent with regard to material goods, we are led by the hand to reflect on the following point.



6 Saint Vincent and solidarity

The word solidarity is one of those words that is frequently used but it is not always used with its true significance. It comes from the Latin word *solidus* which means solid or strong ... it is said that a person is in solidarity with another when he/she shows support or agreement with that person's cause, especially when this support is given during difficult times. We also recall the fact that in civil law when a group of debtors commits themselves to one another in solidarity, it means that each one of them has accepted responsibility for the whole debt.

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (Genesis 1:26). This scriptural text, simple and yet profound, is the theological and Christian foundation of solidarity. The Christian God is not a god of isolation, but a God who is in communion with life and love, the God of the community of the Father with the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Christian theology used this word for the first time when it referred to the equality among the members of the human family, an equality derived from the fact that all are children of God. In theology, the concept of solidarity cannot be separated from the concept of communion. If, as a result of our relationship with the Divine, we share the same dignity, then this communion compels us to seek that which is good for all people.

Solidarity has always been a demand that is placed on our life together as members of the human family. In a strict sense we are talking about a relationship of justice because to live in society everyone needs everyone else ... this is so because we are all human persons, with equal dignity and the same rights. We say that this is a relationship of justice because the goods of the earth are destined for the common good, for the use of each and every person.

We have dealt with this matter on several occasions but let us pause to reflect on the following words that appear in the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et spes*: We must never lose sight of the universal destination of earthly goods. In his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately owns not merely as exclusive to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself. Therefore every man has the right to possess a sufficient amount of the earth's goods for himself and his family ... when a person is in extreme necessity he has the right to supply himself with what he needs out of the riches of others (*Gaudium et spes*, #69).

I hope that no one is going to view this text as subversive. What is embarrassing and scandalous, however, is the fact that a small segment of the population controls 50% of the wealth in the first world, that is, in Europe and North America. The countries with the highest levels of per capita income are Christian countries. Another fact: in those countries with the highest per capita income we find the greatest social inequality. I am not going to continue with these facts because after having spent more than six years in Rwanda, these facts have faces and names and I am unable to speak in terms of statistical data.

If we study the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* of Pope John Paul II, we discover the profound meaning that the Pope gives to the word solidarity. We also encounter the extraordinary analysis that he makes of the reality and the responsibilities that he accepted as the visible head of our Church.

We do not find in any of Vincent's writing the word solidarity ... this word was not used until the nineteenth century. In Vincent's writing we do find, however, expressions of compassion toward those sisters and brothers who suffer. Perhaps the best example is the text that is well known by all Vincentians: the poor are my worry and my sorrow (Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993, p.117). I believe that one could not ask for a greater expression of solidarity, especially knowing (as we all know) the manner in which our Founder gave life to those words.

As in so many other situations, we could continue to cite different references to Vincent's writings. I hope that from heaven it does not appear to be presumptuous to attempt to sum up with one reference (not a long reference) what appears to me to be that which is most essential to Vincent's doctrine and that which so many members of the Vincentian Family, united today with Vincent in heaven, attempt to live. Let us listen attentively: God loves the poor, consequently, He loves those who love the poor ... let us devote ourselves with renewed love to serve persons who are poor, and even to seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned; let us acknowledge before God that they are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy of rendering them our little services (CCD:XI:349).

As I was preparing this presentation I remembered a gathering of young religious. After viewing the film, *The Mission*, a Jesuit novice exclaimed: we cannot be pigmy children of giant parents.

The theme of solidarity is present in our Constitutions and this began with the provisional Constitutions of 1975 and has continued to the present Constitutions. When speaking about the poor whom we are called to serve, it is stated: The Daughters of Charity see those who suffer, those stripped of human rights and dignity, and those in poor health as children of God and brothers and sisters with whom they are in solidarity (Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, #16c).

We are referred to *Populorum Progressio* which speaks about the aspirations of humankind: Today we see people trying to secure a sure food supply, cures for diseases, and steady employment. We see them trying to eliminate every ill, to remove every obstacle which offends man's dignity. They are continually striving to exercise greater personal responsibility ... and yet, at the same time, a large number of them live amid conditions which frustrate these legitimate desires (*Populorum Progressio*, #6).

Let us reflect for a few moments on the great encyclical on solidarity: This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all (*Sollicitudo rei socialis* #38).

Today the ethic of solidarity is being replaced by a false view of solidarity as a spectacle and the media is converting this into another article of consumption. Social conflicts do not exist, only the occasional disagreement. Social, political and economic problems are covered up and we find missing any analysis of the reality. Therefore there is no possibility of becoming aware of injustice and no possibility of mobilization against injustice.

We are not accustomed to solidarity as a campaign or an immediate response to a situation of great urgency without asking ourselves about structural causes. If an earthquake causes death and suffering in Mexico, it is unfortunate that the poor suffer the consequences. Yet at no time is the question asked: why does a seismic event of the same intensity produce different effects in Mexico and Los Angeles. Humanitarian aid is provided when these emergencies arise and each day we are better prepared for such emergencies. But we are very limited in our attempt to mitigate the consequences of these catastrophes and no one seems to question their causes.

We said that in Saint Vincent's time the word solidarity was not used. Vincent spoke about the common good and through his life he gave witness to the meaning of solidarity as an encounter: • the experience of finding oneself in the midst of the world of suffering and injustice and not remaining indifferent, and • having the ability to think and live differently.

To live solidarity as an encounter led Vincent to know and love the poor, to participate in their lives and to establish a relationship of true communion with them. This led to the establishment of the Confraternities, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity and as a result of these initial foundations, other religious Congregations and lay Associations that follow his spirit were born.

To live solidarity as an encounter obliges us to place ourselves in a position where we are able to model the society that we desire and thus we commit ourselves to live our lives in accord with this desire. This supposes a change in values and adapting these values to a lifestyle that imitates Vincent as he attempted to follow Jesus Christ. With our life we ought to be able to say:

- that it is possible to replace having with being as the basic value of our society;
 - that we need much less in order to satisfy our basic human needs;
- that the quality of our relationships provides a level of happiness that is much greater than that which is derived from possessing material goods.

The document, Religious and Human Promotion, that was published in 1978 by what was then called the Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes states clearly: The witness of religious for justice in the world, however, implies, for themselves in particular, a constant review of their life-options, their use of goods and their manner of relating, because the one who dares to speak to others about justice must above all be just in the eyes of others (Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, Religious and Human Promotion, April, 1978, #3e).

The same idea is expressed in a more synthesized manner in Vita consecrate: To bear witness to Christ by one's life, works and words is the particular mission of the consecrate life in the Church and in the world (Vita consecrata, #109)

To live in this way, with the integrity that we have just spoken about, and to commit ourselves to defending those persons who are poor leads to a tension between our proclamation and our denunciation. Our denunciation ought to be addressed not only to the transgressions of ethical values by those in public positions of authority but should also lead us to a critical examination of our own actions, especially when we limit ourselves to deal only with the more painful aspect of exclusion, namely, physical survival.

As in so many areas, Saint Vincent points out the path and shows us how to make the poor authentic protagonist of their own promotion.

7. Saint Vincent and human promotion

In the Compendium we read: The poor should be seen not as a problem, but as people who can become the principal builders of a new and more human future for everyone (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, p.253, #449).

Vincent de Paul's perspective is that the poor are able to become responsible actors in their own promotion. In Vincent's experience we see a twofold dimension: an immediate response in which he provides food and care and shelter and then action with regard to structures, political action because if one has to struggle against poverty in order to mitigate it then at the same time one has to struggle against the causes of poverty in order to eliminate them. Let us reflect more on this theme.

Direct assistance cannot be viewed as an end in itself or as an isolated activity but rather should be seen as a means that enables one to awaken those who are concerned about their personal development and in bettering their situation in both the medium and long range.

All of this implies clothing ourselves in certain attitudes:

- a realization that all people, without exception, are the subject of rights and duties;
- a belief in the ability of every person to better themselves and to move forward.

Brothers and sisters, we ought to believe in people. I am firmly convinced that this is a question of life or death because the future of the people with whom we work is at stake. I say this and I am referring to the poor who have been entrusted to us and also to our collaborators ... it will be difficult for them to take on this attitude if they do not see this attitude present in ourselves, we who are the sons and daughters of Vincent de Paul.

In order to believe in people we need to have a vision of faith. Allow me to refer to article 10 of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity to illustrate this point. There we read: The Sisters find Christ and contemplate Him in the heart and life of those who are poor, where His grace is ever at work to sanctify and save them. Their primary concern is to make God known to them, to proclaim the Gospel, and to make the Kingdom present. Through faith they see Christ in those who are poor, and they see those who are poor in Christ (Constitutions of the Company of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, #10a-b).

Here I ask you to allow me to invite you to pose a question, one that I have asked myself many times especially in situations where I feel helpless and in situations where the realities of those persons who are poor appear to overwhelm me: am I convinced, am I truly convinced and do I believe that the grace of God continues to act in those persons who are wearied, continues to save them and sanctify them? We ought to realize that the first and foremost resource that people have is themselves and their abilities (even if those abilities are dormant).

Saint Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, expresses the same idea as that which is found in Article 10 of the Constitutions: Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations, forever and ever (Ephesians 3:20-21).

With this vision of the human person it is impossible to fall into stereotyping and labeling other people. Expressions such as: all people are the same ... it is impossible to do anything ... they do not want to change ... should not find a place in the heart of the children of Vincent de Paul. If I do utter such words then I ought to stop and think ... it can happen that with such an attitude I am denying my ability to act as I configure the failure of my intervention and thus define the destiny of those persons whom the Lord has entrusted to me.

Another detail to keep in mind is that of our faith in people. We cannot believe that we have some perfect understanding of another person's problems and therefore a clear understanding of the solution to said problem. We often communicate the idea that we understand another's situation and that our solution is also valid for that person. This is a mistaken idea since we are unable to place ourselves in that person's situation. The people who approach us are not interested in encountering someone who wants to change them but rather they want to know that someone will support them and accompany them when they decide to change. To help another person is to become aware of their reality and the steps that are needed in order to overcome said situation. This is a slow process and begins with respect for the other person's ability to organize his/her life. Therefore here we are not dealing with problem solving but rather with a process of accompaniment.

We return to Saint Vincent. We are sons and daughters of a father who was the first in organizing charity and he did this for a very specific purpose: to avoid duplicating efforts and to provide better services to those persons who were suffering. Here I am referring to what occurred in Châtillon in 1617, events that gave birth to his first foundation. We do not always give sufficient attention to the fact that here Vincent intervened in the specific problems of a group of people and did this while in the midst of the situation that produced the problem in the first place. Consequently, he was committed to the actions that arose from the community. In the field of social work we refer to this as community development.

It is very enlightening to reflect on the way that Vincent acted in Mâcon. We have a letter that Vincent sent to Louise in which he explains the events that occurred in Mâcon in 1620. Coste inserted a footnote in this letter and refers to Abelly, pointing out that there was some good to be done so he stopped there. The men and women of the well-to-do-class, responding to his appeal, formed two distinct confraternities. To the men he entrusted the assistance of the poor; to the women, the care of the sick. The Bishop, the Canons, and the Lieutenant General helped him as best they could. Rules were drawn up and put into practice (CCD:I:281, footnote #1 of letter 198c). Once again we see that different groups and individuals committed themselves to remedy the existing situation of poverty.

We are fortunate to have at our disposal various texts that refer to said Rule and we also have at hand a copy of the Rule and I would exhort you to read these documents (CCD:XIIIb:67ff). Here I will simply point out two articles which provide us with an image of Vincent that might be somewhat distinct from that which we commonly hold: [4] All those who were found begging in the streets and at the churches during the week, or about whom the Ladies had made justifiable complaints, would receive nothing the following Sunday... [7] Since the assembly did not want to encourage laziness among the able-bodied poor or their families, they were to be given only what was necessary to supplement the modest salaries from their work (CCD:XIIIb:69-70).

Vincent always joined assistance to some form of human promotion. He looked for different means that would enable those who were poor to become aware of their situation, their rights, their possibilities ... means that would enable them to become the protagonists of their integral development. In 1651 he wrote to the superior at Sedan: Their [the Ladies] original intention was to assist only those who cannot work nor earn their living and would be in danger of dying of starvation if someone did not assist them. In fact, as soon as anyone is strong enough to work, tools of his trade are bought for him and nothing more is given to him. Accordingly, the alms are not for those able to work on the fortifications or to do something else, but seriously ill sick persons, orphans, or the elderly (CDD:IV:188).

In 1659 Vincent wrote to Monsieur Jean Parre who had traveled through Picardy and Champagne taking notes with regard to the needs of the poor while seeking remedies to this situation: They [the Ladies] would also like to enable all the other poor people who have no land --- men as well as women --- to earn their own living, by giving the men some tools for working and the girls and women spinning wheels and flax or linen for spinning --- but only the poorest (CCD:VIII:82-83).

Forgive me for once again making reference to the Constitutions of the Daughters (I am not very familiar with the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission). When speaking about human promotion the Constitutions cite the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, which states: We cannot allow economics to be separated from human realities, nor development from the civilization in which it takes place. What counts for us is man—each individual man, each human group, and humanity as a whole (*Populorum Progressio*, 14).

The provisional Constitutions of 1975 and 1983 spoke about a constant concern for the whole person. Now, with a more developed formulation and in accord with the present way of thinking, the present Constitutions state: With constant concern for the promotion of the whole person, the Company does not separate corporal service from spiritual service, nor the work of humanization from that of evangelization (Constitutions of the Company of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, #14).

Evangelii Nuntiandi tells us that evangelization cannot be reduced to human promotion but the Vincentian tradition tell us that evangelization necessarily includes human promotion and at the same time shows us that we cannot separate in some rigid manner evangelization and human promotion, even though there are some who today will defend such a separation.

It would be possible now to relate the praxis of Saint Vincent with other interesting aspects of the Church's social doctrine: Saint Vincent and refugees (recall here all that Vincent suffered in his organizational efforts on behalf of those multitudes who were arriving in Paris as they fled their homes as a result of the war), Saint Vincent and the theology of work, Saint Vincent and the analysis of the reality, Saint Vincent and networking, Saint Vincent and inculturation ... but we have to leave things as they are for the moment, but I do invite you to continue to investigate these themes and others that might interest you.

Mother Guillemin was correct when she spoke to the Sister Servants in 1963: (waiting for a copy of the official English translation of this document).

We studied the life of Saint Louise with the young sisters and it is right to affirm what Father Benito Martínez wrote in his book *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres* (Committed to a paradise for the poor): Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were both founders of the Company. There was one charism shared by two people or if you will, the two saints received the same divine charism to minister on behalf of the community of poor people (Benito Martínez, CM, *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, CEME, 1995, p. 76). Personally I am in total agreement with this statement.

At some later time we will reflect on the life of the first Sisters, Sister Rosalie Rendu, Frederic Ozanam and Sister S. Guillemin, a true prophet in our time. We could cite numerous other Vincentians who have walked in these footsteps and we would see how the charism has been transmitted and continues to be transmitted as a living and precious heritage.



8. By way of conclusion: visions and dreams

We can say with Mother Guillemin that there is nothing more noteworthy than the spirit of Saint Vincent. For her this was one of the great discoveries and one of the greatest marvels that occurred during the Council. She expressed this idea in the following manner: Each time that a seemingly new idea was put forth, I told myself with deep personal and filial satisfaction: "Saint Vincent taught us that" ... perhaps he did not use the same words since he expressed his ideas using the language of his era. But his thinking had a purity and clarity and authenticity so that it was never contradicted or censured by the teaching of the Church ... Let us rejoice in the fact of being children of such a father.

I would be happy if, overcoming the distance of time, this were the sentiment that each one of us were strengthening this morning.

Allow me to invite you to deepen your understanding of the Church's social doctrine since this will help us to remain faithful in four essential aspects of our life:

- faithful to humankind and to the signs of the time
 - faithful to Christ and the gospel
- faithful to the Church and its mission in the world
 - faithful to the charism of our Founder.

In addition to the treasure of faith we have another great treasure, the Vincentian charism and paraphrasing Saint Paul we hold this treasure in earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7). Let us take the time to ask ourselves if in our every day existence we are prophets? What do we proclaim? To whom and to what realities do we give witness? Let us then confront our responses with the prophetic life of our Founder, with the life of our prophets whom we have cited in this presentation and with the life of the many other prophets whom we know in the Vincentian Family.

Let us remember that the prophets are those who have the courage to raise their eyes and to stare into the eyes of God, to encounter God face to face, like Moses, but who also remove their sandals before the burning bush, that is, they cast aside their certainty and security and they look for another point of reference as did Mary of Nazareth. Like the potter in the book of Jeremiah, they are willing to divest themselves of that which is of no use. They encounter Yahweh and do not die because the prophets are able to see God (at times in an intimate manner). When they hear the call, they are fearful and want to flee like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Jonah. They expect to die in the desert but when they hear the call of God they are able to say: here I am, send me! You have duped me!

As they respond to the signs of the time that arise in the midst of our world, the prophets are called to valiantly reproduce the boldness, the creativity and the holiness of our Founders and to do this by being faithful to our charism and by adapting our charism to the situations and the needs of our time (Vita consecrate, #37).

The Council has told us: One is entitled to think that the future of humanity is in the hands of those men who are capable of providing the generations to come with reasons for life and optimism (Gaudium et spes, #31). More recently Pope John Paul II has stated: Now is the time for a new "creativity" in charity (Novo Milenio Ineunte, #50).

We often offend the Creator and the Savior when we embrace the pessimism of this age and we can understand why pessimism is the philosophy of life for those persons who do not believe in God.

In the spirit of Jesus we ought to cultivate that hope that allow us (as Saint Paul states in his letter to the Romans) to look with confidence at the future of creation and humanity, groaning in labor pains even until now, certain that this is the path to liberation (cf. Roman 8:18–20). Hope in the Kingdom is not verified by passive resignation but by anticipating this Kingdom through (no matter how small) specific, partial liberations ... for these small steps lead to a future of fullness.

We remember that the prophets not only plan but with their life they attempt to make their dreams a reality and this is hope ... this is the Christian utopia. Therefore, they are willing to lose their life little by little or, if need be, in a single stroke.

The prophets have a distinct sensitivity. Their heart is enflamed with the certainty that God's creativity cannot be held captive. It is necessary therefore to be always attentive, to stay awake and to look at the reality with new eyes because at any moment something unexpected and surprising might occur.

Let us listen to the prophet Joel: Your old men shall dream dreams; your young men shall see visions (Joel 3:1).

We remember that for the people of Israel visions and dreams are divine communications. Our world, the poor and the church have the right and the need to share in our visions and our dreams. The above text from the book of the prophet Joel invites us to dream with God, to dream the dreams of God for his people, to foresee a better world and to work with all our strength so that this dream becomes a reality. Is this not what Vincent de Paul did? Is this not what so many "prophets" did who preceded us in sharing and living the Vincentian charism?

When we have visions ... when we dream about wonderful things for the poor whom God has entrusted to us ... when it seems that all these things are impossible ... then we realize that these are the dreams of God and we struggle so that they do become a reality. Let us deepen our understanding of the Word of God ... let us deepen our understanding of the Church's social doctrine ... let us deepen our understanding of the Vincentian charism ... and then we will see how this new understanding will encourage us and animate us to have great dreams and great visions ... visions and dreams that provide the best for each one of the poor women and men whom God has entrusted to us. So be it.

Translated by Charles T. Plock, CN with permission from the author.