

Rome, 31 May 2007
Visitation of Our Lady

To the members of the Vincentian Family

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you!

On 2-4 February 2007, we, the international heads of various branches of the Vincentian Family, met in Rome for our annual meeting. We shared our experiences during 2006, with their lights and shadows, evaluated the many cooperative ventures that we are engaging in, and planned future projects together.

In this letter, we wish first of all to give you an update on matters pertaining to the individual branches. They touch on events of the past year and the programs and plans of the current year. Secondly, we present to you the suggested theme for this year's celebration of the feast of St. Vincent de Paul. At the same time, we attach an aid for reflection on this day.

I. As is our custom, at the beginning of the meeting each of us recounted the highlights of the last year, with an accent on what we can do better together in the future. Here are a few of the principal things we talked about.

- **The International Association of Charities (AIC)**

The first meeting of the countries in Asia was held in Manila, and a seminar on Participative Leadership in Guatemala for the associations in Central America. Among the recently published formation materials were two on "Political Action" and "Women and Poverty," and three on the series of spiritual reflection on "On the road with Vincent." AIC is a member of the board of Depaul Foundation and has initiated common projects in Ukraine together with the other branches of the Vincentian Family.

In March 2007 the International Assembly was held with the theme of "Women and Poverty in the Diversity of Cultures." Ukraine was received as a full-right member, while Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia were accepted as members in formation. Before the assembly proper, there was a seminar for the associations in Africa.

- **The Congregation of the Mission (CM)**

Archbishop Frank Rodé was named Cardinal, the first Vincentian in the Latin Rite to be so honored. Receiving the Systemic Change award were projects from

Madagascar, India (North), Slovenia, Peru and USA (Niagara University). Also the Mission Award was established for projects promoting our missionary spirit. Five projects received this award: Ethiopia, India (North), Slovakia, Rio de Janeiro and Zaragoza.

In January 2007, there was a workshop to help confreres in difficulty, and in June the international meeting of Visitors will be held in Mexico.

- **The Daughters of Charity (DC)**

The Visitatrices' Encounter, held in the Motherhouse in May 2006, had as its theme 'Daughters of Charity, Servants, Witnesses and Prophets.' From this developed the theme for the next General Assembly of 2009: 'Prophecy and hope, now and everywhere.' A Vincentian Formation Session for ninety Sisters was held in the Motherhouse during the month of June and was followed in the month of October by a three-month long Vincentian Formation Session for the Sisters of Asia with twenty seven participants. Other important Formation Sessions and meetings were held among which was the formation meeting in Mozambique on the Dream Project which is now in operation there and in Nigeria. The Project is under consideration also in Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Kenya, Eritrea, Rwanda, Burundi and Madagascar. New Foundations were made in Magadan (Siberia-Eastern Russia) and also in Tanzania. Other Sisters responded to emergency situations or disasters, e.g. the earthquake in Java and with the refugees in Lebanon.

This year 2007 sees the continuing preparation for the General Assembly. Among various new ventures being undertaken is the opening of the AIDS centre in Nigeria and a shelter for immigrants in Sicily. A special session has been held in Ukraine for the Sisters who work in the former Soviet Union. Another Vincentian Formation Session was held during April and May in the Motherhouse for Sisters from Africa and Madagascar. A significant event will be celebrated on 25 November in Salvador Brazil when Sr. Lindalva Justo de Oliveira, who was martyred, will be beatified.

- **The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SSVP)**

In order to have better contact with the Holy See, a member from Italy will represent the Society. More than 600,000 euro were sent to countries affected by calamities and to other projects in various countries, principally in Africa and Latin America. Efforts are being consolidated by the group "Vincentians for Peace," especially in Zambia and Haiti. Projects are also being developed in 2007 in Cuba, Ukraine and Zambia. The "Africa Commission" continues to prepare a plan for 2008-2009. Last year 448 conferences were added and 34 Councils instituted.

Prior to the 2008 World Youth Day in Sydney, Australia, a Vincentian Youth Gathering will be held. This is being coordinated by members of the Society.

- **The Religious of St. Vincent de Paul (RSV)**

Priority is being given to contemporary situations, especially broken families,

single mothers and abandoned children. Also they focus on the implementation of small creative projects that respond to unattended needs and on working with organizations, especially with the Vincentian Family. Since last year the Superior General, Fr. Yvon Laroche, has accompanied the Society of St. Vincent de Paul as spiritual director. An International Office for Missions has been created.

This year will be spent in preparation for the Chapter as the Congregation faces very concrete challenges on the New Evangelization and the formation of the youth.

- **The Vincentian Marian Youth (VMY)**

Collaborating with CLAPVI, the “Latin American Meeting on Vincentian Youth Ministry” was held in Caracas (Venezuela) with the formation of Advisers as its principal objective. Those who participated included members from among the Daughters of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, Lay Advisors of VMY, and from other branches of the VF. The International Secretariat welcomed three young volunteers and a new Sister who took the place of those who finished their terms.

In 2007 and under the theme of “Sharing the joy of living with Jesus” they will continue to deepen their Vincentian Marian spirituality, collaborate with the other branches of the VF and insist on the objective of self-sufficiency. In December there is a plan to hold the “Meeting of National Councils of Europe and the Middle East.”

- **The Association of the Miraculous Medal (AMM)**

A Daughter of Charity was named Executive Secretary of the Coordinating Council, and her appointment has allowed better follow-up of planned activities. Three Bulletins have been published. The web-site has been updated and the catecheses in three languages have been completed and sent to all the countries. In communications with the national AMM emphasis is made on the implementation of the commitments of the II International Meeting of 2005.

For 2007 the following are planned: publication of four bulletins, encouraging the formulation of Statutes in those countries where there are none as yet, intensifying communication with the national AMM, and forming a group to study the revision of the International Statutes. Soon the Association will be making preparations for the centenary celebration of the approval of its international statutes by Pius X (8 July 1909).

- **The Vincentian Lay Missionaries (MISEVI)**

The year 2006 focused on the challenges of the General Assembly and the renewal of the Coordinating Team. A “Preliminary Plan for an International Community” has been drafted.

Among the agenda items for 2007 are: to formulate themes for the formation plan, to create a Commission in charge of studying the revision of the (International) Statutes, and to realize the establishment of an International Missionary Community.

- **Sisters of Charity of St. Jeanne-Antide Thouret (SC)**

A special guest at this year's meeting was Sr. Maria Luisa Colombo, the Superioress General of the Sisters of Charity of St. Jeanne-Antide Thouret. She informed us about the following developments in their Congregation:

At present there are 2,800 Sisters distributed in 360 communities and operating in 27 countries: 107 Sisters in Africa, 80 in America, 183 in Asia and 2,430 in Europe. Among the 28 communities in Africa, there is a significant presence in the Central African Republic and in Sudan (Darfur). The communities are to be found in the outskirts of the big cities as much as in rural villages. The service is carried out in big establishments managed by the Congregation or by other entities, as well as in collaboration with the Caritas organizations in the parishes, with volunteer groups and other Associations.

In these situations, the assistance and proximity to, and above all the passion for the promotion of the poor, characterize the way they serve which finds its roots in the Vincentian spirit and lifestyle. The latest foundations have been in Thailand, Ethiopia and Moldavia.

There were also other matters that we treated at this year's meeting. They included the following:

Report of the Delegate of the Superior General:

Fr. Manuel Ginete has informed us that in 2006 he has visited the Vincentian Family in Egypt, Brazil, Nigeria, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Ireland, Spain (Valencia), Ukraine and Nicaragua. In the next five years, he intends to stress the formation of National and Regional Councils of the VF as well as formation of Advisors.

The Vincentian Family in Italy:

We invited the "Coordinating Group of the Vincentian Family in Italy" to dialogue with us in order to enlighten us on its role, processes, projects, etc. as it animates the Vincentian Family in Italy. It presented the Regulations that govern its activities and projects. Aside from the international projects on hunger and malaria, its activities included also assistance to the tsunami and hurricane victims, and the recently held national Congress on the encyclical "Deus Caritas est."

Report on the Campaign Against Malaria:

Marco Bétemps of the SSVP gave a report on the continuing campaign in collaboration with various universities in Italy. The first conclusions are in the direction of producing medicines in small laboratories in Africa, which will open the possibility of less expensive and more generic medicines. On this they are working with some companies in India.

Vincentian Historical Places:

Discussion centered particularly on the chapel of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris and the Berceau. Different possibilities were explored in the area of formation as was the idea of pilgrimage for the benefit of all the members of the Vincentian Family. Some

suggestions were made: to prepare a “Vincentian route,” to make these places more conducive to international groups (thus, making use of translation materials and equipment), and to explore the possibility of expanding the CIF to include formation of other branches of the VF.

More Information:

We are reminded to invite other branches of the VF to the respective General and Provincial Assemblies, to encourage everyone to join the Day of Prayer on the occasion of St. Vincent’s feast, as well as to invite the poor and other persons who belong to the VF, to continue to invite other branches of the VF who are already well known and well established to the meetings on the international level.

Fr. Maloney’s book, *Rule of Life for Lay Members of the Vincentian Family*, has been published in English and Spanish. Translation to other languages will be explored. This reader-friendly booklet treats of Vincentian spirituality.

There exists already a Vincentian library on the FamVin website in English (www.famvin.org/wiki), and the Spanish version is being started (www.famvin.org/wiki-es).

II. On the second day of our meeting we listened to a presentation by the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change, whose members are: Norberto Carcellar, C.M.; Ellen Flynn, D.C.; Joseph Foley, C.M.; Robert Maloney, C.M.; Patricia Nava, AIC; Pedro Opeka, C.M.; and Gene Smith, SSVP. The Commission spoke of the nature of systemic change, the spirituality that underlies it, and the strategies that foster it. The members described projects in Madagascar, the Philippines, England, the Dominican Republic, and other places in which our Family is succeeding not only in serving the immediate needs of the poor, but also in assisting the poor to develop strategies by which they can emerge from poverty. Convinced that there are a number of other projects like these already existing within the Family, the Commission asked the heads of the Family to share the stories of such works.

Many of the strategies that the Commission has identified for promoting systemic change flow from the gospels and the Vincentian Tradition, such as:

- Involving the poor themselves, including women and young people, at all stages: the identification of needs, planning, implementation, evaluation and revision;
- Having a holistic vision — addressing a series of basic human needs: individual and social, spiritual and physical, especially jobs, health care, housing, education, and spiritual growth — with an integral approach toward prevention and sustainable development;
- Placing particular emphasis on self-help and self-sustaining programs, with a special view toward addressing the root causes of poverty.

A lively discussion followed. At the end of that discussion, the heads of the various branches of the Family decided to choose **systemic change as our focus for at least the coming two years, beginning on 27 September 2007.**

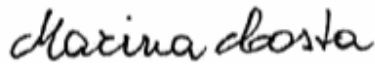
Last year, as you recall, we proposed the phrase “Love is infinitely inventive” as the theme for the celebration that the branches of the Vincentian Family organize around the time of the Solemnity of St. Vincent. In continuity with that theme, this year we have chosen as our motto a phrase from the first letter of John: “***What we have heard and seen and touched with our hands — we announce to you..***” This phrase and, even more, the full citation (1 Jn 1:1-3) emphasizes how concrete the incarnation is and also how concrete are the works of charity that John describes in his letter: “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life — for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us — what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

With a view toward touching the lives of the poor very concretely, we will reflect on systemic change for at least the next two years, and perhaps longer, evaluating at the end of each year what is happening and then planning for the year ahead. **Within the next few weeks we will be sending a study guide consisting of five sessions.** We hope that it will be useful to the members of all the branches as we focus on systemic change together and attempt to design projects that aim at bringing it about. Since systemic change is multifaceted and involves much collaborative activity, such projects will be a good opportunity for the various branches to work together and also to cooperate with groups beyond our Family.

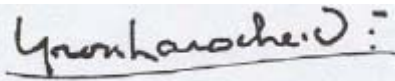
This year we are not enclosing a detailed plan, as we have done in the past, for the Family’s liturgical celebration on or around 27 September. Rather, we thought that it might be better for the various branches, in each locality, to plan the celebration creatively together. We have provided only a single two-sided sheet, with some suggested readings and with some quotations that you might find useful. On the sheet you will also find a “systemic change” prayer.

The concept of “systemic change” is a contemporary one. It was unknown in St. Vincent’s time, though St. Vincent himself expressed many related ideas. When he gathered the first group of women to form a “Confraternity of Charity” at Chatillon-les-Dombes in November 1617, he stated, in the Rule he composed for them (SV XIII, 423), that the poor sometimes suffer more from lack of “order” than from lack of charitable persons. He continually urged the members of his Family to love the poor “spiritually and corporally” and “affectively and effectively.” He encouraged his followers to examine various elements in the lives of the poor to see what their most important needs were: nourishment, health care, education, work, spiritual care, etc. Today we are conscious that the poor live within a social system where some or many of these elements are lacking, a system that, if changed, can help a person emerge from poverty.

As we celebrate the Solemnity of St. Vincent this year, we ask the Lord to help us be creative during the coming year in helping bring about systemic change. With gratitude to the Lord for all that he enables our Family to do in his service and in the service of those who are poor, we remain, your brothers and sisters in St. Vincent,



Marina Costa
President, AIC
(Founded in 1617)



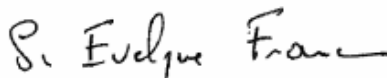
Yvon Laroche, R.S.V.
Superior General, Religious of
St. Vincent de Paul (Founded in 1845)



G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General, Congregation
of the Mission (Founded in 1625)



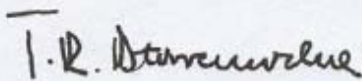
Yasmine Cajuste
President, Vincentian Marian
Youth (Founded in 1847)



Sr. Evelyne Franc, D.C.
Superioress General, Daughters
of Charity (Founded in 1633)



Benjamín Romo, C.M.
International Coordinator of the
Association of the Miraculous Medal
(Founded in 1909)



José Ramón Díaz Torremocha
President, Society of St. Vincent de Paul
(Founded in 1833)



Mari Carmen Lupiañez
President, MISEVI
(Founded in 1999)

READINGS, QUOTATIONS, AND A PRAYER
Vincentian Family Celebration – 27 September 2007
An Aid for Reflection on Systemic Change

Some suggested readings:

Is 52:7-10
1 Cor 1:26-31: 2:1-2
Mt 5:1-12a
Mt 9:35-38
Mt 25:31-46

Some relevant quotations:

St. Vincent:

- “If you consider the poor in the light of faith, then you will observe that they are taking the place of the Son of God, who chose to be poor. Although in his passion he almost lost the appearance of a man and was considered a fool by the Gentiles and a stumbling block by the Jews, he showed them that his mission was to preach to the poor: ‘He sent me to preach the good news to the poor.’ We also ought to have this same spirit and imitate Christ’s actions, that is, we take care of the poor, console them, help them, support their cause” (SV XI, 32).
- “Our love must be affective and effective” (SV IX, 475, 592, 599; XI, 40). St. Vincent tells the Daughters of Charity: “The love of a Daughter of Charity is not only tender, it is effective, because they serve the poor concretely” (SV IX, 593).
- “We must assist the poor spiritually and corporally” (SV IX, 59, 593; XI, 364). St. Vincent uses this phrase in speaking to all the groups he founded: the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity. He tells the Daughters of Charity that they should tend not only to bodily needs, but also share their faith by their witness and their words. He warns the members of the Congregation of the Mission that they should not think of their mission in exclusively spiritual terms, but should care for the sick, the foundlings, the insane, even the most abandoned (SV XI, 393).
- “We serve by word and work” (SV XII, 87). St. Vincent was deeply convinced that what we say and what we do must reinforce one another. His rule for “effective evangelization” is “First do, then teach.” He sees preaching, teaching and human promotion as complementary to one another, and as integral to the evangelization process. Today, the unity between evangelization and human promotion, so much a part of St. Vincent's spirit, is one of the main emphases in the Church's social teaching (Cf. Synod of Bishops, 1971, *Justice in the World*: “... action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world are integral elements in the preaching of the gospel”).

St. Louise de Marillac:

- “The poor person is first in the church. He is the prince and master, being a kind of incarnation of the poor Christ. We must therefore serve him with respect, no matter what his character is like, no matter what his defects. And we must love him” (Jean Calvet, *Sainte Louise de Marillac par elle-même*. Paris: Aubier, 1958, p. 75).

Blessed Frederick Ozanam:

- “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” (Letter of 30 April 1848).

Pope John Paul II:

- “Search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short and long-term solutions – adaptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so you will work for the credibility of the gospel and of the Church” (Address to the Members of the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, 1986).
- “You will also want to seek out the structural reasons which foster or cause the different forms of poverty in the world ... so that you can apply the proper remedies” (Homily given in New York City, October 1979).

Albert Einstein:

- “No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew” (a quotation attributed to him).

Peter Senge:

- “Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots’” (*The Fifth Discipline*, 1992).

Prayer for Systemic Change:

We praise and thank you, O God, Creator of the universe.
You have made all things good and have given us the earth to cultivate.
Grant that we may always use created things gratefully,
and share them generously with those in need.
Give us creativity in helping the poor meet their basic human needs.
Open our minds and hearts so that we might stand at their side
and assist them to change whatever unjust structures keep them poor.
Enable us to be brothers and sisters to them, friends who walk with them
in their struggle for fundamental human rights.

We ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen.