

CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, MEMBERS OF SAINT VINCENT CONFERENCES ACROSS THE WORLD

Dear friends and brothers,

As usual at this time of year, I have the utmost pleasure to re-establish contact with thousands of Brothers and Sisters across the world, who sacrifice themselves everyday to serve the poorest among us, through the small-scale communities of faith that our conferences are. They serve those who, better than anyone else, represent the good and peaceful Christ who sacrificed himself for our salvation (1).

At least once a year, the President General gets in touch with his peers: Brothers and Sisters in all parts of the world where the Society of Saint Vincent is established. Communication among ourselves is very important in that it encourages the formation of all Brothers and Sisters, while protecting our independence of thought from various forms of manipulation (2). In today's letter, I would like to take the opportunity to address three issues that particularly concern me.

My first concern is the necessity of good communication among us: members of a worldwide conference. In general, communication is a fundamental part of any human activity, and especially in our modern times. What would the world be now if all discoveries and inventions had not been conveyed? If part of humanity had kept them for itself, and another part had ignored them as if they did not exist? (3).

It is particularly important for Saint Vincent Conferences to communicate with one another and share experiences, within the context of serving the needy and their Brothers and Sisters. It is also essential that the most active among them, the most able to fulfil their dreams, and the most efficient in identifying new needs and developing new ways to serve and to relieve hu-

man suffering, be able to communicate their findings to the others by teaching them in a frame of mind governed by charity (4). As for others, they must be humble enough to learn from successful experiences taking place in other parts of the world, and thus prevent suffering for so many individuals.

However, even though the sharing of experience is extremely important at the level of tangible service to the poor, it is even more so at the spiritual and mental levels. Often, while traveling, I read articles written by Brothers and Sisters who live in different parts of the world, and I think about how useful their experience would be to other Vincentians who live on other continents. The talents given to each one of us by God (5) are, from a Christian point of view, proportional to the needs of the community. We are therefore obligated to make use of these talents by serving our Brothers and Sisters on the largest possible scale.

No one holds the absolute truth in regard to serving the poor. Each Conference, within its own environment, imagines ways to fight against the suffering of those who have no choice: the poor. We have to do our best to ensure that the result of our work, when it is successful, is communicated immediately to other Brothers and Sisters who, somewhere else, face the same problem and have not yet found an appropriate solution (6). They then can use a tool that they had not discovered, to efficiently serve their friends in distress. How can we doubt the efficiency and necessity of communication?

Unfortunately, only a few seem to be interested in knowing what is happening in other areas. One of the most common shortcomings among Conferences, and one that we must confront, is a tendency to isolate themselves from the group that we are, as if we would see in others a threat

(1) In the human nature united to Himself the Son of God, by overcoming death through His own death and resurrection, redeemed man and re-molded him into a new creation. (cf. Gal. 6, 15; II Cor. 5, 17) (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 7,a).

(2) In the use and ownership of communication instruments, it is as urgent to educate with a critical sense animated by a passion for the truth, as it is to work on behalf of freedom, respect for personal dignity, elevation of the true culture of people, though firm and courageous rejection of any form of monopoly and manipulation. (Jean Paul II, Exhortation Apostolique " Les Fidèles Laiques " 44).

(3) "For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential. (Vatican II Council, Pastoral Constitution "Gaudium and Spes" 12).

(4) A.F. Ozanam (1838-4-27 letter from Lyon to CGI). We must change ideas, inspirations, sometimes fears, and always hopes. These brotherly communications (referring to written contact), are similar to circulation, which gives life to the Society. (p.260)

(5) Meditation on the parable of the talents.

(6) "For the members of the people of God are called to share these goods in common, and of each of the Churches the words of the Apostle hold good: "According to the gift that each has received, administer it to one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4,1^o) (Vatican II Council - Dogmatic Constitution On The Church 13c).

rather than an opportunity for true service, for the knowledge that they can share with us. We curl up on ourselves too much, on our small and humble groups. The Society's Web page (www.ozanet.org) is a good example of this: a group of excellent Vincentians, entirely devoted to laying out and updating the Society's information page, work courageously to maintain a high level of information. The site is full of useful references for Conferences but, unfortunately, they are not used appropriately.

Still very few Conferences share their experiences with the scope of publishing them and making them known to other Conferences. Very few of us systematically go to our Web page to find out about experiences in other areas, as well as to become better acquainted with the Society's history. We are all able to learn from others and to teach others. I suggest that every Brother and Sister who is able to do so navigate on the Internet at least once every two weeks to keep up to date on everything that is going on in the Society across the world, and go ahead and tell their own stories on how to best relieve the suffering of others.

Those who are familiar with this extraordinary means of communication could help other Brothers and Sisters learn how to use modern communication tools such as this one, that are becoming indispensable to serve the poor and the Holy Church in our present world. We live in an era of communications, and the Society must use these tools to serve those it loves and wishes to serve: those who need our help, our efforts, and our devotion, which must always remain creative.

The second issue I wish to address in this letter is a topic that concerns me more and more, and about which I am questioned by other Brothers and Sisters who share the same concern: Vincentian social works. What I mean here are special works, such as homes for the elderly, orphanages, schools, small hospitals, homes for chronic-care patients, dispensaries, academies, and so many others that we have built these past years, on our own or jointly with other institutions, to answer the needs of a large number of our Brothers and Sisters who were greatly suffering. These represent thousands of projects throughout the Vincentian world. Without doubt, all of them are good works destined to do good deeds. But let us be clear; in some of them, it is difficult to find the Vincentian characteristic, the personal and essential contact of Brothers and Sisters with the people they serve through visits to the specific social works: the personal contact with those who suffer, which is the ir-

vocable basis of any activity within our dear Conferences.

The Society's activities have always had as its main characteristic the proximity of volunteers, Brothers and Sisters, and members of Conferences to the suffering that we are trying to relieve with our work. From a Vincentian point of view, the personal contact with those who suffer, the taking charge of their pain, let me say it again, is the distinctive mark of the Conferences, and the most valuable one at that. Any social work that does not encourage this contact, and that does not operate in proximity with Brothers and Sisters and through them, will undoubtedly be good and benefit many, as I said before, but it might not be as fully Vincentian as it would be with this personal contact. For a social work to be fully Vincentian, Brothers and Sisters must be involved directly and daily. Our social works cannot be left exclusively in the hands of paid staff or other institutions. The presence of volunteer Brothers and Sisters is essential, and it is this presence that will give to Saint Vincent de Paul Conferences a sense of belonging.

I wish to give the following advice to our dear Conferences, who are worried about setting up social works to answer so many needs, whether typical or urgent: think about the continuity of a project in which you are able to remain present, of course with the help of paid staff if necessary, but by managing daily the services provided to the poor on a voluntary basis (7). We cannot allow our most needy friends go from a state of loved and cared for friends to a state of simple number-bearing users, because of an excessive professionalization of our works. Only the guaranteed presence of our Brothers and Sisters will ensure that our good work is a Vincentian good work, not only a good work.

The professionals who help us are nevertheless indispensable, and most of them give us every day, through their own dedication, lessons on how best to behave when we care for the needy. However, we must understand that they are auxiliaries in the work of Vincentian Brothers and Sisters. Otherwise, we would be in the wrong as for our tradition and our vocation. A good formula to select these paid collaborators, and to avoid the risk of an excessive professionalization in the contact with our friends, is to select them among our own Brothers and Sisters

(7) "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep."

who, having done volunteer work within a Conference and being well acquainted with the philosophy of the Society, are in need of a job.

Reciprocally, without imposing, it is a good idea to offer people who know the Society because they work for one of our social works, the possibility to belong to one of our Conferences - as long as it is a different Conference from the one who manages the social work in which they work - in order for them to become aware of what the Conferences are expecting from their service to the poorest.

This shortcoming, consisting in abandoning and renouncing the service that we, as Vincentians, should perform in certain social works, and my concern about seeing us being replaced by paid staff in these works, is also present sometimes within the administration of the Society. This situation worries several Brothers and Sisters, who share this concern with me. They wonder if perhaps we are not being overcome by our own growth, if we are not losing our identity because of a growth that, as our Brothers and Sisters say, overcome our strength as volunteers.

Indeed, the spectacular growth of our Society in several areas of the world has generated in some cases the creation of multiple administrative structures servicing the Society. In order to ensure continuity, these structures often have to be assisted by a non-Vincentian and non-volunteer staff.

Sometimes, unfortunately, due to the indifference and the lack of dedication of our Brothers and Sisters, these people, however necessary, as I mentioned, occupy an ever-greater place within the administration of Councils, a place that does not belong to them, and that can jeopardize the philosophy of service of the Society. The Saint Vincent Conferences are composed of volunteers who, faithful to a commitment of faith within their own group, dedicate themselves to the poor based on the most absolute and radical voluntary action. All the other collaborators are necessary auxiliaries at the service of the dedication of our Brothers and Sisters, but in no case shall we allow them to become, because of our own negligence, directors or even creators of our social philosophy.

This danger that worries our Brothers and Sisters and myself sometimes, as much through social works as within our own administration, will disappear if we, the Brothers and Sisters, truly and seriously respect our obligations towards the Society. The members of each Conference must truly and seriously manage the special works under their responsibility; the

members of the Councils' executive, often in charge of administrative services, must be fully responsible and avoid being substituted by those who should remain auxiliaries. In conclusion, this must be a work of love for the Society, of work of seriousness and responsibility towards the commitment made.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, you must be fully aware of this real danger that could even threaten at times the existence of the Society in certain areas. Do not ever renounce the attitude that you have adopted towards the poor, either in your works or your Vincentian administration. Do not allow an overly sophisticated and professional approach, however good it may be, to deprive our most needy friends of the care and tenderness that we must provide through all our social works, in the name of Christ and the Church (8). Do not allow an overly professional approach to create in our offices an atmosphere, although remarkably efficient, that relegates love to a second place (9).

Let us remember that, for the poorest, Vincentians are very often their only reference to the Holy Church, meaning that many will not have the opportunity to be evangelized (10), to find out about the Church of Christ, and how else can the Church see them, but through you, Vincentians, men and women who go to them, everywhere in the world, to try to assume part of their suffering. The poor know very well how to distinguish those who really care from those who are indifferent (11). For all those whose only reference to the Church is our attitude towards them, the Church, based on our actions, will appear, or not, to care for them, it will be gentle, or not, and it will, or not, represent a movement that is close and dedicated to their plight. We will often be the hands and the face of the Holy Church. What a tremendous responsibility! This is the reason why, in the name of the love we profess towards the poor, we must put the emphasis on the works of the Society. Efficiency must never be our first concern: the

(8) "It is possible that you cannot tell him anything (referring to our contacts with the poor). We ask you to know, and that you act accordingly, that your charitable action be not only a simple assistance to the material needs of the poor. It is an act of evangelization, an advertisement of the kindness of God, and your charitable action must lead him towards God. Perhaps he will not reach God, but this is what Vincent de Paul means by spiritually serve the poor". (Jaime Corera, C.M., International Spiritual Advisor of the SSV in his speech to ACSVP Salamanca, Spain, 1984).

(9) "There is no power over souls but the power of gentleness; that is why all the blessings of the earth are promised to those who practice it: *Beati mites, quia possidebunt terram.*" (Preliminary considerations to the Rule of the SSV, Paris 1835).

(10) "God sent me to evangelize the poor". (Lc 4,18).

(11) Now the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth. (Vatican II Council - Dogmatic Constitution On the Church 33,b).

love that we will put first will eventually drive us to it.

This topic of special works leads me to the third issue I wish to address in this letter. Whenever I visit these special works dedicated to specific kinds of suffering, I always think about our tremendous capability to "twin". I think about our vocation of sharing with others, of praying together, whatever the distance that separates us; our vocation to feel as if the worries and fears of the poor, as well as those of our Brothers and Sisters, who live in far away places, were our own, this is what we call "twinning". I particularly feel this when, visiting Conferences in different countries, I see a project in a rich country and, a few days later, another project in a poor country. Both of them have the logo of the Society on their door, but how different they are from one another! In rich countries where Brothers and Sisters worry about the dignity with which our needy friends must be treated, the works are sometimes considered almost luxurious. Congratulations to our dear Brothers and Sisters who have so much consideration for the poor whose pain they so want to share!

However, as I was saying, there are also projects in poor countries. Not only are they not luxurious, but they sometimes lack even the most elementary resources, such as water, electricity, or indispensable sanitary services. They are in need of everything.

I have an idea all of a sudden, and I submit it to the judgement of my dear Brothers and Sisters of the world. How about considering "twinning" special works, as of the day they are created? Let me try to explain.

When we start a new project in a country that we consider rich (12), or when we have the intention of restructuring an existing project to adapt it to present needs, could we not include the cost of a project in a poorer country in the estimated cost of our project? As I was saying above, some works in rich countries can be described as luxurious, why not try to simply make them dignified, without additional expenses, and allocate the difference to another part of the world to complete or start another project?

(12) "These charitable enterprises can and should reach out to all persons and all needs. Wherever there are people in need of food and drink, clothing, housing, medicine, employment, education; wherever men lack the facilities necessary for living a truly human life or are afflicted with serious distress or illness or suffer exile or imprisonment, there Christian charity should seek them out and find them, console them with great solicitude, and help them with appropriate relief. This obligation is imposed above all upon every prosperous nation and person." (Vatican II Council, Decree On the Apostolate Of the Laity 8).

We could imagine that, every time a Conference, or a Council, creates a new project and appeals for help to Brothers and Sisters and good willed people, it could include in its estimate an additional line in the expenses required to achieve the project, that would reflect the budget dedicated to an "integral twinning project", and where we would describe in detail in which part of the world this project would be established, what needs it would answer, and the show of Vincentian and brotherly solidarity that would result from it. Is this an impossible dream, or can we, and will we, have the faith to realize it?

In a world that is ever more global, ever more interdependent, and where communication is becoming more important and vital every day, we are called upon to consider charity from a global point of view of suffering. We must also consider the global nature of our action. The action of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (13).

There are so many resources and means at our disposal to spread good will: will we be able to use them? Will we be able to imagine how to use them in favour of those who do not have the opportunity to choose?

Our Mother, Mary, wishes to help us so that, each day, we are able to alleviate the suffering of those left by His Son as His best representatives: the poor. May She listen to our prayers from all our Conferences, and help us reach our objectives.

I pray her thus through the intercession of our good friends, Saint Vincent de Paul and the Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

Paris, June 30, 2003

José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha
(i.n.e.d.)
XIV President General

(13) We would like, now and forever, closely and remotely, from one Conference to another Conference, from one country to another country". (preliminary considerations to the Rule of the SSVp, Paris 1835).

