

Paris, June 30, 2008

**CIRCULAR LETTER TO MY DEAR FELLOW-MEMBERS OF THE
CONFERENCES OF THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL IN THE
WORLD.**

Dear Friends and Fellow-Members:

Three subjects I want to offer for reflection to my worldwide fellow-members in this intimate and fraternal communication, that I customarily have with you each mid year.

“When he had received the wine, Jesus said:

It is finished.

With that he bowed his head

and gave up his spirit.”

(Gospel of John 19:30)

A): What do you want of me Lord?

The Gospel of St. John that our Holy Church offers on Good Friday, reminds us year after year of these words - the final ones of Jesus - before giving up his spirit. Truly all was finished. The Redeemer had come with a clear mission to live among us and to bring the gift of God’s forgiveness, offering His life in exchange for that gift. All was consummated after a few years of teaching: from how to address ourselves to the Father, to how we should comprehend our relationship with the rest of mankind, all through the introduction of the new commandment: **“Love one another as I have loved you”** (John 13:34). All that remained was to give up His life and He did.

The Son of God, He who had become a man to live among us, arrived into the world with one mission and He had completed it. That is: His birth, His public life, the handing of Himself over to torture, His death and resurrection. This was not just coincidence or an accident. No! It was the full assumption - conscious and responsible - of a mission entrusted and accepted even to its final consequence. And Jesus defeats the temptation to escape that consequence, to avoid the torture that he knows of beforehand, and exclaims to the One who had sent Him: **“Not my will but Yours, be done”** (Luke 22:42). It

is the final act of a life completely offered for the mission.

Not only Jesus - even though in much less measure and fundamentally without comparing ours to the grandeur of His mission - we also came into the world entrusted with a mission. That is: When God contemplates the birth of each one of us, He dreams of a life, a mission, an obligation that He wishes us to discover and commit ourselves to, our contribution to better the world and the very History of Salvation. Afterward, He follows with interest how each of us makes use of the freedom that He has granted, and observes - most of the time with sadness - how we utilize the seed He has deposited in our soul. Or rather, how we do not utilize it in our hurry through vain illusions that are bound to lead us away from that entrusted mission.

Each member of the Conferences of St. Vincent should meditate profoundly on this passage of the Gospel of John and ask ourselves, **What is my mission that will allow me to say, at the moment of surrendering my life, “all is completed”** What does the Creator of the world ask of us and what answer does He expect of each of us, in order to continue belonging to Him.

It is not something that affects only others. Rather, it is a call that affects each of us, each of the members of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul and a call in which we often fail with equal intensity, just as the rest of humanity does. Coming to meetings, lodging within the Conference, remaining year after year amidst the members and partaking in the suffering of the poorest, is not enough, if we do not achieve the discovery that this is what the Lord expects of each of those who serve the Conferences, the place to which we have been coming in search of our vocation of serving the poorest of the poor.

Even the most humble among us has a mission of God, dreamt by Him for each of us and of which we have

the obligation to discover and commit ourselves to.

For each member a process of discernment is necessary, the intimate knowledge of its deepest values and also of its defects. A process of discernment in which we shall find, without doubt, the assistance of those around us, when we listen to them attentively, so that they consider us more useful. And why should we be less? It is a process of discernment that we will always find in the encounter with God through personal and community prayer within the bosom of the Conference.

The question, **“What do you want of me, Lord?”** could be and should be a question for all of us. What does God expect of you, dear friend, who is reading these lines, in your service to the Conferences, in your service specifically to the one in which you serve? **“What do you want of me, Lord?”** It is certain that you will find which particular and intimate mission God has reserved for you and that it will be, undoubtedly, different from the one that is entrusted to me as a goal or to any of the other members. **“What do you want of me, Lord?”**

That process of discernment will obligate us to be permanently on guard as to what happens around us. However, the Lord does not usually speak to us directly, but frequently does through those who accompany us in life or who, at any moment, cross our paths. Who has not felt questioned by the words of a fellow member, words of a friend, about an act that by chance has occurred in our midst?

Each Conference, in service to the poorest of the poor, and also to its members, is nothing more than the sum of the wills of its components. That is, its service will be directly influenced by the quality of each of its members in their commitment to the community life of the Conference. Therefore, the life of each Conference will be directly influenced by its capacity to serve, by our capacity of having listened to what God expects of each of us and how we will put it into service, listening then all together to what the Spirit of Truth, the Lord and Giver of Life, expects of us as a Christian Community at the service of the poor¹.

What do you ask of me, Lord?², is a fundamental

(1) I had referred to this extreme in the second part of my Circular Letter of June 3, 2007, which is at the disposition of the reader at www.ozanet.org
(2) “The acceptance of the Plan of God, in each person, makes grow the seeds of love, generosity, reconciliation and inner peace, for them, their families and for all those with whom you have contact in your lives. Vincentians have the privilege of encouraging these signs of the presence of the Resurrected Christ in the poor and among themselves.” (Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Article 1.11, third paragraph).

question for each one of us that should illuminate our very life and enrich the life of the Conference one is a member of. Studying in depth, indeed beyond individuality, is a question that needs to be asked by each Conference in the world, each time its service in favor of the poor is examined. Is it accurate then to say that we are doing what God wants us to do and what the poor are in need of?

We are to suppose, dear fellow-members, what each of us shall be capable of giving the world if we listen to the call, decode it, accept it and then apply it to our way of life. We are to be conscious that we shall make a better world if each one of us is capable of responding affirmatively to the mission God entrusts to us. We are to understand that if we do not function in this way, something will result that will not enrich the world because of our carelessness and that this world will be a little less good because we were not capable - or we did not desire it - of investigating or committing ourselves to the mission that the Creator had entrusted to us.

These are questions, be they made individually or collectively, each of us Vincentians should ask ourselves continually so that some day we can say, imitating Our Lord: **“All is completed.”** These are questions that will make us abandon the complacency in which many of us live and will draw us to the authentic restlessness of whether we are truly responding to the expectations that God, since the beginning of time, desired from each one of us.

There is a question that might seem incredible, inconceivable and bordering on the disrespectful. But permit me to include it, in terminating the reflection of this first part of my letter. What would become of each of us - indeed of all humanity - if Jesus, in exercising His own freedom, had betrayed the will of His Father? if he never would have been able to say **“All is finished.”** What hope would we have today?

It will not have the same repercussion. Evidently! But for the continuity of the History of Salvation, God desires to depend on the small contributions that inspire each and every one of us alive today, each of the baptized. What would we miss contributing to the world if we did not ask ourselves the question: **“What do you want of me, Lord?”**, if afterwards we flee from the chalice that He has entrusted to us?

It is a question that we all should ask ourselves continually, throughout all our lives.

B): Open and in Defense of Christian Values.

In the space of the twentieth century, two movements have powerfully influenced the last 50 years. Both began in Europe during the 1960's.

On the one hand, the Second Vatican Council arrives to update Christian values - evangelical values - in the light of new knowledge and theological advances and to the new lifestyles toward which the world is opening. But without forgetting to what point those values are to influence Western Civilization which has fully been presided over by them during the last fifteen hundred years. Likewise, the Church is not conscious that the rhythms of change have profoundly evolved. And we have not **been conscious that if the results of a Council, which** before took centuries to take shape, but now with modern methods of Communication and the frenetic life the world has acquired over the current century, necessarily require a much more aggressive campaign of normalization for the extension of that Conciliar message among all those of good will.

The Holy Church has lost some very valuable years in conveying to all humanity - into each ones bosom - much of the richness of the Council, factors that continue being unknown absolutes to many and, what is more dangerous, unknown to many Catholics. How many of us are familiar with the Conciliar documents? How many of us are capable of explaining them - in a simple manner - to others that live around us, so that they would fall in love with them, as, without doubt would occur, if we were capable of doing so? And these are not the only problems that present themselves to what the Council has enacted. How many of us are capable of explaining thoroughly and with simplicity, the **fabulous Social Doctrine of the Church? A Doctrine** open to all and for all.

On the other hand, the opposing movement, the one that arises from and has its "blind affection" in the name "**May 1968,**"* is presided over by a fierce nihilism** and elevates counter values - as a counter culture - that flow from its bosom toward a dominant ideology where the impulses of each person are to be the only values that count; the truly important ones. They destroy not only the majority of moral limits, which we had established for ourselves in all fields of action since Greece and Rome - not

* The May '68 student demonstrations in Paris is considered to be the watershed moment that saw the replacement of conservative morality (religion, patriotism, respect for authority) with the liberal morality (equality, sexual liberation, human rights) that dominates French society today.

** The rejection of religious and moral creed.

only! - but advance to be considered frustrators to all humans in their physical and mental development. They are much smarter than the movement led by the Church - the Council - and fundamentally more daring. They convince many good people of their generation, that "**old concepts have done, now do and will continue to do harm to the development of human preservation,**" and they must be defeated. These concepts, absolutely demonic, are accepted - just as in olden times - as truths of faith. All is in movement, nothing is permanent. All is submitted for review. There are no moral limits that indicate the difference between right and wrong. What's more, the concept of Rousseau, that evil does not exist, is accepted more and more with conviction. Evil hides and wins in many souls, the battle of the lie: of its nonexistence.

Today, this distancing from the values represented by the philosophy inherited from the Greeks and Romans - and later enriched by Christianity - that has permitted human beings to reach heights, imperfectly for sure, yet unimaginable in the times of the Resurrection of the Savior, constitutes an impoverishment of mankind that humanity will regret if we are not capable of returning to live within the reasonable limits of the Christian message. That is, if we are not capable of once again understanding that good and evil exist and that only by wagering on the good can we continue building the "Civitas Terrena" aspiring to the truly "Civitas Dei," both defined by St. Augustine. Otherwise it will be the moral impoverishment of the world that will reach magnitudes possibly never before seen.

This battle, this war to recover morality: Should it be the area of work for the Conferences? I believe so, without a doubt. The loss of values - the feeling to do good or evil, and of being conscious of it - implies a poverty³ that moves, in the majority of occasions beyond other poverties that appear more evident, or are easier to detect and less complicated and demanding, in the struggle against them. If the Rule reminds us that "**no work of charity is foreign to the Society**"⁴, I do not doubt that this new poverty of mankind, since the beginning of this century - but most likely also continuing in successive ones - should be addressed by our Conferences. It is one more poverty that presents itself at our door and it challenges us to attend to it for Love; for the Love of God.

(3) Reference to this poverty was indicated in my Circular Letter of June 3, 2006. (www.ozanet.org).

(4) "No act of charity is foreign to the Society," includes any form of help destined to alleviate suffering or privation and fosters human dignity and integrity, in all their dimensions. (Rule of the Society, Article 1.3.)

We should all make an enormous effort - through our permanent formation that allows us in simple ways, as mentioned above - to be able to explain by our means, the position of the Magisterium of the Holy Church, the questions that are currently debated in any of the settings in which we customarily exercise our apostolate, and even in those others - family, profession, friendships - where doubts may arise over concepts and values that we all should clearly understand and know, so as to share them with knowledge and seriousness with others. Persons of good will, who are, little by little, being absorbed into the dominant philosophy, are not capable of or do not desire confrontations with those who learned and shared the faith from childhood.

Especially important is this mission to the youngest among us. With them - our youngest members - we should spread all our knowledge so that they will know and assume the values of good against evil, before some are dragged into a counterculture that will doubtless make them unhappy, sooner or later.

Formation, therefore, is an extremely important challenge for the Society in general and for each member in particular. The organization, in this day and time, does not have the capacity to work with each member on necessary and permanent formation. But it does have the ability to encourage each member toward that permanent formation that we must never abandon during the entire life of our apostolate.

We shall not aspire to be masters of anyone; only to be bearers of some necessary knowledge, but always in the simplicity of our actions.

C): Systemic Change

To conclude this Circular Letter, permit me dear fellow-members, to refer to an issue that is being dealt with in the meetings of the Vincentian Family - at an international level - over the past two years. It is about what has been called "systemic change."

Under this title, the Family that takes its inspiration from St. Vincent de Paul, aims to remind us of the necessity of providing for the drastic changes in the material existence of the poor whom we reach out to help.

That is, we are called today by the whole Family, to what so many times we have heard in the Conferences, ever since their foundation: Without

the intention, whenever possible, of redemption of the situation in which they find themselves, there is no truly charitable action; there is no true action of Love.

It is important that each Conference engage all its resources in the attainment of touching the one who suffers and whom we help, achieve the defeat of that suffering so that the possibility of becoming self-sufficient and living without our help, is restored. We should strive to have as our objective that those brothers and sisters whom we give assistance to, achieve the dignity of facing their needs on their own. We are to believe, in the meantime, not only in the helping works that so often we are capable of building, but also in going further and undertaking the task of the advancement of all human beings.

And we are to carry this out wherever possible, in collaboration with that formidable army of charity that comes together under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul. I have recalled on many other occasions, that today our labors are a bit incomplete and diminished of strength, when we do not work together with the rest of the Vincentian Family, in the places where we find two or more of our organizations working toward the same fruits.

The Daughters of Charity, the Vincentian Fathers (CM), the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul, the International Association of Charity (AIC), are inestimable collaborators always for the benefit of the poorest. Let us unite with them wherever we should meet. Let us not let one misunderstood jealousy lead us to serve alone, when the poor would be better served if we worked together.

With another year more, dear fellow-members - of having addressed you - I do not want to conclude without also addressing Our Lady. She, who is Mother of the Church, and who, with love, watches over all movements that strive to follow the Way of Love revealed by her Son, will help us obtain, each day, a better and more demanding service for those whom Christ Himself wished to leave us as His representatives.

With my prayer and affection,

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XIV President General
(I.N.E.D.)

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