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FATHER JEAN-PIERRE RENOARD, CM

**Vincentian Prophecy and hope**

Motherhouse, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2009

*"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account!" (Deuteronomy 18: 18-19)*

What is a prophet? Literally, it's "someone who speaks in the place of" ... "the see-er", I even like to say the clairvoyant. It's in this sense that a prophet is the "speaker", the "proclaimer", the "spokesperson". To sum up, a prophet is a person of God: *"The prophets bring out humanity's ongoing need to discover God's designs for history, in great matters or small, collectively or individually."*<sup>1</sup> A prophet reveals and explains God's desires and intercedes for the people, as a beacon to light the way and broaden perspectives.

In the Bible all the prophets are defenders of the Covenant between God and the chosen people, servants of the Word of God. They remind the people of God's love and the Covenant God has made with them. They guard it at any cost, as "sentinels", to use the expression of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Prophets warn those who continue to turn away from God that they risk having to face the consequences of their infidelity. In the same way, they attack or challenge the rich and powerful who crush those who are poor, or the priests who mislead the faithful, taking them along with them to adore their idols. The way that God speaks to the prophets is a form of spiritual experience, an inspiration, a secret friendship between God and each of the prophets. *"God speaks to the prophets as he speaks to men and women today, that is, in the depths of their hearts. ... It is impossible to explain how God expresses himself; we have to experience it in order to discover it ... It is a 'sacred bond' between God and humanity, signs or other 'secrets' in which the prophets were able to recognise gestures, words and messages".*

Without wishing to repeat what was so well expressed this morning, I shall venture to say that Prophets are ordinary persons who became God's "spokespersons", because one day God called them to this work. The mission of the prophet's message is to reaffirm the Covenant between God and his people. Prophets are servants of the Word of God. They are a sign of God's love, of his Covenant with all people. They are "Messengers of good", announcing what needs to change, warning people ahead of time before some evil happens; showing them what is going wrong and indicating the right path. Through their Word, they try to lead the chosen people to a new trust in God.

How did St Vincent come to take up this vocation? What did he say, and what does he still say to us?

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<sup>1</sup> Father Monloubou in his universal biblical dictionary

## I. ST VINCENT, A PROPHET IN HIS TIME

In his time, St Vincent was a prophet, a man imbued with the spirit of God and with a deep concern for making God's loving plan known to others, especially to the most lowly people, those who were forgotten, and to show them how this plan worked for their good. His form of prophecy was rooted in a biblical context which I shall summarise in a few verbs:

**DENOUNCE – PROCLAIM – LOVE – UNITE**

### 1. A man who denounces

This title is deliberately provocative, but it refers to St Vincent's great prophetic mission and its principal commitment, which was to denounce evil.

This is proved by the incident at Gannes – Folleville<sup>2</sup> where, to some degree, our saint put his finger on the evil of his century, which was disbelief and sin. He realised that sinners were resistant to religion because their faith was not being nourished or explained in a simple, direct way.

The peasant man living in Gannes found it hard to own up to his sins. He had the reputation of being a good man, "*one of the best men in his village*". He was unable to confess his sin to his parish priest. "*He had never dared to do so*". The priest's closeness to his people left much to be desired, in that he had difficulty in showing pity for his parishioner's spiritual distress. The people's faith was not properly nurtured and seemed to call out for some fresh impetus that would give new life to their religion and restore the efficacy of the Sacraments. In that historical climate spiritual poverty showed itself symbolically through this encounter which was brought to light by Madame de Gondi, but it is probable that St Vincent had already experienced similar religious deficiencies on several occasions. Madame de Gondi herself admitted that she had to pass the formula of absolution through the grille of the confessional in order to be absolved by priests who did not know the words to use!<sup>3</sup>

With the far-reaching the effect of this encounter in Gannes intensified even more by his sermon in Folleville, Vincent seems like a prophet, a prophet of love. He did not condemn, he did not arouse any fear, but he invited the people to be reconciled with God. The content of his exhortations is sometimes open to question, but Vincent himself said: "*However, I had only one sermon that I preached everywhere, turning it around in a thousand different ways: it was on the fear of God.*"<sup>4</sup> This was an era marked by a general slackening in moral standards and the

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<sup>2</sup> Coste IX, 49-50 from March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1642 (most inexact text); XI, 2-4 undated (text from Abelly, only on the sermon at Folleville and its consequences); XI, 162 from January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1655 (different account of the story of the peasant man); XII, 1963 ed p. 418 (traditional version); XII, 1963 ed p. 596 from December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1658 (brief mention)

<sup>3</sup> XI, 163 from January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1655 "*some of them didn't know the words of absolution*"

<sup>4</sup> "*St Vincent only said this one time, at least in the writings that we still have, and not until the very end of his life, speaking to the missionaries on Friday, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1658, at the age of 77, on the observance of the rules, saying once again that the origin of the missions did not come from him, but from the designs of Providence. This was 35 years after he had begun them and we know how he let himself be carried away by words!*" (Bernard Koch, CM – notes typed on the subject, March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1998)

Catholic Reformation came into force. In addition, it was a time when these issues were being addressed again, and the call to conversion was about to become widespread as the teachings of the Council of Trent began to take effect. At that time, *"the fear of God"* was approached from a biblical perspective, that is, not simply as emotion but with a solid attitude of fidelity to the Covenant. An authoritative commentator has said, *"To teach the fear of the Lord is not the same as arousing fear, but rather teaching prayer and the Commandments and helping people to live a life of trust in God"*. It is good to remember that along with wisdom and courage, the fear of the Lord is a gift of the Holy Spirit! This gift is also known as humility. We are more afraid of our own weakness and resistance than of God at work in us. To fear the Lord is to recognise that God is the source of all good and above all, to rediscover our friendship with God.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. A man who proclaims

We know how rousing St Vincent's words were. They attracted such crowds of people that he had to call on the Jesuits in Amiens to come and help him with the missions. One man's rediscovery of faith and his testimony of authentic spiritual satisfaction had an effect on others, so that many ordinary, simple people came to be reconciled with God and with one another. We know the prophetic impact of this providential intervention: the same message was preached again, and as it spread, it had the same resounding success as on the first occasion<sup>6</sup>. Vincent discovered his mission in life through *"the first sermon of the Mission"*<sup>7</sup>. He did not know then the consequences of his commitment which are still apparent in our day.

In his sermons, we see how he explicitly proclaims the Gospel in the way that Pope Paul VI was to urge 350 years later: *"A clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all, as a gift of God's grace and mercy"*<sup>8</sup>. We have some references to St Vincent's preaching which expressed similar ideas. In his conference on the Catechism, he says that *"the purpose of all preaching is to attract souls to heaven"* and we can see that in the original text, he wrote this statement after crossing out his first rough draft: *"and the aim of all preaching is to withdraw souls from sin and attract them to what is good ..."* Father Bernard Koch CM wisely remarked: *"The fact that he crosses this out and replaces it immediately by 'attracts them to heaven', without needing to insert it between the lines, shows that, even in those days, when Vincent was preaching on sin and the risk of going to hell, as we read later on, he preferred to present first of all the conviction that God is love, and to speak of heaven."*

In a century marked by the birth of Jansenism, this would influence all St Vincent's pastoral ministry and his life. For him, evangelisation would never be reduced to morality or fear of hell. He insisted on proclaiming first of all the central doctrine of faith and love. He was a man imbued with the goodness of Christ which flows from the mercy of the Father.

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<sup>5</sup> Fr. Bernard Koch has the same idea. For him, "fear of God" evokes respect in love and even joy, based on a desire to please God and a fear of being separated from God's love. Fear of hell is not excluded, but it is not at all of primary importance. (Op. cit. p. 5)

<sup>6</sup> XI, 2-4 from May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1658; Abelly I, 1, c8 p 31-35; Collet I, 46-48.

<sup>7</sup> XI, 4, undated

<sup>8</sup> Paul VI -*Evangelii nuntiandi* § 27 – December 8th, 1975

To use his own words, his preaching was to be "*missionary*". The Gospel was its starting point, and he said to his confreres: "*When the Company is working in the missions it must give itself to God to explain by familiar comparisons the truths of the Gospel.*"<sup>9</sup> Like Christ, he wished to speak in parables. The authors of the parables were there only "*to serve as a stepping-stone to the Holy Scripture*"<sup>10</sup>. His missionary preaching consisted of "*the Christian virtues in the simplicity of the Gospel and of the first workers in the Church*"<sup>11</sup>. His principal recommendation can be summed up in one phrase: "*to follow the light of faith always and in all things*"<sup>12</sup>.

He also recommended what he called "*catechism through meeting*", and he saw this as something where the greatest revelations could occur: "*It is appropriate to begin with the three mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, as these are the most necessary*"<sup>13</sup>.

With regard to moral teaching, he wished it to become "*informal*" and something capable of building up rather than destroying<sup>14</sup>.

We see that his keywords for preaching are simplicity, charity, humility and informality, as well as strong conviction, and he summarises his method in the famous expression: "*Be clear and simple.*"<sup>15</sup>

If I were to think of a prophet who might resemble the missionary Vincent, I would choose Amos, the oldest of the prophets, from the second quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, under Jeroboam II and Ozias; Amos was from Juda but he had to preach to the people of Israel. Far from being uneducated and illiterate, this untypical herdsman was the prophet of God's special love for Israel. Over and above the warnings he gave in his teaching, Amos also reminded the people of the demands of the Law and of everything concerning the rights of poor and needy people. Amos announced to those who were rich and to the priests the message that would later be given in St Matthew's Gospel, Ch 25, v. 40! In spite of his revelations which included serious warnings, Amos, like St Vincent, opened hearts to hope. When everything seems lost, God can still give us grace.

Is it not obvious how, both the double message and the two messengers appropriate are appropriate for our present time?

Is it not clear that, by our vocation, we are called first and foremost to be mediators of God's mercy?

### **3. A man full of love**

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<sup>9</sup> XI, 41, undated

<sup>10</sup> Idem

<sup>11</sup> VII, 163, to the members of the Congregation of the Mission, May, 1658

<sup>12</sup> XI, 26, undated

<sup>13</sup> (Observations, in the introduction of the *Little Catechism for the Mission*, Bibl. Nation., Fonds fr., Ms 24851, f° 315, published by M. J. Guichard, C. M. : Saint Vincent de Paul catechist, Paris 1939).

<sup>14</sup> XI, 10, undated

<sup>15</sup> XII, 431, Conf. of June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1658, (one can profit also from: VIII, 237; XI, 237 and 259)

The prophets spoke about love because "*Love is not loved*". All of them were first and foremost messengers of the love God has for his people. They were mediators of God's loving tenderness for the chosen people and later, for all nations when the concept of 'universalism' had matured. We know that St Vincent excelled in this way of preaching.

Vincent's first testimony was that of love. His life was nothing but love and, to summarise it, we could use the words he himself used about Christ: "*His humiliations were only love, his labours only love, his prayers only love, and all his interior and exterior operations were only reiterated acts of his love.*"<sup>16</sup> Saint Vincent defined the love that God brings us and to which we are called to witness. God loves us. Vincent never had any doubt about this and he said in clear, simple language: "*God be praised! God be ever praised and glorified! Oh yes, brothers, once God conceives an affection for a soul, regardless of what it may do, He bears with it. Haven't you ever seen a father who has a child whom he loves dearly? He lets that little one do whatever he likes to him, even sometimes telling him, 'Bite me, my child.'* How does that happen? *It's because he loves that little child. God acts the same way with regard to us, brothers.*"<sup>17</sup>

But God wishes us to love him, with an open heart, a strong will, and by charity in action. "*We must love him more than everything else*"<sup>18</sup>, and he loved to repeat that charity makes us go to God<sup>19</sup>.

In this way, Saint Vincent shows us the right path. If love of God and for God is the source of our life, then charity for our neighbour – *this is not a press 'scoop'!* – is the soul of our lives. He transmitted the message of the Gospel with courage and perseverance. Charitable love was the driving force of his life and action. There is no need to prove this, but no doubt, during the time of a General Assembly, we need to hear again the instructions and the message that he left us. St Vincent had sensed divisions and rifts within the community,, and he gave very pointed instructions in his conference on charity on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1659; this is one of the finest jewels of Vincentian literature (Coste, XII, pp 581 – 593, 1963 ed). In it, he emphasises the following principle of Thomistic teaching:

*"There is greater merit in loving our neighbour for the love of God than in loving God without any reference to our neighbour."* (XII, 582)

And he said that if I have a vocation to inflame the world, I must "*inflame myself to love those with whom I live... How can we give charity to others if we do not have it among ourselves.*" (XII, 583- 584)

For the world around us, it is the same; like St Vincent, we are ambassadors and "bringers" of God's Love for the poor. How much did Vincent do for them? We do not need to list all these things, you know them already! Vincent has become popularly known as the Saint of charity, and all those who imitated his example have

<sup>16</sup> XII, 628, 1963 ed., December 13th, 1658

<sup>17</sup> Conference from November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1656, XI, 348

<sup>18</sup> Conference to the Daughters of Charity on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1640, IX, 16

<sup>19</sup> Conference of November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1657, X, 280 and Conference on the Love of God, XI, 34

invoked him as patron and model. He remains a beacon and a witness, and his teaching on this subject is still relevant, not at all outdated:

*"When we serve those who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ."*

For St Vincent, this was the way he had learned to respond to God; he sees the poor Christ represented in poor people and he gives first place to the poor. The poor people of St Vincent's time were mainly peasants, people living in rural settings. Nothing, then, was more natural for St Vincent, than to put before them, first of all a Christ who was a working man, a farmer, a sower, an observer of nature and someone who saw things as they are. He spontaneously felt a connection with those who suffered under the burden of work or any kind of trouble. St Vincent wished to be at the service of Him who was hidden in the sick person, in the stranger, in those who were neglected, forgotten or abandoned, those who were wounded on the battlefield, the hungry, children, country people who lost everything through epidemics or through poor harvests, galley slaves, the plague-stricken, old people etc. He sent his collaborators to all these groups of people.

All this is very clear. St Vincent does not go off into the clouds, and does not present a God who comes down from on high, but one who comes from below (from the earth). His Christ raises up despairing humanity and draws people upwards. He releases humanity from its distress and divinises it. The heart of Jesus, as portrayed by St Vincent, is completely filled with all the sufferings and woes of the world:

*"You know that Our Lord willed to be tried by all forms of misery. 'We have a High Priest,' says Saint Paul, 'who knows how to sympathise with our weaknesses because He has experienced them himself.'"*<sup>20</sup>

As I have already said, echoing the words of many credible witnesses<sup>21</sup>, Vincent is a man of the poor. We hear him sighing with exhaustion and love: *"The poor who do not know where to go nor what to do, those who are suffering already and the many who are increasing every day, these are my burden and my sorrow."*<sup>22</sup>. And he is even more forceful with his assembled confreres when he tells them *"We are priests for the poor. God has chosen us for them. This is our capital. All the rest is only of secondary importance"*<sup>23</sup>. And to you, the Sisters, he made this comparison: *"We are the servants of those who are poor, although unworthy of that honour."*<sup>24</sup>

Saint Vincent had a special predilection for the final words of Christ in glory, judge of all people: *"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."* (Mt 25, 40). To the first Daughters of Charity he said: *"Poor people are our masters, they are our kings",<sup>25</sup> our lords.* And, in some way, this represented a very compelling overturning of the established

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<sup>20</sup> XI, 19, undated

<sup>21</sup> « Prier 15 jours avec saint Vincent de Paul » (15 days of prayer with Saint Vincent de Paul), Nouvelle cité N° 45 – Translated in Portuguese under the title : « Orar 15 dias com Sao Vicente de Paulo » – Editora Santuario N° 10.

<sup>22</sup> Collet, I, 479

<sup>23</sup> *Excerpt from Collet VII, 168*

<sup>24</sup> X, 215, May 22nd 1657

<sup>25</sup> X, 489, November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1658

order at the very height of the 17<sup>th</sup> century! The social pyramid was turned upside down and the first became the last. The rich and great of this world were called to serve.

We know the high point of his teaching: to pass from affective love to effective love, and to value both of these as does the Gospel. Good feelings or sentiments are not enough, but we need to *"have a piety with its sleeves rolled up"*. As our dear Fr Jean Morin used to say, this is a modern way of saying "the strength of our arm and the sweat of our brow". *"All our work consists in action"*<sup>26</sup>. The only thing we must never forget is that action means commitment to the 'little ones' and requires union with God who is its driving force.

At this level, we could say that St Vincent's brand of prophecy was that of the biblical prophets who lived out what they proclaimed, men such as Jeremiah, Ezechiel, Zechariah, Hosea and so on. The message of their lives and actions preceded or accompanied their spoken proclamations. What they said, therefore, had credibility because their words were backed up by the way they lived. St Vincent was as much a witness by his commitment as by his message. He practised what he preached. Here is a final example of this: he was still preaching missions at the age of 72<sup>27</sup> and admitted that he would like to die *"near a bush"*<sup>28</sup> or *"on board ship"*<sup>29</sup>, what a witness of committed prophecy. We are so accustomed to St Vincent's teaching, that we risk forgetting that he was a man of the earth, an ordinary person, a missionary and a servant in action. He spoke more by what he did than by what he said. To reduce him simply to his writings would be simplistic and blameworthy.

#### **4. A man who worked for unity**

Prophets are people who uphold the Covenant. They recall God's unfailing commitment to his people, and never cease to remind the people that they are also bound to be faithful themselves, and this in spite of their betrayals and deviations. Union is a key word for every prophet. Gathering, linking, assembling, bringing together – in a word - uniting, was one of St Vincent's preoccupations. He was a man who united.

Vincent gathered together women of goodwill, most of them married, to make them pioneers of what we call today the AIC (Ladies of Charity), and gave them a rule for working as a team.

He brought together priests and lay volunteers to respond to the ever-increasing needs of the mission and of formation, and he organised them into a community of reflection, prayer, sharing and, above all, action.

He took an active part in the meetings of those women vowed to a consecrated life, women whom Providence and the determination of St Louise de Marillac had assembled, and which would grow from a *"little snowball"*<sup>30</sup> into the large **Company**

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<sup>26</sup> XI, 33, undated

<sup>27</sup> IV, 560, 561, 564, May 1653

<sup>28</sup> V, 204, October 17th, 1654

<sup>29</sup> XI, 357, June 17th, 1657

<sup>30</sup> X, 82, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1655



**of the Daughters of Charity** which I had the joy of knowing in the 60s when it reached its peak numerically!

He brought together men who were ready to be associated with the Missioners, and made use of people possessing great talents. We just have to think of the members of the Tuesday Conferences in Paris or the Provinces who helped out as missioners from time to time. Along with the confreres, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet preached at Metz, and Jean-Jacques Olier preached in the territory belonging to the Abbey of Pébrac.

Vincent gathered round him men who wished to prepare for the priesthood by his "*retreats for ordinands*" and made an active contribution to the opening of major seminaries.

He also turned his thoughts to children, and set up "*little schools*" and, at the other end of the spectrum, was aware of the needs of elderly couples, and conceived of the idea of "*little houses*".

He brought together priests who wanted formation, and so established "*the Tuesday conferences*" and "*retreats for ecclesiastics*."

He coordinated the work of willing helpers who would go and help the devastated provinces and set up networks and information channels ("*working relations*") to obtain help from the rich.

Whether we think of his vast network of correspondents (popes, kings, princes, men and women religious, confreres, lay people of various categories); whether we analyse his relations with the Company of the Blessed Sacrament or the Foundresses of new Congregations; whether we remember his single-minded action at the Council of Conscience, we see clearly that he desired to be involved in the reform of the Church. And we are left with the idea that Vincent desired unity so as to be more effective and to forge social and evangelical bonds in order to give a better service and to evangelise more effectively.

To describe this in today's language we can say that Vincent's links with others show the germ of the concept and reality of the "Vincentian Family"! If we are united, it is in order to be more effective; to provide an even better "effective love".

The aims of his action are themselves unifying; we find them compelling. I will give you two particular examples of this.

- The first concerns the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission. This caused waves during the Assembly that updated the Constitutions in 1979 and 1980. The members had to take into account the evidence repeated so often by the Founder: "*Our Institute has only two principal ends, namely, the instruction of poor people in rural areas, and seminaries.*"<sup>31</sup> We know that these two commitments complement each other: forming priests, and good priests, and that this ensures that they will work hard at maintaining the fruits of the mission. It meant having pastors who could

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<sup>31</sup> III, 273

support poor people who had been strengthened in their faith, pastors who could help them to grow in faith. Who can fail to see the unity of a great work, that of promoting spiritual health?

-The other link is closely connected and it concerns you: "*The principal end for which God has called and assembled the Daughters of Charity is to honour our Lord Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity, serving him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor. ...*" It was your own Foundress, St Louise, who said this.<sup>32</sup> And Vincent, the co-founder, repeated: "*Well now, my daughters, I beg God, the source of charity, to grant you the grace of learning the means of serving the sick poor corporally and spiritually*".<sup>33</sup>

-This union is valuable as a guide and as a description of the vocation of the Daughters of Charity. We should not separate the two kinds of food, "*the corporal and the spiritual*".<sup>34</sup> This union constitutes "*the spirit of the Company*".<sup>35</sup> To the Sisters sent to Angers in 1641, Vincent explained the meaning of this expression when it was used with regard to sick people: "*corporally, by serving them and giving them food and medicine; spiritually, by instructing the patients in things necessary for salvation and seeing that they make a general confession of their entire past life so that, by this means, those who will die may leave this world in a good state, and those who will recover may take the resolution never more to offend God*".<sup>36</sup> It is clear, then, that in Vincent's mind, evangelisation was an essential part of service.

This is so true that, conversely, he said to the members of the Congregation of the Mission that they must not exclude the direct service of poor people on the mistaken pretext that their is an active missionary life, or one of commitment to the Seminaries: "*Our little Company has given itself to God from the beginning to serve the poor people corporally and spiritually; consequently, at the same time it has worked for the salvation of the poor through missions, it has also established a means of solacing the sick through the Confraternities of Charity*".<sup>37</sup> We know that some confreres became nurses, dispensed alms, or even became pallbearers at funerals!

In this way, they were involved in the integral development of the person, even if this concept was unknown at that time.

## II. SUPPOSING WE WERE PROHETS?

"*Would to God, says the greatest among them, that everyone were a prophet!*" (Coste IV, 362, April 24, 1652)

What aspect of our Vincentian heritage should we practise today to make Hope, one of the cardinal virtues, flourish again?

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<sup>32</sup> Saint Louise 21<sup>st</sup> June 1647 L 179 To Monsieur Portail

<sup>33</sup> IX, 51, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1642. The search engine indicates 20 usages of this two word combination corporal-spiritual, which is quite significant for the topic under discussion.

<sup>34</sup> IX, 467, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1653

<sup>35</sup> IX, 466, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1653

<sup>36</sup> XIII b, 108, 1641

<sup>37</sup> VIII, 277, February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1660

**1. St Vincent, a man filled with God,** gives himself away by some remarks on what we might call his life in God. It is clear that he is full of God; it is equally clear that he wishes to communicate this to those to do not know God, or have a mistaken understanding of God. He shows his prophesying to be authentic and he spurs us on.

In some texts we can read things that might often pass unnoticed, things that would seem to be a statement or admission of Vincent's ability to become deeply interior through mental prayer which is the source of all his daring apostolic and charitable action.

### **The Gardener**

*"If you find no benefit in mental prayer, you won't profit much from the conferences. In the same way, dear Sisters, we are like those poor gardens in which drought causes all the plants to die, unless the gardener's care and hard work make provision for this. That's why you have the holy custom of mental prayer which, like a gentle dew, moistens your soul every morning by the grace it draws from God. When you're worn out by encounters and difficulties, you have again, in the afternoon, this salutary refreshment, which continuously invigorates all your actions. How beneficial this will be for a Daughter of Charity in a short space of time, if she is careful to refresh herself with this sacred dew! You'll see her growing day by day in holiness, just as the gardener sees his plants growing day by day, and in a short time she'll advance like the beautiful dawn that rises in the morning and goes on increasing until noon. In this way, Sisters, she'll go on until she has reached the Sun of Justice, who is the light of the world, and be swallowed up in Him, as the dawn is lost in the sun."* (Conference of May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1648, IX, 316)

We see, then, that St Vincent is first of all a man of God, deeply anchored in God; let's not forget he was a mystic in action. For him, this life of intimacy with God takes priority, and he attains it through the exercise of mental prayer, just as an athlete improves his or her performance and physical strength by frequent training sessions, by repetitive movements, warm-up exercises or agility. Remember what St Paul insisted on: *"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."*<sup>38</sup>

Where do we stand, then, in this matter of "being anchored in God"? Let's make sure that we are careful about doing our "spiritual gardening", that we are watering our soul by mental prayer, and that we verify for ourselves the Vincentian saying which strikes to the heart each time we hear it: *"Give me a man of prayer and he will be able to do anything."*<sup>39</sup> Belonging to God is a priority and is a great motivational force for action. If we evade making a response to this question our actions will be empty and not prophetic as we would wish them to be ...

**2. St Vincent also had an earnest desire to communicate** this life of intimacy with God to the people of his time, and we know that he wanted to pass it on to the

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<sup>38</sup> 1 Cor 9: 24-25

<sup>39</sup> XI, 76, undated

poorest people in the two principal areas of their lives, the spiritual sphere and the temporal. If he tried to develop his interior life, it was so that he could better communicate to others what he lived, felt and upheld. He was gripped by a passion for the Kingdom in himself and in others, and he invites us to have the same enthusiasm. Let's recall what he said about zeal: *"It is a pure desire to become pleasing to God and useful to our neighbour: zeal for the spread of the empire of God, zeal for our neighbour's salvation. Is there anything more perfect in the whole world? If the love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is the purest element in the love of God."*<sup>40</sup> I invite you to meditate on this text which is also in the form of a confession and has an amazing relevance for each one of us today.

### **Missionary prophet**

*"Well then, let's give ourselves to God then once and for all, let's work, let's work, let's go to the assistance of the poor country people who are waiting for us. By the grace of God, some of our houses are almost always at work—some more, some less—giving a mission here or there, going from this village to that, always at work, by the mercy of God. "I remember—should I say this?—that, in the past, when I'd come back from giving a mission, it seemed to me that, when I reached Paris, the gates of the city were going to fall upon and crush me; and seldom did I return from a mission without that thought coming to mind. The reason was that I used to make this reflection: 'Here you are, going back to Paris, and other villages are waiting to receive from you what you've just given to this village or that! If you hadn't been there, it's likely that certain persons, dying in the state in which you found them, would be lost and might have been damned. If you've discovered that certain sins are being committed in such a parish, don't you have good reason to think that you'll find the same and other sins being committed in the neighbouring parish? And yet they're waiting for you to go and do the same for them as you've just done for their neighbours; they're waiting for the mission, and you go off and leave them! Yet, if they die in their sins, in a certain sense you'll be the cause of their loss, and you ought to fear that God will demand an account of this from you.' "* (Repetition of prayer, November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1657, XI, 391)

So, Sisters, the ball is back in our court! We are invited to roll up our sleeves and to avoid at all costs what St Vincent called *"insensibility"*. We are vowed to action in accordance with the call we have received and with our charism. It is true that we have to guard against activism, but we also have to beware of any weakening in our commitment.

To what extent are we bearers of the Good News in the way Jesus was, attentive to those who are wounded by life, welcoming those who are looking for meaning in their lives, a matter of the greatest urgency today?

Are we sowing for eternity, helping the poor people of our times to recognise that they are sons and daughters of God, loved by Him and called by Him to live with Him?

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<sup>40</sup> XII, 681-682, 1963 ed., August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1659

How can we carry out this work for eternity as we focus on human nature restored in its dignity and its basic needs, with the spiritual as the crown of human fulfilment? I cannot tell somebody to love God if he or she is hungry, so true is it that "an empty stomach has no ears"!

Prophets? Yes we are prophets when we are passionate about God and passionate about people. This twofold passion was fundamental in St Vincent and, if we follow him, we are obliged to imitate him. We are God's mouthpiece and messengers. Our very being should speak of God, and our actions even more so. Such is the responsibility laid on us.

### 3. Saint Vincent's brand of prophecy was one of inventiveness.

He saw needs and responded to them. We are marked by his great foundations, but if we read Vincent's writing attentively we will notice many diverse interventions in these works. For example, we too easily forget the presence of the infant Congregation of the Mission in the British Isles: in Scotland, the Hebrides and Orkney ... or the Daughters of Charity faced with the terrors of the Fronde. During the time of the parliamentary uprising, they obtained bread, grew vegetables and raised pigs etc; during the conflicts of the Princes the Sisters were sent to take care of the sick, those suffering from famine, those who were homeless, while others distributed soup to 1300 self-effacing poor, not counting the help they gave in health-care and the education of orphans, doing all this in spite of danger and fear.<sup>41</sup>

We should also mention in detail the beggars, prisoners, galley-slaves, the aid provided to the devastated provinces, sick people, foreigners, orphans, flood victims, exiles ....whether rich or poor.

We can also say that very early in the Company's history, St Vincent and St Louise agreed to move Sisters outside of the capital. The calls for help dictated where they would go, and so the first establishments were in the capital. Then, between 1638 and 1648, there were 20 communities established, and between 1648 and 1660, there were 15 others. Movement outside of France began with the foundation in Poland with its long period of uncertainty. What strikes us in this proliferation of foundations is the accumulation of difficulties, problems and tribulations. For example, the trials in Liancourt,<sup>42</sup> the dissensions, tensions, opposition and conflicts in Nantes; financial problems in Fontainebleau and Chantilly, the Jansenist opposition in Chars, and so on ... in a word, these examples are sufficient to show the perseverance of our Founders and of the first Sisters. *"there are so many requests for them (the Sisters) from everywhere"*<sup>43</sup>, and *"It's all miraculous."*<sup>44</sup> ... this was really the *"signature tune"* of the Daughters of Charity and it has a lesson for us today. We should not be afraid when faced with small numbers or a decreasing workforce. In his incomparable biography "St Vincent de Paul", Father Roman CM wrote the following: *"Most of them (the communities) had two or three sisters living either in rented accommodation, in the house of the lady of charity who had asked for them, or in lodgings provided by the confraternity, parish*

<sup>41</sup> See the excellent Chapter 13 "During the extreme misery of the Fronde" in Sr. Elisabeth Charpy's book, *Contre vents et marées, Louise de Marillac*, Editions Compagnie des filles de la charité, 1988

<sup>42</sup> Two young men had accused Sisters of immoral behaviour

<sup>43</sup> III, 212, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1647 and X, 179, August 20<sup>th</sup> 1656

<sup>44</sup> I, 241, between 1632 and 1636

*or municipality. Very few foundations needed to have more sisters; at most there would be half a dozen. Nevertheless, these small teams scattered over French soil were hardy plants that took root, thus ensuring the extraordinary expansion of the community. The sisters had certainly taken the 'solid virtues' to heart."*<sup>45</sup>

I have no 'epilogue' on numbers for today; that is your domain, but the vigour and fruitfulness of the early years bring us back to a maxim which never fails, before anything else, we have to be! So much has been written on "*being a servant*"<sup>46</sup> that it is pointless to add anything to that. Allow me to tell you, however, that when people meet us, they recognise in us the Vincentian spirit, as it is so easily identifiable by those features which are always unmistakable: simplicity, humility, charity for poor people and a deep prayer life. It is in and through this spirit that we have the source of the light that can radiate from our local community.

It is up to us to be equally attentive to the signs of the times, and to detect who it is that are calling us today and how we can respond. This means that community, institutional and provincial discernment needs to be carried out.

Yes, "*love is inventive to infinity*"<sup>47</sup> especially when it refuses to stick doggedly to the past and makes the deliberate choice to live through HOPE! I hope that, as far as your own story is concerned, you will be cathedral-builders!!

## CONCLUSION

Father Gregory spoke to us not long ago about balance and "*restoring our integral sense of being*". Sister Evelyne recommended that you "*strengthen your innermost being*". Father Javier reminded you of the importance of meditation where the "*whisper of the Spirit*" passes. All these reflections are linked and make the same demand.

The only true prophet is God. There is no other authentic prophet than the Word. There is no other authentic prophet than the Church. Ploughing deep furrows within our being is the most urgent matter on hand. The world today is full of the deafening uproar of the media even to the point that we can all become conditioned to it and have our judgment affected by it, even with regard to the Church. It is very important to encourage this same interiority in other people. For some time now I have had a special insight that I will leave you with, something to let yourselves be challenged by, an incident based on a recent experience of mine:

I live with a young confrere who was ordained a priest nine months ago. He recently prepared a young couple for marriage, and part of this included listening to each one's story. When he was talking to the young woman, he discovered that she had been baptised, had made her first Communion and had been confirmed. He asked her: who is Jesus Christ for you? She paused to think for a moment, and then suddenly replied: "**Nobody.**" The priest then said, "But what did you learn in your

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<sup>45</sup> *Saint Vincent de Paul, A Biography* by Jose Maria Roman, CM, Melisende English edition, 1999, p.474

<sup>46</sup> See *Vincentian Note* No. 41 "Being a servant"

<sup>47</sup> XI, 131, 1645, bearing in mind that this expression is applied to God the Father, inventor of the Eucharist!

religious instruction? They talked about values, goodness, faithfulness, respect, etc. but presented Nobody"! Since that time, this "nobody" haunts me as it has this young priest! So my final question is this: If the most serious form of poverty is not knowing God and even more, not knowing the One through whom God's love has been manifested, He who gave his life for the salvation of the world, what should be our priority service today?

Daughters of Charity, be prophets by the charity of the spiritual bread you offer, the world is hungry for it!!

Father Jean-Pierre RENOARD, CM

MONSIEUR MARIO GIRO – SANT'EGIDIO COMMUNITY

An essential part of mission:

**Collaboration**

Talk prepared by Andrea Ricardi  
and read by Monsieur Mario Giro,  
Motherhouse, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009

My dear friends,

I deeply regret that I cannot be with you today. I would have loved to be in your historic Motherhouse on rue du Bac, from which so many charitable works have been launched over many years. I would have liked to be there to thank you for all that you have done throughout your long history for persons living in poverty. But also, to thank you for the close collaboration that has taken place between the Daughters of Charity and the Sant'Egidio Community. However, because of a health problem, which though not serious, was brought on by the exhausting work of recent months, I find I cannot attend. Please forgive me.

I am sending my text which will not just be read by Mario Giro, but in a certain sense, interpreted by him because he is a close friend of mine and a great friend of Africa. Mario Giro knows the suffering of that continent, its wars, which are the root cause of all other poverties, and its health problems, but also its potential. He will be able to answer the questions you may have about my presentation even better than I could have done. He is also a person who searches for a path of hope even while feeling the pain of the various situations with which he is in contact.

As I have already mentioned, your Motherhouse has been the origin of many charitable ventures of loving service of the poor. You have a long history of love for these people. However, we cannot simply look to the past with complacency, something that you do not do.

Anyone who is familiar with the wounds of today's world also knows how these wounds cry out for healing, for a better and more dignified life. Pope John XXIII invited us to study the signs of the times when he spoke about a Church for everyone, but most especially for people who are poor. At times our communities are blind to what the present day holds for the world and those who live in it. Each person is caught up in his or her work: we see the hands that work and miss seeing the faces of those who are holding out their hands, touching us or reaching out to us. We think we see, but in the end we do not see the reality before us. We allow ourselves to be swept along by life; a very busy life.

As I understand it, this is the reason why you have chosen as your Assembly theme: "Prophecy and hope now and everywhere". You have wanted to look beyond what already exists. The Second Vatican Council and Pope John XXIII have taught us much about the signs of the times. We don't need to become sociologists or psychologists – as some Churches have called on experts at times to explain the contemporary world – but we are ourselves "experts on humanity" as Pope Paul VI said. The signs of the times help us to look farther ahead. We need to know how to read our times and our experience of humanity in the light of the Gospel, a lamp that lights the way for us.

Jesus used the expression "the signs of the times" only once in the gospel, when he was speaking to the Pharisees and Sadducees. *"You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times."* (Mt. 16:3) May I say that sometimes we talk about heaven and faith, without knowing how to read the signs of the times here and now where women and men are living.

The same Council spoke about *aggiornamento* – a very special term – which does not mean modernisation, or imitating the customs of our times, or even adapting ourselves to society's mentality. Prophecy would be lost if this were to happen, while *aggiornamento* is a refusal to adjust ourselves to the life and mentality of this world. *Aggiornamento* is the ability to read the signs of the times and to orient our own way of living in light of the present day. It is not a question of adapting ourselves to the times we live in but living in a prophetic manner.

I am pleased to note in this presentation that the Sant'Egidio Community is with you in examining the signs of the times and seeking pathways of hope and prophecy.

In many parts of the world the signs of the times reveal a humanity that is deeply wounded. You know very well from experience the wounds that the African world suffers. Not only the *Africa* that has been struck by wars and illness, but also the *Africa* that sees itself without any prospects for the future. In fact, the great phenomenon of emigration (which affects young people and persons of a certain cultural level) is a very obvious sign that their future lies not in their own country but elsewhere. The widespread enthusiasm among the people that accompanied decolonisation happened more than 40 years ago. In those days, Africans believed in their future, but hope for the future of Africa has not been translated into specific action. Africa needs to have hope for its people, just as a father has hope that his children's lives will be better than his; as young people hope for a future for themselves; and a mother sick with AIDS has hope for her little ones.



Hope is important but not easy to find. People – ourselves included – need to have prospects for the future in order to have hope. Prospects are like icons. Persons of faith need icons which represent their faith: the Lord, the Mother of God, the saints and martyrs. Even hope needs icons: these icons are in the form of visions of the future.

Yes, our contemporary world lacks perspectives and prospects, in the political world, among politicians and even in the Church. Yes, visions are icons of hope. People look at one another and live the present, but without any ideals. Attaining an ideal requires struggle, self-sacrifice and work.

Being absorbed in oneself is a widespread phenomenon in the western world, in Europe and North America. Last week at Aix La Chapelle in Germany, where on behalf of the Community, I received the Charlemagne award, I stated clearly and with conviction in my speech that if Europe lives only for itself it will die. A Europe without a mission in the world becomes divided and has no future. Yes, even Europe and the western world are lacking in ideals and risk turning in on themselves. Current policies and politics confirm this. Europe is a vault and a fortress that risks becoming the continent of greed.

This preoccupation with self and closed-mindedness has a significant effect on the life of people who are afraid of getting involved or making life commitments. It is even difficult to find women and men who will consecrate themselves to the service of others and the Gospel. Men and women in Europe often have a mental block because they are living just for themselves. Living this kind of life, they cannot experience happiness, for happiness cannot exist without generosity. That's right, happiness only comes with generosity. Our world in the northern hemisphere is a very unhappy world.

Deep within themselves Europeans are afraid of losing something, their world, their well-being. We see this in their relationships with immigrants arriving on their continent. We cannot simply close our borders. The immigrants arriving in Europe are the sign of something wrong that is happening outside of Europe.

Europeans are not only afraid of people who arrive from elsewhere; they are also afraid of their own citizens who are sick, elderly or have disabilities. It seems that they feel vulnerable and cannot continue to bear the sufferings of others. I repeat: without generosity and compassion, we cannot be happy. In some ways this is a condemnation of our world.

As a result, elderly people are driven from their homes or their families, to prepare for death in institutional settings, far from their loved ones and their normal environment. I am always aware of the profound contradiction of a modern society that prolongs the lifespan of its people– which is a great gift – and at the same time gives the message to its older members that they must leave because they are superfluous. We hear it said that they are a big financial burden on society.

The deep meaning of selflessness and self-giving is destroyed by self-centredness and a preoccupation with one's own interests. For people with this

mentality, generosity towards others and persons who are poor seems pointless and ridiculous. The logic of commerce would lead us to ask: what is in this for me? This mentality erodes and destroys selflessness. In a world in which everything can be bought and nothing is free, a life given to others seems to have no value.

Even the family suffers from this erosion of self-giving. In reality, the family is a miniature community founded on self-giving. The crisis of selflessness and its disappearance from society is a worrying sign in a world where everything is bought and sold, a world that has become a marketplace, regulated by the idea that the market is lifesaving (and the recent economic crisis shows that nothing is a lifesaver). The crisis in self-giving is also a crisis of humanity.

I am thinking about Asia where striking development has taken place but where personal and social life seems completely centred on productivity. This is seen in certain countries where feast days have been discontinued in order to increase productivity. There is no longer any place for self-giving and as a result humanity itself is wounded, for humanity is no longer human if it cannot give of itself.

Fear of losing something, fear of others, and fear of the future. Europe has many fears: the future, others, the wounds that come with human life, and persons who are elderly. Fear shapes the lives of Europeans. Fear is as old as the world. How many times in the Bible do we find people being urged not to be afraid? This shows that humanity is fraught with fear. These western people who have all the technology they need at their disposal, who seem to have the power to transform the fundamental laws of life, who have very significant means for taking action, are still truly afraid. Fear is one of the signs of the times in the western world.

Fear, instead of transforming us into good or gentle people, often makes us aggressive. To overcome fear, or to become courageous, it is said that we need an enemy. And this is how the culture of the enemy develops, a perspective that dominates the world of men and women dominated by fear.

It is very moving to see how much our globalised world lacks peace, for globalisation has not brought with it unification or peacefulness. What we have is an economic globalisation, in which old conflicts have resurfaced and new ones have arisen. Human beings, cultures and religions feel threatened and fearful in a world that is too big: change of location provokes conflict and leads to a culture of the enemy. One of the signs of the times of our contemporary world is the growth of aggression and violence. This is a sign of the times that calls us all to cultivate dialogue and love.

This is not the moment to talk about the huge problems of conflicts between religions and civilisations. You are all aware of how the Sant'Egidio Community has been very actively involved in the promotion of peace since 1986, after the large gathering of religions that took place in Assisi, at the request of Pope John Paul II for the promotion of peace. We have also been involved in the process of dialogue among religions and cultures. The Spirit of Assisi is the true response to the problem situation of clashes among civilisations and religions. We understand the insight of Pope John Paul II even better today: to practise the art of dialogue without confusion,

helping to bring about in all religions the important value of peace which is rooted in each one of them.

Dialogue is not an academic concept: it also involves everyday life, life among different persons who learn to understand one another in their differences and appreciate them.

Let us recall what happened 15 years ago, when in Rwanda a terrible tragedy broke out between people living together: Tutsis and Hutus. Dialogue diffused the conflict, created connections and established peace. Dialogue is a preventative measure that brings peace.

There is a great deal of violence in our contemporary world. I am thinking about the outskirts of Latin-American cities where violence becomes the initiation into life for many young people. In Central America, El Salvador in particular, gangs of youths are spreading throughout the countries and growing in numbers, and the leaders offer young people and adolescents a life of violence where everything is possible, even though they know that they will not live very long. Violence and aggression are serious threats to peace. In fact, peace is not only threatened by war but also by the spread of violence that verges on war.

I could say more but I think each one of us should comment on the signs of the times that affect each of us in particular. These signs of the times are often in the form of wounds that cause us to reflect and question. In fact, a religious congregation such as your own, present in over 90 countries throughout the world, gives a special vantage point from which to observe the signs of the times, humanity's wounds and its search for hope and peace. I say this from experience because, although the history of Sant'Egidio is different from yours, our reality is similar to your own. The Sant'Egidio Community has taken root in over 70 countries throughout the world where it has local communities. It lives very close to people who are suffering from various forms of poverty: poor children, people with AIDS, elderly persons, persons in prisons (and often life in certain prisons in Africa, Latin America and Asia is almost a death sentence as the living conditions lead to death), persons who are ill, homeless, emigrants and refugees.

We live in the midst of these local situations, as friends of the poor, but we also experience the joy and the challenge of being a small community without frontiers, a community of men and women of different languages and nationalities. In our communities, the experience of global Christianity is lived out, an aspect of Christianity that has been present since its origins, as the letters of the apostle Paul tell us. John Chrysostom wrote that the Christian community is a paradox, for those who live in Rome know that they are part of the same body as those who live in India. Our universal communities are a sign and a response to the mindset of conflict among different ethnic groups, cultures and civilisations. They are a sign that women and men of different backgrounds and nations can be a family that has no frontiers.

Our communities don't just include their members but also people who are poor (those we care for and those who come to us) who are members of our family. Our communities are also, in some way, international centres for poor persons coming from different countries and continents. This is the way I understand the DREAM

experience, which cares for persons who have AIDS. In different circumstances, one same spirit unites the various experiences of treatment and of suffering. In this way, our community is also a globalisation of solidarity.

The experience that the Sant'Egidio Community and the Daughters of Charity have had of meeting one another and deciding to collaborate, in their diversity of charisms, came from the need to maintain a vision of a different, better and more humane world. What I mean is that we hold fast to the image of a world in which people who are sick continue to hope for healing and life, a world where children hope that they will not die and that they will have a future, where elderly persons are not abandoned, where women and men distressed about the future have someone to listen to them, where poor persons are less poor, where those wounded by life receive care. In fact, our friendship came to life via poor persons and the specific need to better care for AIDS sufferers. This is not simply a functional collaboration, but a friendship which, beginning with persons who are poor and sick, has touched the depths of Christian communion.

I would say that the sign of the times that touched us and called for a response was the existence of AIDS. We became aware that many people around us were dying from this illness. This situation worried us and forced us to view the problem in greater depth, to seek solutions and become bearers of hope. In the midst of people suffering from AIDS, we asked ourselves how we could bring to today's world the power of healing that the Lord had given to his disciples.

Sant'Egidio and the Daughters of Charity are two small international entities without borders in many countries throughout the world, friends of poor people who never give up and who continue to hope. We are different but we are moving in the same direction and we ask ourselves the same questions. We are not resigned to thinking that the world can continue to be so full of illness, poverty, abandonment and suffering. Our contact with the suffering experienced by men and women has brought great hope: and even a dream. It is the dream of healing those who are sick and spreading the Gospel of Hope. Jesus gave his disciples the power to proclaim the Gospel and to heal those who were sick. We cannot disregard this force which is not a power that comes from the world. We do not want this power to be buried away out of fear. Rather, we want it to bear fruit for a world that has great need of it.

Much is said about the way that lay people and religious can collaborate together. We use so much ink to write pages of theory about it. The story of the collaboration between the Daughters of Charity and the Sant'Egidio Community began with two Church persons with different characters and histories who refused to become resigned or turn their backs on the suffering of persons living in poverty. Our friendship developed thanks to poor persons. Moreover, it was AIDS sufferers who brought about our first meeting. This proves that together we seek only to serve those who are sick and poor. The new pathways of collaboration are not always easy, because even Christians are men and women like everyone else, and have their individual ways of thinking and their customs.

The Sant'Egidio Community has a long history of friendship with religious men and women who were the first to take our charism seriously in our early days in Rome in the 1970s. Among these religious were Vincentians and Daughters of Charity.

Some began by participating in evening prayer with the Sant'Egidio Community, especially in Rome, and from here our friendship began, one that has been strengthened over the years. Our communities gather in the evening to listen to the Word of God and pray to the Lord. This gathering takes place in the beautiful basilica of Santa Maria di Trastevere in Rome, in front of a beautiful mosaic. This is the same sort of prayer that takes place in our little centre in Mozambique or in Indonesia, for example.

We are a community of lay people who have our own professional and family lives, but we are also called to be spiritual men and women. As Saint John Chrysostom said to the people of Antioch, lay people are in greater need of the Word of God than monks are, because they live in the midst of the uncertainties and difficulties of everyday life. We can become true friends of those living in poverty if we are spiritual persons, if we listen to the Word of God and open our hearts in prayer.

Furthermore, prayer that is beautiful, welcoming and open is a witness for all because it is at the centre of our lives; it attracts those who are searching for a meaning to life. I am surprised at the number of people who come regularly or occasionally to our evening prayer. I have often wondered why religious communities, who have so much space and so many churches, do not open these to people who are seeking God. Beautiful prayer that is available to others is a grace and a gospel witness.

These years of listening to the Word of God and praying in common have allowed the little communities of Sant'Egidio to become sanctuaries where people seeking meaning in their life can find a refuge. Anyone who comes to the basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere in the evening will see the place full of people who are not members of the Sant'Egidio Community but who come from all over. (Among them are many religious who are living in Rome.) It shows how important it is to have a prayer centre in the heart of the city. I am not saying this as a way of boasting about the Sant'Egidio experience, but to point out how our testimony and welcoming others to prayer are often the most precious gift we could offer to them. Places of prayer are sanctuaries of hope.

Among all our works, prayer comes first. I often recall a dear friend of the Community, a Waldensian (Methodist) minister, Valdo Vinay, who explained the parable of the Good Samaritan by drawing a parallel with the gospel of Martha and Mary. Martha, worried about her many tasks, did not listen to the Lord. Mary chose the better part which would not be taken away from her. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Levite and the priest, concerned with their own affairs, did not stop to help the man lying half dead on the side of the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. Only a Samaritan stopped. Mary and the Samaritan chose the better part. There is no distinction between the two of them. In other words, there is no contradiction between the active and contemplative life; they are not two different or opposing options. Rather, those who choose to be on the side of Mary also choose to be on the side of the person lying half dead on the road. I would like to add that we cannot remain for a very long time at the side of a person who is half dead, hoping for his or her healing and salvation, if we do not choose to act like Mary.

An invitation to pray together was the first step towards friendship between the Sant'Egidio Community and religious men and women. Many religious have also helped us financially when we have encountered difficulties. Although the community of Sant'Egidio is rich in dreams, it is not rich in resources, even today. Often people outside confuse our desire to help others with the idea that we might have many resources. The collaboration that exists with the Daughters of Charity came from the request for healing and assistance made by persons with AIDS in Mozambique. These sick people approached us, and the project DREAM, created by Sant'Egidio to care for AIDS sufferers, began in February 2002 in this country in Africa. Several months afterwards, the Daughters of Charity who were running a hospital in Choqwe, in the province of Gaza, asked the Sant'Egidio Community to help them. The centre in Choqwe is the first DREAM centre of the Daughters of Charity. Today, more than 5,000 people who have AIDS are cared for in this centre. We are talking about a group of women, men and children who had been condemned to death. They knew that, but then they discovered resurrection. In fact, as many patients will testify, DREAM signifies, from an existential point of view, that they have had the personal experience of passing from death to life, through resurrection.

Since June 2004, thanks to the intervention of Sister Evelyne Franc, the idea developed that the Daughters of Charity could themselves establish this treatment programme for AIDS, beginning in Africa. Then, in 2005, a general agreement was signed in Paris, in which the Daughters of Charity made the commitment to adopt and implement the DREAM programme in hospitals and health care centres managed by the Company throughout the entire world. The Daughters of Charity, according to the agreement they signed, commit themselves to developing DREAM in accordance with their own tenets, considering it a gospel-oriented means of offering high quality treatment to persons living in poverty.

In fact, DREAM really does represent a dream; Benedict XVI affirmed this when he met volunteers from the Sant'Egidio Community in Cameroon during his visit to that country. The DREAM programme is a dream that has come true.

There is a great divide separating the rich countries in the northern hemisphere from the poor countries in the southern hemisphere, even in terms of the dramatic consequences of illness. A person with AIDS in Europe or the United States can receive care there. In Africa, however, people die from AIDS. Children are born infected with the virus and they die. Parents die and the children are condemned to living alone, exposed to all sorts of difficulties. Why don't sick people in the south have the same right to health care as those in the north? Why does this great divide exist between the north and the south?

This is the reason why DREAM came into being: to give AIDS sufferers in the southern hemisphere the same care as that available to those in the north. Another part of the agreement in Paris in 2005 says that the Daughters of Charity are committed to setting up DREAM centres and molecular biology laboratories in the various places where the Sisters serve. They also make a commitment to supporting their centres through an ongoing search for funds. The Sant'Egidio Community, creator and developer of the DREAM programme, is also committed by the contract, to the training of medical and social personnel in the DREAM centres run by the Daughters of Charity, to providing supervision through periodic visits and to analysing the lab

results data recorded by the computer programme. In the last four years, about 150 religious and lay people have taken formation courses for DREAM throughout Africa. Currently DREAM centres run by the Daughters of Charity are already in operation in: Choqwe in Mozambique, opened in 2002 with about 5,500 patients; Kubwa in Nigeria opened in 2006 with about 1,300 patients (Nigeria hopes to open other centres in the future); Nairobi in Kenya, opened in 2008 with about 700 patients; Dschang in Cameroon, opened in 2008 with about 300 patients; Mbandaka in the Democratic Republic of Congo, opened in 2009 with about 300 patients. I may remind you that the next centre will open in Masanga in Tanzania in 2010.

This list shows not only the extent of the work we have accomplished together, but also the rapid progression of collaboration to overcome the death sentence that AIDS represents, for this death sentence can be avoided. Church authorities have been accused at times of being the cause of the indifference that exists among the rich northern countries in the world with regard to the spread of AIDS, and as a result, it is not easy to find sufficient resources needed for treatment. Our DREAM centres affirm by action and not only by words how necessary it is to give Africans the same free and high quality care that is available in northern countries for those who have the disease. In all the centres run by the Daughters of Charity, treatment of adults and children is provided as well as measures to prevent cross transmission from mother to baby. Almost all the Daughter of Charity DREAM centres provide maternity services. Furthermore, for the last several years, almost all the centres have a molecular biology laboratory that allows for more adequate follow-up and adjustment of the treatment that can lead to a cure. I would like to quote one of our dear friends, Sister Wivine Kisu, who said in February 2009 when the DREAM centre was inaugurated in Mbandaka in Congo. "While many people and organisations throughout the world have a generally pessimistic outlook with regard to the African continent and the treatment of persons with HIV/AIDS, the Sant'Egidio Community has proved otherwise, by showing great interest in putting in place the excellent treatment protocol recommended by the DREAM programme."

This is prophecy. A sign of our times, a wound calling out for our attention, has stimulated the creativity that comes from love and the generosity that comes from collaboration. The history of collaboration between the Daughters of Charity and Sant'Egidio Community is the sign of a non-aggressive alliance, not linked to the culture of the enemy, but rather profoundly connected to the culture of friendship: the poor person is a friend. To recall the words of the prophet Zephaniah, this is a covenant between the humble and the poor. We become more humble each day if we listen to the Word of God, if we study the signs of the times, seeing there the path on which the Lord is leading us, then we will discover people who are poor. In this way a true alliance will be established with those who are humble, Jesus' disciples, and people living in poverty.

I know that in the spirituality of the Daughters of Charity, the presence of Christ in the poor, in the least of our brothers and sisters, is of the utmost importance. For Vincent de Paul, reading the Word of God was particularly important. Jesus is in those who are poor, his least brothers and sisters. The Sant'Egidio Community honours and loves poor persons with affection and solidarity, recognising the Lord's presence among them. This is the sacrament of the poor as Olivier Clement liked to call it. For us, the Daughters of Charity and Sant'Egidio, the sacrament of the poor has

also been a sacrament of unity which has made us friends and collaborators, sisters and brothers.

For us, this experience of friendship and solidarity that we have had for the last few years is a sign of hope. The results prove it: I see it in the children who are born healthy, in the serene faces of mothers, among the women and men who are no longer condemned to die but who live again. This is also prophecy, one that does not allow us to give up when faced with the impossible. We must pray, though, and nurture our hope in faith. We must have visions of hope for nothing is impossible for those who believe.

In fact, although it seems impossible to penetrate the thick wall of the pandemic of AIDS, we have discovered in our midst a companion who, by his or her aid, has made the impossible possible. Such is the story of Sant'Egidio and the Daughters of Charity. It's the story of a sharing of gifts that has made DREAM possible. Yes, the prophetic action is being able to work together while remaining different. Not only has this brought us happiness, but we are able to hope even more. It helps create in us ever greater visions of hope for the world and for those who suffer. By the grace of God, miracles are possible in this world of sorrow. Yes, because in this world characterised by resignation, hope can become a reality.

Read by Monsieur Mario GIRO  
*Head of International Relations  
for the Sant'Egidio Community*

**Answers to some of the questions put to Mario Giro  
after he read the talk prepared by  
Andrea Ricardi  
(founder of the Sant' Egidio Community)**

Notes taken during an informal sharing session with members of the Assembly

Taking as my starting point the words of Andrea Ricardi, I would first like to say that we mustn't be afraid; our world today is overwhelmed by fear. Of course there is an enormous difference between the world of the 70s and our world today. In the 70s and even in the 80s many people believed that they could change the world. They offered a variety of solutions, many of them ideological. That particular time was characterised by a desire for action and by faith in humanity; people thought that they could change the world. Today it is just the opposite. Our present day world sends out a pessimistic message: wars, poverty and inequality will always be part of human history. The major international organisations present reports that are pessimistic. Over a period of 30 years the prevailing ideas have completely changed. People say, "It isn't possible; we need to be more realistic and have fewer ambitions and illusions. We need to continue to take some action but not in a very decisive way



as we know full well that our objectives will never be achieved.” This is the message that is being passed on by society everywhere.

I would answer your questions by saying, ”Don’t let yourselves be affected by this message of despair. We mustn’t be afraid. Think back to an incident in the life of St Francis of Assisi. He was very concerned about the difficult situation his Religious Institute was in but one day the Lord said to him, “My dear man, do you think I would have raised up this family if I wasn’t prepared to take care of it?”

Andrea Ricardi says that we have to be spiritual and that is true. Being spiritual means having the certainty that the Lord cannot abandon us. We haven’t got all the answers, we have no magic formulas but we do have faith. We believe that the Lord will help us and if this was true in past centuries when things were worse than they are now, it is still possible in our day.

We need to stay calm as we look for solutions. And when Andrea urges us to pray this is something that is absolutely fundamental. In other words, in the face of every challenge we have to believe in the power of prayer, something that is not simply a matter of devotion. If I could take the example of praying for the sick: every month the Sant’Egidio community sets aside a day of prayer for the sick. So in Africa a lot of people are drawn to these times of prayer and this has a social impact: praying together in this visible way, not for appearances sake but as a way of expressing our faith, has an impact on people.

In prayer we find a call to action and there is no contradiction in this. The first thing we have to do is to fight against everything connected with the culture of death (disease, ill-treatment in prison etc.) and to present, instead, a culture of life.

Sant’Egidio is well –known for its struggle against AIDS (Dream Project). At the present time the joint field of action for the Daughters of Charity and the Sant’Egidio Community is the struggle against AIDs in Mozambique. In working together we are not just providing a specific and very important service but we are also telling people about a different culture “it is possible to heal.” AIDS leads people to think about the source of this illness, its consequences and also about sexuality. So it is not enough simply to look after patients, we also need to educate people and work towards a culture of life.

Another field of action is that of visiting people in prison. These visits are the most important gesture of friendship. They also let us know about possible human rights violations and to decide what are the prisoners’ most urgent needs.

### **Prayer and dialogue**

We often hear it said, “What is the use of praying for peace, having dialogue with other religions, etc?” Results will come, perhaps they are there already and we just can’t see them. A lot of time is needed. So we have to pray for peace and we need to dialogue with other religions without expecting immediate results. If we think, for example, of Father Charles de Foucauld: he spent all his life in the desert, he had just one or two companions, he died alone.....killed by Muslims. It was only years later that this tiny seed buried in the desert would bear fruit. At first sight this

looks like failure. We have to wait years for the “Little Brothers of Jesus” and even longer for the “Little Sisters of Jesus” to be instituted. You, too, seem to be able to wait patiently as you sow the seeds of future harvests.

### **Violence in our world**

Violence, too, is one of the major problems of our times. We often feel helpless in the face of violence. We do have the capability of creating non-violent places which show that another alternative is possible. Throughout its history the Church has always worked to build peace..... In Europe, for example, the building of numerous monasteries and abbeys created a network which allowed the culture of non-violence to flourish. These were places of peace. Our communities today must also be places of peace and of love for one another.

For several years the Mafia in Sicily continued to operate because people were complicit in their activities. Ten years ago it became less active because the Sicilian people reacted against it. We need to give our support to people there so that they can find the courage to expel the Mafia. This is the sort of action we need to take in order to free up areas of non-violence. In this way pockets of non-violence can be set up in countries where violence is rife (Algeria, Nigeria, Brazil...) and you know this better than I do!

### **Creating a culture of peace**

It is important to create links between children, young people, adults and the elderly and to suggest to them that they work together to build a more just and humane society, and we need to promote friendship between the different generations. We have to create a network of non-violence that reaches from the cradle to the grave. This can be done by the local people. We don't need to plan great things but if we work together we can create areas of non-violence. Even if these are only tiny ventures they are a sign that the task “is possible” where people tend to think that violence has the upper hand and will overwhelm us. Often it is the culture of resignation that overwhelms us and this is something we need to fight against. People often become resigned and get used to living in very violent places. People are vulnerable and close their minds to situations in order to escape trouble. We must build a culture of peace, that is, we must refuse to get used to violence. Answering violence with violence is no solution to the problem. We have to create areas of non-violence. This can be done but we need to pray for God's help. Violent people can still show respect for religious symbolism and we need to take advantage of this. Collective and public prayer has an important role to play.

### **The internationality of the Catholic Church**

We live in a world that is very diverse and varied. Differences that exist in everyday life are a source of enrichment. We are different and we will always be different. One of the messages put out by the culture of fear is the desire to keep with people like ourselves and to reject those who are different. We have the good fortune to be catholic, that is to say universal, and to live on an international level. The greatness of the Catholic Church lies in its unity in diversity.

At the present time Africa is a fragmented continent but what gives it unity is the Catholic Church. As Catholics we should be more aware of the fact that we are a great international movement in the world. We need to be more aware of our precious unity in diversity. Unity is both a gift from God that we accept and also a task that we have to accomplish.

Mario GIRO  
*Head of international relations in the  
 Sant'Egidio Community*

INSERT PHOTOS

MADAME MARINA COSTA, AIC

Requirements for mission

Collaboration between the members of the Vincentian Family

**The "Charities" and the Daughters of Charity.**

**Two charisms with one single aim**

Paris, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009

By founding the first Charity at Chatillon-les-Dombes, Saint Vincent expressed in a practical, concrete way the extraordinary intuition he had when he heard about the extreme poverty of a family in his parish: his insight was that to serve God, we have to offer corporal and spiritual service to our neighbour who is living in poverty, and that this service should be effective, concrete, available to all and organised.

This project quickly spread to other French provinces and to other countries. Several groups of "Charities" were founded. Saint Vincent wanted them to have contact with one another, and to keep alive the original spirit, so he entrusted their leadership and formation to Louise de Marillac who committed herself to this task with great enthusiasm and personal dedication.

In the course of her visits to the "Charities", Louise gave the members a spiritual formation and this helped to ensure that they were remaining faithful to the charism and the inspirations of Saint Vincent. She invited the members to reflect on the situation of poor people, and, at the same time, guaranteed respect for their Statutes, the efficiency of the organisation and financial accountability, and she promoted unity within and outside the groups.

Soon, when faced with the vast array of the poverties that were continually emerging, Saint Vincent and Saint Louise realised that the service provided by the volunteers in the "Charities" was not enough, and so they came up with the idea of gathering young women willing to devote their entire lives to poor people. In this way, they founded the Daughters of Charity who would work alongside the ladies, dedicating themselves totally to God in the service of the poor.

Collaboration between the ladies of the "Charities", founded by Saint Vincent de Paul, and the Daughters of Charity, was therefore intentional from the very beginning. (Today, the ladies of the "Charities" are known as Volunteers of the AIC – International Association of Charities). Saint Louise used to say: "*The Ladies and the Sisters will always live together in real union*", and the aim of this union, carried out by their distinct vocations and in complementary tasks, is to ensure that the service of the poor always continues to improve.

Saint Vincent was well aware of the multi-dimensional aspect and the extent of the different forms of poverty. His response, therefore, was also multi-dimensional: he put in place all the resources possible for the service of very poor people, using men and women, religious and lay people, rich or not so rich. This plurality showed the rich complexity of Saint Vincent's project, which continues down to the present day, through the different branches of the Vincentian Family, as well as in a large number of institutions based on his spirit.

Fr Maloney once said that the Vincentian Family is an "*army*" that is called to unite and collaborate in order to continue the mission of serving the poor in these difficult times, in the current situation of global crises that are economic, cultural and moral. This is a big challenge for us and raises important questions about prevailing models of development. This is a great challenge, but Saint Vincent said that we should be ready for any sort of circumstances or events and be able to draw from them something that will benefit poor persons.

From the beginning, the lay volunteers and the Daughters of Charity had the same aim – to serve the poor spiritually and corporally, seeing Christ in them, and serving them in organised and effective ways.

The charism of the lay Vincentian groups, however, is not the same as that of the Daughters of Charity; each branch has its own special characteristics. As Saint Paul wrote: "*The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good.*" (1 Cor. 12:7) All the baptised are called by the Spirit to a task that is specific to each person; we all have our unique, personal vocation, and it is our responsibility to understand it and follow it faithfully.

The vocation of the Daughters of Charity calls them to serve Christ in those who are poor, consecrating their entire lives to God. ... .. The title of this General Assembly, "*Prophecy and Hope*", emphasises that this charism is still dynamic and relevant.

Lay people are also called to share in the prophetic office of Christ. The Second Vatican Council emphasised that the priestly, prophetic and royal function of Christ is carried out today in the Church and all baptised people share in this threefold mission.

The Apostolic Exhortation "*Christi fideles laici*" repeats the teaching of the Council. The Church has a secular dimension because it lives in the world and is concerned with the renewal of the temporal realm. All of us are called to participate in this secular aspect of life, but for lay people, this secular dimension is their specific place where they live out their vocation. "*Christi fideles laici*" states that "*in union with Christ, the great prophet, and constituted in the Spirit as witnesses of the risen Christ, the lay faithful are called to radiate the novelty and strength of the Gospel in their everyday family and social life*". (CFL, 15)

Saint Vincent believed in lay people; he entrusted a great deal to them and expected them to respond with generosity and commitment to their vocation of serving the poor. He showed his faith in the laity by founding several associations and delegating the responsibility and leadership of these groups to the lay people themselves. (Cf. *Rule of the Charities of the Ladies in Chatillon-les-Dombes*, Nov. - Dec 1617, Coste XIII b, p. 8)

Saint Vincent was someone who was also attentive and open to receiving from lay people. Over the years, his vision and projects were enriched by the influence of the women whom he directed, by the way they lived their faith and carried out their service.

The first confraternities of Charity were creative experiments in the field of lay ministry. Vincent confided to them a ministry that was useful and very significant; he was able to understand the importance of service carried out by lay men and women, seeing it as an opportunity of going out to the poor in a new way. He went beyond the expected limits of his day and created something new and exciting.

We see, then, that we all share in the prophetic office of Christ, according to our specific charisms, and that the richness of Saint Vincent's vision is manifested through this plurality.

Collaboration within the Vincentian Family can and must lead to effective interaction if we make an effort to act in union with one another, and recognise our respective charisms and the role and structures of each one. To work together, each member must be able to see the roots of our common identity and, at the same time, respect and appreciate the different aspects of other branches, the differing vocations and the responsibilities of each one. This mutual love and respect brings a new breadth and richness to the mission.

I have deliberately used the words "if we make the effort", because I think that this collaboration and interaction doesn't just happen on its own. It has to be worked at, encouraged with goodwill, personal commitment, prayer and fidelity to the founders. We have to believe in it!

With regard to **specific acts of collaboration**, in the field, I would first of all like to express how grateful the AIC is to you, Daughters of Charity, for all the collaboration that exists already, and that you have always offered to the volunteers. There are many examples of valuable and positive joint efforts which show that the

service of persons living in poverty is all the better when we manage to unite our energy in projects at several levels – formation, spirituality, and concrete action.

We know from experience that in a country where there are no Daughters of Charity or priests of the Congregation of the Mission, the motivation of the volunteers and their spiritual life become weakened and the association does not survive. In today's society, being a volunteer is not easy, and, without a strong spiritual motive we cannot face up to the difficulties we encounter, and the temptation to give up becomes very strong. How wise Saint Vincent was in creating different branches!

To discuss this collaboration in greater depth, I would like to share my dreams with you. Maybe I am looking for utopia, but those who know me, are aware that when I speak of utopia, my utopias are projects. Although we know that it may take a long time for this utopia to become a reality, we also know that each day we can take little steps that bring us nearer to its fulfilment.

### **My first dream of collaboration between the lay associations and the Daughters of Charity is to strengthen collaboration for evangelisation**

Evangelisation is one of the great challenges of the present time, but I have come to realise that lay volunteers find it difficult to carry out this task. Often the volunteers speak about the difficulty they have in transmitting the Good News in a secularised world which is not interested in spiritual things. They realise that evangelisation is a fundamental part of their Vincentian mission. They acknowledge the challenge; they would like to be able to take part in evangelisation but they are aware that traditional approaches are no longer valid and they do not know how to proceed.

We know that Saint Vincent saw spiritual and corporal service not as two separate goals, but as different and complementary elements of an integral process of evangelisation. He taught us that our evangelisation would be dynamic if we proclaimed the Good News in different ways

- through specific works of justice and charity which would free people from injustice and marginalisation. Service of the poor is the Good News in action. It is Good News that gives a response to the bad news that persons living in poverty experience each day.

- through the Word, by proclaiming the Lord's presence, his love, his forgiveness, which means proclaiming the dignity of all people, defending their human rights and denouncing injustices.

- through the "language" of relationship – being close to those who are poor, working and sharing with them, and trying to form community with them, showing them that the kingdom of God is alive and present among us.

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The challenge is to put these teachings into practice. I think that it would be a big help if there was a common commitment on the part of all the branches of the Vincentian Family to this mission of evangelisation, by examining more carefully the specific role of each in this work, so that lay people will not become discouraged and delegate the spiritual part to the "religious" members but seek together to make the Gospel alive in our midst.

It may be that some of you here present are advisers to lay branches, some may work in projects with volunteers, or may be responsible for animation or leadership within the Vincentian Family, and I am sure that you are well aware of the problems of evangelisation. Perhaps in certain countries we could strengthen our collaboration, bearing in mind the difficulties that lay people encounter. The celebration of the 350th anniversary could be a good opportunity to launch such initiatives.

**2. My second dream: that we make sure that the work of organising does not stifle prophecy in the service of the poor and in the life of the team.**

There have to be several dimensions to the life of Vincentian associations:

**Organisation:** the service of the poor requires personnel, resources and continuity. Saint Vincent said quite rightly that "the poor suffer more from want of organisation than from want of charitable persons", and he was a great expert in organisation. He planned every action or aid programme step by step, even before he began them. The rule of the first foundation contained already the seed of everything that later characterised his charitable and social activities. Yet, at the same time, he was a great prophet of charity.

**Prophecy:** the mission of the prophets in the Old Testament and in our own day, has an eminently religious dimension because the Lord is the beginning, the heart and the aim of the prophetic mission. It is He who calls and who sends; it is His message that must be announced, His coming that must be prepared for. But the mission of the prophets also has a social dimension: announcing the Good News, making a commitment to free the oppressed, defending the weak and promoting justice. For baptised people, this social action takes on a prophetic and therefore profoundly religious value, over and above its human value, because it is the Spirit who entrusts them with the mission of renewing the world, of defending human dignity, of promoting justice, freedom, solidarity and peace.

Saint Vincent said "*We can say that to go and evangelise the poor does not mean simply to teach them the mysteries necessary for salvation, but to accomplish things foretold and prefigured by the prophets and to make the Gospel effective*" (SV XII, 84).

With groups of volunteers, it is very important to take into account these two dimensions which represent two different, complementary stages in our mission. We know very well, however, that it is not easy.

Being vigilant that in the mission entrusted to lay people, organisation does not stifle prophecy is another very important element in which collaboration with and the support of the Daughters of Charity play a role. This applies especially to those who work with teams or groups in the Vincentian Family.

The teams need to be helped to rethink their actions and projects in the light of the Gospel, both at the planning stage and in any evaluation. They need to be helped to check whether their activity is really a proclamation of Christ in the midst of the society around them, if it is a search for justice, if it gives witness of concern for those who are very poor and marginalised.

It is important to help volunteers to discover through prayer the Vincentian dynamic in which prayer results from action and leads to action. It is important for the groups to learn to pray in this way, connecting with concrete events and with the needs of poor persons and invoking the Spirit in every decision, difficulty or challenge.

I know it is not easy, but I know that an adviser who is able to pass on this motivation is a real gift from God for the volunteers and for the poor.

**3. The third important point that I suggest with regard to collaboration is to help the groups to be aware that they belong to the Church and that they should therefore make this clear through their missionary activities.**

At the 2008 and 2009 General Assemblies of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum" (the department of the Holy See that is responsible for directing and coordinating charity organisations), the Assembly work focused on the part of the Encyclical *Deus Caritas est* concerning the spiritual dimension of charitable action, and especially on the formation of lay people who collaborate in this indispensable service in the Church and who carry out the *diaconate of charity*. The 'diaconate' is the service of charity exercised in an organised, community manner. (*Deus Caritas est*: 21,23)

In his address to the members of these Assemblies, the Holy Father emphasised how important it is for those in charge of pastoral charitable action to devote constant attention to those who work in the area of the diaconate and to the human and spiritual quality of these persons, because social action in the Church should also be missionary and prophetic. Charitable action is carried out in the name of the Gospel, and so, for the person who is helped as well as for the helper, charitable works are a spiritual experience.

If *Populorum progressio* commits Christians to act, *Deus Caritas est* invites them to return to the source of their commitment: deep, living faith is what nourishes acts of charity.

Saint Vincent's project did not simply aim at pastoral effectiveness, and the team is not just an active gathering of people around a common project, it is a faith community of sharing and friendship. For volunteers, and for those whom they are helping, the exercise of charity should be a school of faith in the spirit of St. Vincent.

I think that specifying once again the place of the diaconate of charity is important also for collaboration among the lay Vincentian associations and the religious branches of the Family.

#### **4. Formation leading to maturity in a common experience of faith**

The formation of volunteers is a priority for the AIC for we are firmly committed to formation that will reinforce spiritual and Vincentian values and develop the human potential of the volunteers so that they may become witnesses who are capable of transforming their community.



On our part, one of the best things we can offer with regard to collaboration is the **formation of volunteers**. The mission of the international AIC includes formation in the Vincentian spirit, awareness of belonging to the Vincentian Family, and an integral and ongoing formation for the service of those who are poor.

The AIC has offered spiritual reflections which, in the last few years, have been linked to different stages in the life of Saint Vincent and to the guidance he gave to the "Charities" of his day, so that, from these reflections we can find action lines for the AIC to follow today.

From a technical point of view, the AIC provides formation in a "helping relationship" based on self-promotion and empowerment; formation on how to work by means of a project, and formation in networking and systemic change. The AIC places great importance on the link between individual action and social action at all levels, from the international level where the AIC has an active presence in international organisations, down to local levels where it makes institutions conscious of the problems of poverty and works to combat injustices.

The AIC uses various means of formation: seminars, visits to other countries, the publication of booklets with formation themes and spiritual reflections. This is an ongoing effort, directly linked to the integral promotion and development of the volunteers

However, what the international AIC cannot do is to provide a daily follow-up: it entrusts this to the national and local presidents, but we all know that sometimes the communication chain breaks down and no longer functions. This is very much an issue related to the persons involved. There is nothing to equal personal accompaniment of a group which could be developed by a Daughter of Charity who lives locally, who can take part in group meetings and who knows the situation personally: this is the inestimable value of the collaboration offered by group advisers.

Their role is not just to offer spiritual reflections during group meetings, though this is an important and necessary element. Rather, the aim of formation and true collaboration that the AIC expects from its advisers goes much further than that.

It involves stimulating and encouraging the volunteers  
to grow in a common experience of faith which is founded on the solid basis of St Vincent's vision and spirituality,  
to have a more mature awareness of their mission of service and evangelisation  
to be a prophetic presence in the Church community, capable of awakening people's consciences and of alerting communities to the subject of poverty.

You know that volunteer movements are declining today. The current volunteer crisis is not just in western countries. Many people tell us about a similar falling off in numbers in other countries, for example, the Philippines, Mexico, and Brazil

On the other hand, until last year in most developing countries, there was a trend towards increasing numbers of volunteers, but we are beginning to realise that the

world crisis demands more than ever that women have to work to maintain their families, and sometimes, therefore, they can no longer give their time as volunteers.

This situation requires that the commitment of volunteers be supported by a strong spiritual motivation and ongoing formation. It is only if they are aware and convinced that their Vincentian volunteer service is a response to a vocation, a call from God, that the volunteers will continue to commit themselves in the service of the poor. This is the only way that the lay branches of the Family will be able to continue.

In conclusion, my dream is for a collaboration that helps the volunteers to take a quality leap in the spiritual and vocational dimension of their service. This is the only way that they will be able to give a prophetic witness and be able to work for the transformation of situations of poverty and encourage new vocations to continue their mission.

Saint Vincent's spirituality shows us that we can attain holiness by discovering the presence of Christ in our experience of serving those who are poor, when this service is carried out with charity, humility and simplicity. This Vincentian spirituality is the most precious gift you can share with the Vincentian laity.

Saint Vincent's project is implemented fully through collaboration, and it reaches its highest point when there is constructive exchange and sharing. Each one has much to give and much to receive by putting in common his or her personal and vocational charism. From this exchange will flow a better service of *"our lords and masters"*, those who are poor.

Saint Vincent says to us: *"We should help and support one another and strive for peace and union among ourselves. This is the wine that cheers and strengthens travellers along this narrow path of Jesus Christ. I recommend this to you with all the tenderness of my heart."* (Coste, IV, 265)

Madame Marina COSTA  
Former President of the AIC

### BROTHER THIERRY-MARIE COUREAU, OP

Requirements of mission

### **Inter-religious dialogue**

Motherhouse, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009

**"Listening creates dialogue"**

Dialogue and listening are two words used very frequently in our contemporary world, in every sphere, be it psychology, politics, ecclesiology, spirituality, economics, unions, etc. We often speak about these words (dialogue and listening) either to express the need for them, or to refer to some serious breakdown in the process, such as, "We can't succeed in dialoguing", "this person doesn't listen", "we were not understood". When dialogue fails, listening fails. These words and sentiments also find their way into our religious communities.

These sentiments, which are very often expressed, are an indication of genuine suffering. They express one of humanity's fundamental questions, one of its most deeply-felt expectations. Without intending to do so, they call into question the purpose of mankind, the meaning of our existence. For this reason, they are part of all our human realities and of Biblical experience. The partnership of dialogue and listening is presented as a possible expression of the heart of Revelation in Christianity. For this reason, it directs our way of being in the world, with ourselves and with others. Meeting others in their cultural and religious differences is presented as symbolic of the question of dialogue, because of the issues it seems to raise regarding the identity of a believer. But, in fact, it does not differ fundamentally from every other relational situation. Because of my position and experience, I will make this the background to this talk.

However, by way of contrast, to help us see things more clearly, I propose to begin by indicating what passes for dialogue, but is not; I shall call this counterfeit dialogue. After that, we shall go back briefly to the source, to plunge into biblical and theological tradition in order to see how it is shaped by the dimensions of dialogue and listening. We shall then conclude by considering humanity's task of seeking to be in conformity with its origins and destiny, that is, where we have come from and what destiny awaits us.

### **Counterfeit dialogue and common impasses**

It often happens that, when we speak of dialogue, we don't know what we're talking about. Dialogue is a very common term that is used these days to designate all kinds of meetings and gatherings, and times of being together in conversation and discussion among several people. However it is not at all certain that all these gatherings, large or small, can be described as dialogue since they often contain elements that are unclear and lacking in precise theological content. Before we can say what dialogue is, we have to narrow the field in which it operates, and for this we need to identify certain impasses in which we may become trapped. It is these that may cause people to say that dialogue is impossible. False dialogue is found in two areas. One looks for what is useful, and the other seeks a response to a need. The first impasse seeks to dominate, while the second pursues a least common denominator.

#### *Seeking what is useful to us or aiming to destroy*

In the sphere of inter-religious dialogue, the favorite areas deal with theoretical and doctrinal discussion, which may be theological and ethical in nature, as well as the sharing of spiritual experiences. There are many possible topics for discussion: theological discourse, ritual, outstanding personages, documents, "spiritual" practices, moral attitudes, questions about death and health, war, justice and peace, etc. Very

often, in a position like this, dialogue is seen as something that should lead us to points of agreement or of differences; that it should put forward judgments on the basis of what each person is. In this way, then, each one sets off with a pre-conceived idea of what the other person thinks on the subject. The other is misrepresented and placed in a box that has been prepared already according to where the person thinks the dialogue should be leading. If the person doesn't fit into the box, frustration occurs and this is a sign that no dialogue has taken place. Such an attitude indicates that we are dealing with a counterfeit form of dialogue that is trying to pass for the real thing, and with an attempt to dominate the other person! Attitudes of domination can take various forms: conquest, absorption, confusion or denial.

The first of these attitudes often arises when comparison becomes the primary purpose of the dialogue. The goal of this kind of meeting is to demonstrate the superiority of one tradition over another. Dialogue is seen as an instrument of conversion, without calling it that. On both sides it is the setting for a struggle, sometimes subtle, in which proof of the weakness of the other person's doctrine or attitude is made obvious. It is not a situation of dialogue, but one of *conquest*.

Another attitude aims specially at discovering or even being completely immersed in the spirituality of the other party, with a view to self-enrichment, gaining something for oneself from it. The person seeking this has such an appetite for what the other person has, that the latter's tradition can be seen as a kind of cement to hold the first person's tradition together, a tradition that is seen as being ill-adapted to our contemporary world. One seeks to enter into the other person's world, which is held onto like a lifeline. A situation like this is not one of dialogue, but one of *absorption* or self-seeking.

A third attitude, frequently connected with inter-religious meetings, has as its aim to "show the uniformity of all the descriptions of God, to say that we are all the same, that we are all heading for the same place but going by different routes." This is not a situation of dialogue but one of *confusion*.

Another position is that of affirmation that overrides the desire to understand or know the other person. Under cover of dialogue, this method seeks to show what the other person is and what he or she isn't. To reject or use the person better, the person will be described as having virtues or negative aspects either in the past or at the present time, here or elsewhere. This is not true dialogue but it is a *denial* of the other person's present reality.

*Satisfying a need or the temptation to find the lowest common denominator*

The second blockage concerns needs that arise when people respond by putting in place certain "strategies" of dialogue. These strategies are a shrewd response to the difficulty of living in a pluralistic world, but remain an artificial construction founded on the lowest common denominator.

Current thinking is that dialogue begins with "shared life and common action". The importance of this is well understood, it is to succeed in co-habiting, the better to respect one another. This process then comes to an end when particular vested interests are satisfied.

Over and above vested interests, there is, obviously, a certain urgency to try to build peace and concord, sharing of resources and practising solidarity. This is one of the driving forces of present-day international assemblies at all levels: political economic, social or religious. Who could question this essential task in the face of a humanity in jeopardy, this urgency to not place cultures and civilizations in opposition to one another, but to bring them together round a common table? Yet, we have to ask whether this is real dialogue or only some agreed common interest?

We understand that in many situations which we claim to be an attempt at dialogue, nobody seeks to meet the other party involved, to listen and speak to them, but each side tries to dominate, to make themselves heard and to hear themselves speaking. This is just a pile up or juxtaposition of monologues which try to pass for dialogue but, in fact, have other aims in view. How can we arrive at true, genuine dialogue?

### **Theological foundations of dialogue**

The attempt at dialogue gets lost in a certain number of impasses, because we do not know what dialogue is, what it is aiming at or on what it is based. Speaking to another person face to face is one of the principal activities of being human. It is one of the most difficult because it is only authentic if it involves a commitment to things and to people. Genuine communication with other persons is possible only if we begin by listening, and allow ourselves to be touched by what they say. It's at this level that we can talk about dialogue. If, on the contrary, we adopt the position of hearing ourselves speaking, then it is only an imitation of dialogue or a bogus form of it.

#### *Dialogue is the goal*

The experience of dialogue finds its model in the Bible, and theology sees in it a characteristic feature of divine life. More than this, dialogue is the ontological foundation of human nature. It is the human person's point of entry into humanity.

From a Christian viewpoint, understanding the human person leads us into an understanding of God's plan for us. God wants humanity to participate and be associated with God's life, with what belongs to God as exemplified in the image of the relationships within the Trinity. This communion in God is a relationship of word and love. This is why God continually tries to enter into a relationship with human beings, person to person, through all that God does for us. God continually gives the Word to us, addressing it to us in order to challenge us. A human person is called and invited to enter this dialogue relationship and to live by it. Each partner in this relationship is invited to surrender themselves unreservedly. In fact, the experience of dialogue is an adventure, possibly the only true human adventure. As another way of expressing the love of friendship, dialogue sets its seal on the purpose of every human life.

This prospect of becoming a person of the word, a person of love, towers far above us in the distance, it is difficult to attain. The whole Bible describes it, the story of a dialogue between God and humanity, a dialogue that humanity finds difficult to establish. In Genesis 3:9, the man and woman listen to what they want to hear of what

they can grasp, and once they have taken hold of it and digested it, they begin to destroy themselves by hiding and not daring to speak with God. Original sin opened the way to a vast era in which we could say that learning to dialogue became a hard task. From then on, dialogue is not experienced as a 'given' but becomes a task that is difficult to achieve.

Noah listened to God and so saved creation from destruction, and after that Abraham introduced humans into an apprenticeship of learning to speak with God. Mankind becomes a partner in the dialogue begun and offered by God. Although God had listened to humanity from the beginning, we listened neither to God, nor to our human brothers and sisters. The road to be taken by humanity was, therefore, traced out by God alone: we learn to listen, and then, after listening, dare to speak freely. This is the apprenticeship in dialogue between humanity and God, and among human beings.

We could take up Bible passages, one by one, in order to discover little by little how this apprenticeship in dialogue took place. It was begun in Genesis, practised in the events of the Exodus and took shape on Sinai, where the call and the response given by the speakers, are inscribed in terms of a Covenant, a promise, the Law. Once it is definitely entered into, dialogue creates a history. Little by little, it becomes rooted under the action of the Prophets. It is developed in the Psalms, and the Wisdom Writings promote it further. In this way, it becomes established in the course of, and by means of, the history of God's action among His people. Little by little, this history becomes permeated with the Word and the chosen people discover that their God is always "Other", yet always coming nearer to them. In the recognition of this definitive "otherness", the promise of communion is established.

### *Christ, the fulfilment of the model of dialogue*

With Christ, the actual framework of dialogue shines out clearly. Jesus Christ represents humanity's attentive listening to God, and God communicating with humanity just as we are, since humanity is accepted in its entirety. The reciprocal relationship of love and the word that had been so hoped for has been achieved. The fruit of this is the ability to welcome into this human-divine dialogue the totality of humanity and to bring people together in dialogue. The life of the three persons is the ultimate setting where dialogue among persons can unfold, and of course, the dialogue of human beings with God.

For Christianity, human persons are understood as being created by and for dialogue. This is neither a given fact, nor an innate idea, nor an acquired asset, but a trial or test that allows one to enter into Life. It is a pathway that leads human beings to their goal: attaining dialogue. [Humanity's first word is a cry, we are called by name by God, set on course by receiving a word of promise, we humans have rebelled by using our own words and by shifting to the word "you", to confrontation, we have been transformed by the disruptive and unsettling encounter with God on a regular basis, and then finally, when humanity enters into continual dialogue with God, people are led to take possession of the promised land which is divine life, the Kingdom of God. This divine life is the interplay among three persons, where Love is understood as the process that takes place when we open ourselves to the other person to give and receive in a joint exchange.]

God introduces the human person into the mystery of Life, the life of God and life as a human. The person becomes human by becoming a person dedicated to dialogue.

### **The task: learning how to listen**

The pathway to becoming human is reached through dialogue. This is where one experiences the exercise of truth and trust without fear, in dying to self and giving oneself to the other.

### *Listening creates dialogue*

False concepts have shown us that dialogue becomes impossible when debate is set up with the sole purpose of obtaining preconceived results. The only result of this is the conquering of the other person. The only possible way of avoiding failure would be to remain silent. Would not this, once again, make dialogue impossible?

To believe that silence makes dialogue impossible is to be mistaken once again about what dialogue really is. It is not a conversation between two people or among a group. In reality, it is something entirely different. It means being led together by the word, to be projected through and with the word towards the truth that is the basis of who we are and that leads us to become what we are. This word cannot come from any other place than from silence, from listening to the other with an attitude of readiness to receive, with reverence.

Dialogue does not begin when someone who wants to enter into it convokes another for a debate about a specific objective. Rather, dialogue begins when one person comes to spend time with the other person, when the initiator decides to approach the other, seeking to understand them in their own situation and listening to what they have to say. It does not matter whether this offer is accepted or refused.

Dialogue is established by this gesture that continues either as an aspiration, or a continued commitment that is patient and persevering, as one who waits at the feet of another in order to listen and receive, who serves without seeking to be served, who accepts that the other person will reveal him or herself when invited to come together. Instead of trying to conquer or take over the other person's word, it involves simply allowing the word to pass through them.

### *Dialogue is friendship*

In an encounter viewed in this way, the aim of dialogue is that of getting to know and love others in their differences, and by this process, to better know, understand and love oneself and one's own differences. Far from first wanting to compare ideas, history and other elements that are the basis of the other's life and attitudes, each participant perceives and acknowledges the difficulty of entering into another person's world, his or her culture, history and traditions. Instead, each one remains in a state of respect and acceptance of not knowing or understanding or taking control. Having learned little by little to allow oneself to be welcomed into the other's world, persons in genuine dialogue can reach the point with the other of being able to speak about them to a third party in their presence without offending them, or

they can speak about their beliefs, and accompany them in their own life process in a critical and constructive way that contributes to their good. It is in this way that those who open themselves up to being known by others discover that they are accepted as they are, they are loved and are not prey to be captured. In this process and over time, those who participate in dialogue learn to get to know one another. This is why dialogue leads to friendship through vulnerability.

Friendship does not mean a state of equality. Equality or reciprocity in the way the word is received or transmitted is not the principle that brings about dialogue. This equality is an illusion, a trap. Dialogue is effective as soon as one of the participants adopts a posture of listening and understanding as the word passes through them. This posture of listening demonstrates that they are willing to go together in search of the truth that is the common foundation of the participants, an anthropological truth, one that makes humans into persons, that supports all religious growth or simply any human growth. This anthropological truth is only accessible through cultures and personalities. It is not an obvious given fact that is transmitted in any universal language. To achieve this little by little requires time, patience and vulnerability. This is why dialogue requires a combination of knowledge and friendship, reason and trust.

### *The fruit of dialogue, transformation of hearts*

Vulnerability is at the heart of dialogue. It is part of the two-faceted attitude of listening and daring to speak in the presence of someone else who is very different. It means to listen and not be understood, to risk sharing one's word and accepting that it may not be accepted or understood. Dialogue involves dying to self and to one's fears. Those who enter into it are rooted in silence, in an attitude of welcoming the other, in refusing to be obliged to respond to the word of the other person. They allow themselves to remain in suspense, to not regulate circumstances and situations, to not attempt on their own to save the dialogue from their own impasses and blocks. This is why having the word pass through persons leads to a weakening of self-love, and to giving up any attempt to destroy or use strategies. This experience of the word leads to a transformation of hearts. It uncovers what is deep within people, their efforts and ambitions, their fears and areas of resistance, their openness and ability to be welcoming. This revelation is an opportunity, a necessary process of purification, a passage from the enclosure to the clearing, from the barrier to the open space.

### *Dialogue is mission*

Does it seem that this approach to dialogue negates the missionary responsibility of the Church? The transformation of hearts is the mission in action. If a person who opens up to another person does so without fear, worry or for the purpose of capturing, judging or labelling the other, then in an unexpected way, the actual practice of witnessing, the practice of *mission*, takes place. This is because with this attitude of openness and giving of oneself to another, one is putting into practice what Christ said, what God said, what his word and his life express. The word cannot be forced or imposed, even if just one explicit word can be given, because it seems necessary for the person who feels that he or she has been accepted and set free by this welcoming atmosphere, and that this word can reveal the living source for



others.<sup>1</sup> Forcing the word would be completely inappropriate, and the word would not be accepted. It would be a false representation, a counterfeiting of the love of friendship that it was proclaiming.

Because dialogue unfolds in time deep within the work of salvation as this operates throughout human history, it can't be used as a tool, even a missionary tool. It is itself the mission. It corresponds to the goal that is being pursued, that of love received and given, experienced and proclaimed by those who have experienced it. It is passed on to others precisely by the celebration of life, the service of our brothers and sisters especially with regard to justice, sharing of praise and coming together in community.<sup>2</sup>

### **Conclusion**

To conclude this brief reflection by going back to our opening question about failure in dialogue, we are invited to deepen our understanding of our human reality so as not to be mistaken about the meaning of dialogue.

The meaning of existence can be expressed as a waiting to be accepted by another, to be welcomed just as we are. This leads us, on our part, to be ready to welcome other people who open themselves to us and for us to get to know and to spend time with one another, without trying to take hold of them or make of them a useful tool to be dominated, or an object to be possessed. This is a disposition that makes us completely open and available and capable of responding in service and praise of the other person.

The meaning of the word "dialogue", as we have seen, needs to be restored. Being open to the word of others requires us to listen, even in a limited way, to understand what is being communicated in silence or in words, in a gesture, attitude or emotion. It is in this openness where a word has passed, by these actions of mind and will, which receive, sort, order, choose, and separate out, that the other person comes as an "other", and the "I" of that person is respected. The relationship that is established becomes a promise of union. This action is the profound meaning of the family of Greek words which have become the word "dialogue" in French (and English). We understand clearly that far from being a discussion among equals or an exchange that aims at finding agreement, dialogue exists as a choice for those who consent to listen to those to whom they are led to encounter in order to try and understand them and to accept them as they are, as distinct from what they say.

It is a form of listening that questions and seeks to decode the word and what it contains, without ever striving to take hold of it and possess it. It is an attitude in which the word of the other person comes to me the listener and frees us both from the temptation to confusion and reciprocal destruction in order to lead us by the same movement towards reaching self and the other, simply for the joy of it.

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1. It is the name of Jesus which, through our faith in it has brought back the strength of this man whom you see here and know so well

<sup>2</sup> This represents the 4 usual forms of dialogue in the Catholic Church: theological exchanges, exchanges on a spiritual experience, dialogue about life and dialogue on a shared activity. Cf. CPDI (Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue), *Dialogue and mission*, 1984.

Dialogue, the “dia-logos” which can be understood as “by and through the logos”, as “permeated with the word”, is a form of self-giving which recognises the irreducible otherness of a person. True dialogue cannot be based on usefulness or need. In Christianity, dialogue is the place, form and purpose of divine revelation. It is the foundation, the way and the purpose of human existence. For those who choose to apply themselves to dialogue, simply making the effort to dialogue enables the process to take place. This listening, which leads to people daring to speak simply and in a straight-forward way, leads to an encounter that has value in and of itself. Dialogue is a one-to-one relationship with another person, flesh of our flesh, yet strikingly different, whose name is love in friendship.

Brother Thierry –Marie COUREAU, OP  
*Director of ISTR ( Institute of theology and sciences of religions)*

“I will not try to change anything of what I think or of what you think (as far as I can be the judge of that) just in order to come to a consensus that is acceptable to everyone. On the contrary, what I want to say to you today is that the world has need of authentic dialogue and that the opposite of dialogue is both deceit and silence and therefore dialogue can only take place between people who remain true to themselves and who speak the truth.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Camus, Conference given at the Dominican convent of La Tour-Maubourg (*sic*, that is Saint Dominic’s convent in Paris), 1948, in Albert Camus, *Essais*, edited and annotated by Roger Quillot and Louis Faucon, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, 1965, p. 372

### *Inter-religious dialogue*

Following his conference,  
Brother Courau, OP, restated some of his convictions  
Concerning inter-religious dialogue,  
convictions which also apply to all forms of dialogue

Notes taken during a spontaneous sharing session with members of the Assembly

#### **Prejudices make any dialogue difficult**

A) We all have prejudices; it would be a mistake to think that we are spared them. They are part of our life and our history. Are prejudices an insurmountable obstacle to dialogue? They are often part of our initial approach whenever we first meet up with another person. It is important, then to be well aware of our prejudices, that is, to realise that these can become real obstacles in an encounter or even prevent an encounter from happening. It is important to pinpoint within ourselves the various stages that occur when we meet another person.

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\* The first stage is when we believe that we immediately understand what the other person is trying to tell us. We take in their ideas, saying to ourselves: this is similar to or this is different from my own experience.

\* The second stage allows us to go farther in getting to know the other person, in listening to them. Here, we discover that we don't understand anything anymore. Since the other person is truly different from me, my prejudices must crumble away in one way or another, because these differences are real. In the beginning, we didn't imagine the differences to be so significant. In honestly listening to the other, we discover that all that we had imagined is in the process of melting away to leave room for incomprehension. This process takes place within numerous relationships, including those with our sisters or brothers in community.

\* In the third stage, we discover that we do not need to understand the other in the way we had imagined them to be, but rather we accept this lack of understanding, and even give up the idea that we could possibly understand them.

In this process, however, something happens: I learn to know the other, that is, I enter into the process in which I have been forced to give up the notion that I could understand this person, and I discover that I have learned to know them. It is about letting go of understanding in order to learn to know. You are well aware that the term "to know" in biblical and Christian experience means: "to have an intimate experience of". Someone who knows God, has an intimate experience of God.

In this effort to understand another person, after the first stage of prejudices and the second stage, where we despair of understanding them, it is important to continue this process of seeking to understand. It is important because this is how we learn to know the other, even if at some point we discover that we cannot come to understand them.

B) With regard to prejudices that the other person may have about me, another approach needs to be taken and this involves coming to understand the reality of the other but also not expecting the other person to reciprocate what I can offer them. At times, I may even need to set certain limits in order to safeguard the good of the other person as well as my own.

It can happen that I will have the impression that the other person does not accept me as I am, that they do not understand me and are not open to me, even while I am making an effort to enter into dialogue with them. In this case, I might become discouraged because I want to receive the same understanding that I offered them. Dialogue exists from the moment that I consent to start the process of understanding the reality of the other.

Dialogue is a work of understanding and love. Love is understanding. To welcome, receive, accept, open oneself to the other, does not mean accepting everything about them but offering a supportive setting. It is not possible to be open unless boundaries are set. To speak of boundaries means to speak of firmness or resoluteness, that is, a boundary that the other cannot overstep, not because I am afraid, but because it is for the other person's good as well as my own. If the prejudice

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that the other person has about me is of a destructive nature, it is important, out of love, to maintain an attitude of openness but also one of firmness.

Let us take as an example dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters. We have said that dialogue begins as soon as I agree to begin to understand the reality of the other person. We need to know, though, that according to the theological mindset of Islam, it is unthinkable for them not to seek to convert others because this relates in some way to the very issue of salvation for all humanity. It is important to recognise this in order to understand the other's thinking with regard to us. As soon as I understand this underlying attitude, can I allow them to do anything they wish to me or to my brothers and sisters? Certainly not. Why? In dialogue and in love, it is of the utmost importance that we prevent the other person destroying themselves by destroying their brother or sister.

### **The Church's Magisterium and inter-religious dialogue**

The Church's Magisterium is currently working on the theology of religions and the theology of dialogue. A structured and established theology of dialogue has not yet been developed. However, since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has been seeking a better understanding of the place of religions and dialogue in the Design of God. If you have the chance to study the Magisterial texts relating to dialogue written since the Council, you will see that dialogue is understood as a method or a means to be used in the proclamation of the Good News.

In our Catholic tradition, theology is a work in progress and one that is ongoing. It is one that we carry out together, as Church, with the experiences of Christians living in various situations and with reference to the Bible, history and tradition. Over the centuries, the Church has continued to evolve in order to make progress in its relationships with other religions. Your Company has followed a similar evolution and this will become even more noticeable since it will take place in a different historical, social and geographical context.

Today, the Church is being led forward by this spirit of dialogue so strongly proclaimed by John Paul II, particularly at the meeting in Assisi in 1986. The Church continues to work on the theological foundations of dialogue. Personally, I think that love is the only response that we are called to give to the world, as a Church, and we share responsibility for this. It is always important to base dialogue firmly at this level.

### **Anthropological foundations**

We ask the following question in the world today: Is there truly such a thing as a universal human reality? We are less and less sure of this on the level of culture, because we know the extent to which each culture contributes to forming human beings. Nevertheless, there is an anthropological truth that we are called to share with regard to love. Each one of you has experienced that, regardless of whatever country you are in and what religious traditions you are faced with, you find people who are ready to welcome, to receive others and to be received, and that this is shared in the simplest ways possible, irrespective of their culture or religious outlook. This is the

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human struggle: feeling within ourselves this fundamental tendency to welcome the other person and at the same time, being capable of destroying the other person from whom we have experienced welcome and love.

We need to reflect more on this dichotomy that we have within us: between this fundamental desire and our attitude which is conditioned by our history, environment, religion, prejudices, snap judgments, etc. This all relates to what the Second Vatican Council reminded us, that the unity of humankind is a Christian ideal. All human beings are called to live in unity. For us who are Christian, this unity is founded on Jesus Christ. The Council said that Christ is united to each person in some way. That does not mean, however, that every person is united to Christ. We are called to unity as human beings through the very person of Christ.

### **Ministry of the Church**

I think that every ministry in which there is consistency between word and action will bear fruit for those to whom it is addressed. A difficulty that often occurs in efforts to evangelise is that there is a noticeable disparity between our words and our actions. If we love others, we need to welcome them and also be open to receiving from them. The huge task that is continually before us and that transforms our very beings, our communities and our Church, is to learn to receive before we give.

It is important for us to contemplate the movement of love in the Trinity in order to understand our place in humanity. We often tend to imagine ourselves in the position of the Father. Our attitude, though, should be to put ourselves in the place of the Son. The Father is the one who gives. The Son is the one who receives. The only disposition is that of receiving, and this is fundamental because if the Son does not receive, the Father cannot give of himself. In order for the Father to give of himself, there needs to be a Son to receive. Logically, the gift of the Son to the Father is secondary in relationship to the attitude of receiving or being open to the totality of the Father. And it is precisely this exchange between the Father and the Son, between the Son and the Father that we call the Gift, that is to say the Holy Spirit.

Our place in humanity is to see ourselves as sons and daughters, in other words, as those who receive everything from the Father and who receive everything from others. And because we receive from others, we can give ourselves to others. There is no other way that we can give of ourselves. This is the reason why the Christian life can mean nothing less than death to self. And this applies to human life in general, not just the Christian life. Christianity says that this is what humanity is destined for; moreover, humanity is destined to show this total openness which is represented by Christ on the cross. It's not without significance that we have Christ on the cross: he represents complete openness, accepting everyone who comes to him, including those who placed him on the cross and with whom he was reconciled before his death: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." This means that he re-established the relationship with those who placed him on the cross; no relationship is lost. The action of the Son is to welcome everyone in himself to such an extent, I would venture to say, that his arms remain forever open, unable to close. This is the attitude that we are invited to live out. We are called to follow Christ, to allow him to work in us so that we may open ourselves to the other in order to accept them, and in

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accepting them, give ourselves to them. If, on the other hand, we neglect to make this effort to accept, welcome and listen, we will be part of this policy of giving: I give you a little time, a little money, a little education, a little care, etc. That's great! And the other person takes just what they need; but without feeling that they are accepted just as they are. To be accepted just as we are, at the moment that we decide, this is the time when we experience the love of God himself and this opens the way for us to proclaim and announce him.

### **In conclusion**

From what I have been trying to say, you can see clearly that dialogue begins from the moment when we are ready to make an effort to listen to the other person. It may seem surprising to think that dialogue already exists when one of those involved is ready to listen. We often think of dialogue as something that has to happen reciprocally. But the point of dialogue is not that we are looking for a debate, conversation or acceptance of one by the other. It takes place when I am ready to accept the other just as they are, even if the other person does not accept me. And this is what we need to understand; otherwise we will be looking for results from an attitude that cannot produce any fruit. We should not confuse fruit with results. It is not up to us to save others; rather it is Christ who saves. It is important to remember this always. We cannot force dialogue, trying to make the other person respond to my attitude of listening and welcoming. Dialogue exists from the moment that I have this attitude of listening, regardless of what the attitude of the other person may be. Look at our God! For centuries, God has been ready to dialogue with humanity. How many people respond to this? But God never gives up, even to the point of taking on our human nature to demonstrate, at least through one man, the response that happens when dialogue is perfectly carried out. God is ever ready to dialogue. God is dialogue. If we do not understand this, we will pursue all sorts of goals that can disappoint us, because they will be unattainable. We can never change the other person. It is question of accepting them and loving them just as they are, and I repeat, without allowing ourselves to be destroyed by them, because in destroying us they destroy themselves. It is a responsibility of love, then, to have this attitude that is both firm and tender with regard to the other person, an attitude that allows each person to experience what it means to be accepted and to accept.

I think that all people, young or old, and those from different traditions or cultures, all hunger for honest and true encounters with other people. And if we offer someone the opportunity to be welcome at our table, to be listened to by someone who is not seeking to control them, amazing things will happen in the area of understanding. The big fear that we all have is that when we come across someone with open arms, that we will come close to them and all of a sudden the arms will close around us and we will become the possession of the one who had welcomed us. The "agape" love of Christ is a complete openness in which the other is free to come and to go. If we have this attitude of total openness and selflessness, this will create an authentic experience of knowing the other person. Many things are linked to this essential element of "agape" love shown by welcoming, receiving, and respecting the freedom of the person who comes to us and opens themselves to us.

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Brother Thierry-Marie Courau, OP  
*Director of ISTR ( Institute for the theology and sciences of religions)*

FATHER YVES-MARIE BLANCHARD

Requirements for mission : ecumenical dialogue

**Prophecy and hope:  
the hazards of ecumenical dialogue**

Motherhouse, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009

The word "ecumenism" sometimes gets bad press. An abstract "ism" word makes some people fear that this is some new religion or even an artificial synthesis of all Christian churches. This is why we are going to use the terms ecumenical "movement" or ecumenical "dialogue", to describe this concept which is not a theoretical system but a reality that is alive and well, in full development with advances and pauses, and even some setbacks. Briefly, it is a work in progress even if it is far from being achieved, and one that is particularly well adapted to the theme of your General Assembly, "Prophecy and hope, now and everywhere". Yes, as we shall see, the ecumenical movement remains a very timely reality today, in spite of how it may appear. By definition, it is a universal undertaking, even if certain regions of the world are more aware and involved in it than other places are. Most of all, it is a process that is constantly evolving; its motives call us to hope, and its achievements, modest though they may be, can be considered prophetic. You see, then, that we are very much in keeping with the theme of your session in addressing the ecumenical movement, in the context of prophecy and hope, now and everywhere. This presentation will be in six parts.

1. We might recall that the ecumenical movement is a fairly recent reality, just 100 years old. This means that even if the divisions go back a very long time (roughly to the 5<sup>th</sup> century for the ancient oriental Churches, to the 11<sup>th</sup> century for the Orthodox Churches, and to the 16<sup>th</sup> century for the Churches of the Reformation), we had to wait until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for inter-Church meetings to take place, first of all in the Protestant world, but also with the Orthodox, Anglicans and, to a lesser extent, with Catholics. Two parallel patterns then developed: international conferences held at regular intervals, such as the three movements at the origin of the World Council of Churches (the International Council of Missions, and especially the two currents of social Christianity - 'Life and Work' - and theological dialogue – Faith and Order). There has also been a pattern of bilateral meetings, uniting two Churches, often prompted by the charism of exceptional personalities, whose commitment can truly be considered "prophetic". For example, the Malines Conferences were the outcome of the deep friendship between Lord Halifax, an Anglican, and Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines-Brussels, at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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After these promising beginnings, two dates stand out in history: first of all, 1948 in Lausanne (Switzerland), when the WCC – World Council of Churches - was born from the amalgamation of the two principal currents which were precursors of the Vatican II Declaration on Christian Unity (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 1964). This Declaration not only accepts the ecumenical process, but makes it an ecclesial priority and an irreversible commitment. In spite of what sometimes appears to be happening, this commitment of the Catholic Church remains completely valid today: it has been confirmed time and time again through the concrete commitment and doctrinal teaching of Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, (among other writings, in his magnificent 1995 encyclical *Ut unum sint*) and now Benedict XVI. So, ecumenism is on the agenda more than ever today, spurred on by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, whose president is now the great theologian, Cardinal Walter Kasper. It is also worth noting that even if the Catholic Church has never belonged to the World Council of Churches (which now numbers more than 300 Churches), probably for fear that the movement might be reduced to some kind of superficial forum like the General Assembly of the United Nations, it nevertheless participates fully in the work of the theological branch (Faith and Order), and in this context it carries out the greater part of the fundamental research undertaken in the area of the Unity of the Churches, (for example, the famous Lima 1982 document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* – abbreviated to BEM). From this paradoxical situation (presence-absence of the Catholic Church at the World Council of Churches), there emerges, among other examples, the European situation. Here, relations remain very warm and genuinely effective between the Council of Episcopal Conferences of Europe (CECE), representing the Catholics of Europe, and the Conference of Churches of Europe (KEK) which brings together a large number of Churches with roots either in the Eastern Tradition or in the Protestant Reformation. These two institutions collaborate closely with each other, for example in the adoption of the European Ecumenical Charter (2001), and the third European Assembly at Sibiu (Romania) in September 2007 (after Basle – 1989, and Graz – 1997), dedicated to the role of the Christian Churches in the process of creating the European Union.

2. The results achieved in the course of its relatively short history and (let's admit it – slowed down by the late entry of the Catholic Church which was hostile to the ecumenical movement for a long time, only joining it seriously in 1964 with Vatican II's statements) are truly considerable when we think of what the situation was only fifty years ago. It is easy to draw up a list, although an incomplete one, of the areas of progress achieved in this domain. Let us simply mention a few points:

- a) mutual withdrawal of condemnations and anathemas, some of which were centuries old, almost a millennium in the case of relations between Catholics and Orthodox, which were restored by Paul VI and Athenagoras on 5th January 1964, in Jerusalem;
- b) a common Creed, especially between the Pope and the patriarchs of the ancient oriental Churches (Armenian, Copt, Syrian) as well as the signing of doctrinal agreements such as the common declaration on justification, approved by the Catholic Church and the World Lutheran Federation on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1999;



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- c) organisation of interdenominational prayers, especially during the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (18 – 25 January), instituted in Lyons (France) by Father Paul Couturier in 1935, and faithfully continued every year;
  - d) the existence of many mixed committees for theological dialogue, at both universal level and within a certain number of countries, especially in France and the United States, where certain committees came to know one another through the quality of their works. We could mention in particular the "Dombes Group" which, since 1937, has been pursuing in-depth and truly prophetic dialogue between French-speaking Catholics and Protestants, in the form of a private, non-official group but one whose moral authority is widely recognised.

Over and above these institutional successes, we should highlight the excellent atmosphere of relationships and friendships which have become the norm in many countries, sometimes in a completely new way after a past that is sadly marked by indifference, hatred and violence. We have only to think of the Wars of Religion, a terrible period in French history, but wars which also took place elsewhere. This new climate is characterised by relations of trust and mutual support at all levels, both among the faithful and on the level of the hierarchy. It is now considered commonplace to offer mutual invitations to synods and assemblies of one Church or another, just as it has become customary to work together in charitable activities and for important social causes. It even happens quite often (for example in France with the CCEF – Christian Council of Churches in France), that the Churches try to speak with one voice with regard to the public authorities. This is not always easy, because, even if we have a common faith, reflexes and sensitivities in social and political matters can be different. The results couldn't be more spectacular. If a Catholic came back to earth after an absence of 50 years, he would not be able to believe his eyes! In spite of real differences and the weight of history, in spite of our sins and isolation from one another, there is really –at the present time - a very strong sense of belonging to the same, unique Church of the Body of Christ, through the diversity of the historical faces of the Church. Such a conviction deserves recognition. In my eyes, it constitutes one of the greatest riches that Christians of the 20th century have left to their successors. It is up to us to act in such a way that this light, which is still rather weak, will not be extinguished because of our negligence or because of a certain scepticism too often conveyed by the media and by those who have no other criteria for judging than appearances which are misleading.

3. Today, the ecumenical movement tends to be running out of steam, to the great regret of those post-Conciliar pioneers. Nevertheless, we have to put this feeling in context and see the ecumenical situation in relation to other areas of Church activity which are also vulnerable in the social and cultural context of the present day. However, let's try to list some of the causes that might explain this weakening in ecumenical dialogue:

- a) First of all, the difficulty of ecumenical dialogue once it has passed the early stage of just getting to know one another. It was easy enough to trace out paths of friendship in the early days, but now that the first stage is over, it becomes much

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harder to look together at fundamental questions that have kept us apart for a long time and continue to separate us. The task of enlightenment and a deepening understanding requires the contribution of experts, and, to be honest, it will take a long time yet to achieve. We can understand, therefore, why the faithful become discouraged as they look for concrete results, and are disappointed at having to wait such a long time for signs of unity awaited with understandable impatience.

- b) The present-day temptation to turn in on one's own identity can cloud over the indispensable supports of life in society. This is a characteristic of post-modern society as it deals with the divergent effects of globalisation. When this overly-cautious perspective begins to affect all areas, for example, as in the many difficulties evident in the European Union, or with the new ethnic problems in many countries, it is not surprising that the main religions, and especially Christianity, feel the effects of all this. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the important ideas of unity are often questioned, and it is obvious that this crisis will affect ecumenism. (We hope that this problem will be temporary.)

- c) Positive though this may seem to be, the development of recent inter-religious dialogue tends to overshadow the ecumenical movement, which is judged to be ineffective and too specialised. It can seem more urgent to open dialogue with other non-Christian religions: there are geo-political realities at stake, for example, in Islam, and these call for better relations. In addition, easy access to intercontinental travel and the huge scale of migration trends also raise public awareness of religious opinion and tradition and present a real spiritual disorientation. Besides, dialogue within Christianity seems more inadequate, less urgent or even not exotic enough. From a Christian point of view, both inter-religious and inter-denominational dialogue are essential, but in the short-term view, we might be tempted to take other priorities. In this case, there is a danger that we might forget what ecumenism demands.

- d) Finally, the present geo-political situation accentuates certain negative effects which slow down or even stop for the time being, dialogues which have been going on for quite a long time. In particular, the break-up of the Soviet empire 25 years ago allowed for emancipation in certain countries which have, happily, regained mastery of their own destiny. As a result, their Churches entered into a long process of re-possessing their history and redefining their social and cultural situation. It is not surprising, therefore, that the internal renewal taking place has brought about a pause in dialogue with the exterior world. Much the same probably occurred at the time of decolonisation, when the Churches were able to take charge of their own identity in the midst of national identities that were still not clear or certain. One thing is certain; insecurity or hesitation about oneself can never foster dialogue with others. The considerable changes that have taken place in our world during the past few years have slowed down the process of dialogue that was initiated partly in the spirit of rebuilding after the Second World War. It was a characteristic time of growth in the West, which took place at the same time as Vatican II, an era of great optimism.

4) Regardless of the present difficulties and taking into account the effects of popular opinion that should be resisted, dialogue in favour of Christian Unity is never optional. It is part of the very identity of the Church, according to the teaching of Jesus, as we read in the Gospel according to St John. Scripture scholars and

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historians of early Christianity are now convinced that the Christian community that gathered around St John suffered greatly from some internal crisis that threatened the unity of the initial group assembled by the beloved disciple. Influenced by this unfortunate experience, this community, more than any other, understood how much the idea of unity was at the heart of Jesus' thinking and his desires, to the point that it was his final and decisive prayer (John, Ch 17). It was as it were Jesus' "last will and testament" bequeathed to his disciples. There should be no hesitation, then, about the urgency and necessity of ecumenical dialogue. In fact, all throughout history and still today in the various regional circumstances and among church figures, it has been and is possible for multiple pastoral orientations to exist, all completely legitimate but attributed to a given time and place. It is not the same for ecumenical efforts, though: for this flows from the expressly stated will of our Lord Jesus Christ, at the very hour of the cross. There are two reasons for this. The first, specifically theological and strongly affirmed by Jesus – is linked to the very mystery of God, whose unity occurs through the communion of Father and Son in the Spirit. The second reason, more strictly pastoral but equally supported by Jesus, resides in the fact that the Gospel can only be proclaimed with credibility if the missionaries and witnesses of the Word are themselves as closely united as the Father and the Son.

I shall not reread the whole priestly prayer of Jesus in Chapter 17, but I invite you, Sisters, to reread it every time you might feel tempted to doubt, perhaps not to a very large degree, but at least to ignore the urgency of using every means possible to hasten the achievement of Unity among our separated Christian brothers and sisters, in the name of the same perfect Unity of the Father and the Son, and at the service of the Mission: *"That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me!"* (John 17: 21) Of course, the reference to the mystery of the Trinitarian God forbids any confusion between unity and uniformity: the Father, the Son and the Spirit are all the more distinct because they are absolutely only One. Such is the mystery of God, to which all the Christian Churches are called to conform, although the major Churches believe they are authorised to impose their point of view, while the smaller Churches imagine they have the right to cultivate their individuality. Such a Trinitarian faith is the reason behind the ecumenical movement; the missionary priority is its primary objective. It was Jesus who took the initiative to link Trinitarian faith and missionary activity in this way. These two dimensions of Christian identity are precious to us, and with all our hearts, we should strive to live out in an integrated way our faith in God, Father-Son-Spirit, and the service of the Mission to all people. Moreover, Jesus gave us the key to connecting these two dimensions: it is precisely the Unity of Christians, certainly a unity wounded by history, but a unity in the process of being rebuilt, according to the perspective of the ecumenical movement.

5. Like all theological realities, that is, those that refer to the very mystery of God, the Unity of Christians cannot be content with human models, borrowed from the experience of earthly societies. In other words, it is often said that the Church is not called to be a monarchy, nor a democracy, nor to have any other socio-political identity, even though it can learn from the experiences acquired from human societies. Speaking only for the Catholic Church, a bit more democracy could at times be useful and could perhaps help us to practise more effectively the principle of collegiality, rightly re-affirmed by Vatican II. The same applies to ecumenical dialogue. The goal

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is not to reach compromises, or to agree on the least common denominator, with the painful sense of impoverishing each denominational tradition. No one is interested in this caricature of ecumenism today. It would be to deny a part of our experience that is strictly spiritual, acquired by each Church in the course of its history and often confirmed by a profound gospel intuition. No, ecumenical dialogue is not a form of bargaining, where results are merely a set of mutual concessions, experienced with a sense of frustration and even blame with regard to the treasures of one's Tradition being abandoned in this way.

Instead of this culture of compromise which is at the same time unfortunate and necessary, ecumenical dialogue is rather a reciprocal call to conversion. It involves a common effort to re-centre ourselves on the heart of faith, that is, on the person of Christ and the mystery of God revealed in Christ. Certainly, each Church agrees to listen to the other Churches, and to receive as relevant the questions asked of it regarding theological expressions, liturgical forms, community models, and other ethical commitments that are customary in each Church owing to its unique Tradition. Challenged in this way by the others, each Church is invited to verify in what ways its own Tradition is faithful to the Gospel and in what ways it has become distant from it. This is not for the purpose of abandoning its particular richness but in order to regulate its forms of expression, in the name of what is essential, in keeping with the perspective known as the "hierarchy of truths". Let us take the image of a circle in which each Church is found at a point along the circumference. It can be said first of all that ecumenical dialogue should not take place outside the circle, in a superficial manner, as if it were a matter of compromise reached through harsh negotiations. Rather, it is in moving along the lines which lead to the centre – which is Christ – that each Church comes closer to its neighbour. In effect, the more closely the lines approach the centre, the more the distance between them is reduced. This is ecumenism: proceeding together towards Christ, accepting to be called into question by one another, and in this way to discover that we are mysteriously drawing closer to one another...

Of course, such a process does not happen by itself, without a real process of conversion that is both personal and collective. This in fact takes place through a work method, such as the one currently practised in a significant number of groups, beginning with the Group of Dombes. This research carried out together, on the subject of some point of serious division, does well to respect the following stages:

a) A re-examination of the common history, with particular attention to the moments of crisis and rupture, in order to better evaluate the cause and the nature of the divisions that still exist today.

b) Extensive study of controversial questions, first in the light of Scripture reread from a common perspective, followed by a look at the theological traditions that are both common and different.

c) Concerted research into possible avenues for growing closer together, in a way that differences no longer are held as agents of separation but can be experienced in communion, owing to a completely legitimate diversity. This is the point of reaching what is termed "differentiated consensus". In other words, it is the act of verifying whether the different expressions of faith are, in certain domains, perfectly compatible with the very unity of faith. By way of example, this was the conclusion reached by the famous declaration of 1999 between Catholics and Lutherans, on the

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subject of justification, which until that time had been considered the principal stumbling block between Catholic theology and the positions taken by the Protestant Reformation. The advantage of such a method is that no one has the feeling of having lost his or her soul: all involved have the assurance that not only have they remained faithful to themselves, but also that they have grown in fidelity, by the fact of having better centred their fidelity on Christ himself. There is also a clear certainty that they have progressed in unity with their Christian brothers and sisters of other traditions.

Communion within the Church, ecumenical movement, inter-religious dialogue: these three areas are inseparable even if it is useful to consider them separately so as not to neglect any one of them. It is always less a question of doing things and more one of placing ourselves in a disposition of welcoming what others say, particularly in the area of ecumenism. It is clear, as Father Couturier said, that Unity will come when God wants and in the way God wants, so we should not plan the ecumenical movement as if it were some purely human reality. Rather, it means not missing any opportunity that arises, whether simply on a symbolic level or even one that occurs by way of disciplined dialogue, daring to take initiatives of mature decision making. In ecumenical matters more than elsewhere, there is reason to fear that lost opportunities will not be recovered, at least not immediately; although in the end it is always God and God alone who guides the movement towards Unity. This is certainly why it is appropriate to recall, in the same line of thought as Father Couturier, what Cardinal Kasper recently confirmed as the urgency and priority of a "spiritual ecumenism". This involves being able to act and put forward daring and prophetic propositions, but above all to have an honest desire to live in a state of ongoing conversion toward Unity, with all that this supposes in terms of dying to our own desire for power, not just personally but also at Church levels and in different denominations, which we must admit is still difficult! It is nothing less than a change of perspective about ourselves and our Christian brothers and sisters, our own Church and others' beliefs. It even involves finding new ways of recognising the will of God and putting it into practice so that we will live according to it.

We can see what spiritual demands such an approach places on us. It also seems appropriate to support and stimulate plans for consecrated life in the service of the Mission. This is why, Sisters, I take the opportunity to confide to your prayers and to your apostolic commitment the great work of Christian Unity. Forgive me if I have put too much emphasis on the French or European situation. I wonder, though, if this European reference is inevitable in this domain, for in fact, it was principally the Mediterranean world and then Europe that caused all the divisions in the Church, first in the ancient Orient, then the separation between Greeks and Latins, and finally the many divisions that arose in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century at the time of the Reformation. It was also Europe that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, created the ecumenical movement, as a rather delayed response to the religious divisions and destruction that came about in the course of its history. It was Europe once again that spread Christianity throughout the world through a considerable missionary effort that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, though, this expansion also spread the divisions existing in Christianity so that these divisions are now the lot of all Christians in all continents. With this has come, more recently, a multiplication of Christian denominations, owing to the genius of diverse cultures. Certainly, the proliferation of new Churches, termed evangelical or pentecostal, poses a new challenge for ecumenism: often an exclusive attachment

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to a leader, exacerbated ethnic claims, an absence of theological reflection, an emphasis on emotion, and even recourse to methods of evangelisation that show little respect for other persons (which can be called, in a negative way, proselytism). These aspects make objective dialogue and friendly gatherings difficult and often impossible. However, we must not be discouraged. The history of the ecumenical movement witnesses to unexpected conversions and changes that were unthought-of from the human perspective. Certainly the day will come when the new Churches' energy can be a call to us, not to replicate what is questionable in them, but to convert from within our ecclesial practices, which doubtless are still too juridical and too little attentive to the spontaneous expression of persons and other cultures. In any case, in ecumenism as in the Mission in general, we do not choose our partners: we receive them as gifts from God and as a challenge to live the gospel more faithfully. This is the first task of ecumenical dialogue.

Today, more than ever, ecumenism has become a global matter: between “prophecy” (daring to act and to take further steps in ordinary situations) and “hope” (remaining firm in the expectation of Unity as a gift of God and converting our Church life in line with this promise). The ecumenical movement is to be lived “now”, (that is in the midst of today's realities, which are not those of the easy years of ecumenism, for example, for us Catholics in the time immediately after Vatican II), and “everywhere” (not just in Europe, but even more urgently in the new Churches and in the former mission countries, especially where Christianity is very much in the minority). And so may I dare say, in conclusion, that the ecumenical movement is also, in a certain manner, an image of your General Assembly, so diverse, yet so united!

Father Yves-Marie BLANCHARD  
Professor at the faculty of Theology and Religious Sciences  
and member of the Dombes Group

FATHER GREGORY GAY, SUPERIOR GENERAL

Homily of 4<sup>th</sup> June 2009

**The Light of Pentecost**

At today's Eucharist we focus on the enlightenment granted to St. Louise at Pentecost, 1623, which brought to an end a great deal of turmoil, struggle and suffering for Saint Louise, and led her to have a deeper conviction of her love for God as well as love for her neighbour. She says that “it was during Holy Mass [that] my mind was cleared of the doubts... a time would come when I should be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and that this would be done with persons where other women did the same. I then understood myself to be in a place for the relief and assistance of my neighbour.”

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This crisis that Louise experienced and something often found in the lives of those who strive to give themselves completely to God and to the neighbour, expresses what is at the heart of the great commandment that the Lord Jesus has given and which we hear proclaimed in today's gospel.

After a long period of spiritual darkness during which Saint Louise imagined that she no longer believed, she begged God (at this time between the Ascension and Pentecost) to draw her out from this pit of despair. As she makes clear this was done by grace through the intercession of the Blessed Bishop of Geneva, Vincent de Paul's close friend, Francis de Sales.

As daughters of Saint Louise, and as followers of Jesus Christ, you are called to give yourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord: that is with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself. This is the covenant that you make with God; this is the covenant with one another; this is the covenant you make with other members of the Vincentian Family. Above all this is the covenant you make with those who live in poverty.

As the gospel says, there is no other commandment greater than this. As we look closely at this commandment that comes from the Lord Jesus, we see that it is built on relationship. I would like to take that one step further and say that this relationship involves partnership with God, with one another in community, with the Vincentian Family and with the poor.

The first reading, from the Book of Tobit, is set within the context of a marriage; and if we look at marriage in a symbolic way as a partnership, what is highlighted in the Word of God here can certainly be applied in a concrete way to the Daughters of Charity who are called to live out the great commandment of love. The author of the Book of Tobit speaks of a marriage "made in heaven."

Let me explain that this first reading begins with a welcoming, "Greetings to you brothers! Good health to you, and welcome!" Afterwards a meal was shared and the guests were given a cordial reception. In your living of the great commandment of love of God, and of neighbour, you are called to do so in a concrete, down-to-earth way. You are called to be hospitable, welcoming, not only to God, but to others in whom you can see the face of God as you share deeply with them his love.

Within the context of this 350<sup>th</sup> year since the death of our founders, the members of the Vincentian Family, are focusing on the very special relationship that existed between Vincent and Louise, a relationship that I call a partnership, but a partnership that goes beyond simply being partners in a working relationship. Vincent and Louise were two companions sharing the graces that God had given them, the love that they experienced in and through God, sharing that deeply one with another in their efforts to serve the poor at that time. Without hesitation, we can speak about a healthy relationship of God's love incarnated in the love they had one for another and with the other collaborators who joined them in this great mission of serving the poor in a very difficult time in the history of France.

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Later on in the first reading, what helps Tobias overcome the fate that others had suffered was his recognition of the need to put God first in his life and in the life of his wife. He said to his wife, “*My love, get up, let us pray and beg our Lord to have mercy on us.*” (Tob 8,4). It’s this same priority given to God that helped Vincent and Louise to have such a tremendous impact on the lives of so many people of their day. There is a challenge here for the Daughters of Charity, the challenge to incarnate this greatest commandment of the Lord Jesus, of loving God with your whole being and your neighbour as yourself, the need to incarnate that in your relationships with those with whom you share ministry: Sisters within the community, other members of the Vincentian Family as well as that relationship you have with those whom you are called to serve.

God calls all people to partnership, not just in the context of marriage, but partnership in living out the gift of love that he has shared first; a partnership that makes the difference between community life that is lived as the constitutions call you to do, and a community life that is simply superficial; a partnership with the Vincentian Family that is more than just paying lip-service to many years of encouragement from the Vincentian leaders to work towards true collaboration; a partnership that builds unity and helps to establish solidarity with those most in need; a partnership that is made with those whom we help to take most responsibility for their own lives, the poor. That partnership or covenant relationship begins with God and ends with God.

Let us ask God, who gives himself to us in this Eucharist, to strengthen the bonds we have with one with another and that the grace of the Holy Spirit that enlightened Saint Louise in that very significant moment in her life may enlighten us, too, so that others can say of us what Jesus said to the scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God”.

Father Gregory GAY  
*Superior General*

#### SHORT MEDITATION FOR 15<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST

When she realises that God is doing such great things in her,  
the Blessed Virgin who is so poor, humble and of such little account,  
learns from the Holy Spirit a precious pearl of wisdom:  
she learns that God is a Lord whose one concern is  
is to lift up the humiliated  
to bring down those on high,  
to shatter those who take up arms  
and to heal the broken.  
God is the only one to look down into  
the depths of distress and wretchedness;  
He stays alongside those who live in squalor.  
Do you not find Mary’s heart something wonderful?  
She knows that she is the Mother of God,



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lifted high above all men,  
and yet she remains so humble and calm  
that everything that has happened to her does not lead her to think  
that even the least of servants is inferior to her.  
Mary's heart allows God to accomplish his work.  
Let us do the same.  
This will be to sing a true Magnificat.  
Any praise of Mary is reflected back to God: "God is magnified!"

Martin Luther

PROPHECY  
AND  
HOPE  
  
NOW  
AND  
EVERYWHERE

*General Assembly 2009*