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

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3. Saint Vincent and the dignity of the person

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

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

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

For Saint Vincent that gospel passage, together with the mystery of the Incarnation, became the foundation for his following of Jesus Christ. Even though Vincent's thoughts are in our hearts and minds, let us reread some of the many texts in which he reminded the Daughters of Charity about their calling: *Servants of the Poor is the same as saying Servants of Jesus Christ, since He regards what is done to them as done to Himself, for they are His members*

(CCD:IX:256). *In serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ. How true, Sisters! You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here* (CCD:IX:199).

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

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

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

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

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

Christianity has always defended the oneness of the human person while Greek philosophy viewed the human person as composed of body and soul. Using the words of Father Ibáñez, this dichotomy between body and soul led to living a schizophrenic Christian life which separated the interior life from the struggle for justice and a social-political commitment on behalf of those persons who are poor. Following the thought of Father Ibáñez we read: *Vincent*

de Paul's faith and experience led him to discover that while Christianity continues to be nourished by spiritualistic attitudes, the struggle for justice and the defense of the poor moves along paths that are quite distinct from the paths of the Church of Jesus Christ (J.M. Ibáñez, La fe verificada en el amor, Ed. Paulinas, 1993, p. 65).

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

Three centuries later and with different words the *Compendium* speaks about integral salvation, salvation of the whole person, something that for us, the sons and daughters of Vincent de Paul, should not be new.

AIC's suggestion for reflection

1. What is the fundamental principle of the Social Doctrine of the Church and what is it based on?
2. Which chapter of the Gospel of Matthew cites the Social Doctrine of the Church on numerous occasions and what does it refer to concretely?
3. How do we awaken in our beneficiaries the awareness of their own dignity?