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

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6. Saint Vincent and solidarity

The word solidarity is one of those words that is frequently used but it is not always used with its true significance. It comes from the Latin word *solidus* which means solid or strong ... it is said that a person is in solidarity with another when he/she shows support or agreement with that person's cause, especially when this support is given during difficult times. We also recall the fact that in civil law when a group of debtors commits themselves to one another in solidarity, it means that each one of them has accepted responsibility for the whole debt.

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). This scriptural text, simple and yet profound, is the **theological** and **Christian** foundation of **solidarity**. The Christian God is not a god of isolation, but a God who is in **communion with life and love**, the God of the community of the Father with the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Christian theology used this word for the first time when it referred to the equality among the members of the human family, an equality derived from the fact that all are children of God. In theology, the concept of solidarity **cannot be separated from the concept of communion**. If, as a result of our relationship with the Divine, we share the same dignity, then this communion compels us to seek that which is good for all people.

Solidarity has always been a demand that is placed on our life together as members of the human family. In a strict sense we are talking about a **relationship of justice** because to live in society everyone needs everyone else ... this is so because we are all human persons, with equal dignity and the same rights. We say that this is a **relationship of justice because the goods of the earth are destined for the common good, for the use of each and every person**.

We have dealt with this matter on several occasions but let us pause to reflect on the following words that appear in the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et spes*: **"We must never lose sight of the universal destination of earthly goods. In his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately**

owns not merely as exclusive to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself. Therefore every man has the right to possess a sufficient amount of the earth's goods for himself and his family ... when a person is in extreme necessity he has the right to supply himself with what he needs out of the riches of others" (*Gaudium et spes*, #69).

I hope that no one is going to view this text as subversive. What is embarrassing and scandalous, however, is the fact that a small segment of the population controls 50% of the wealth in the first world, that is, in Europe and North America. **The countries with the highest levels of per capita income are Christian countries.** Another fact: in those countries with the highest per capita income we find the greatest social inequality. I am not going to continue with these facts because after having spent more than six years in Rwanda, these facts have faces and names and I am unable to speak in terms of statistical data.

If we study the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* of Pope John Paul II, we discover the profound meaning that the Pope gives to the word *solidarity*. We also encounter the extraordinary analysis that he makes of the reality and the responsibilities that he accepted as the visible head of our Church.

We do not find in any of Vincent's writing the word *solidarity* ... this word was not used until the nineteenth century. In Vincent's writing we do find, however, expressions of compassion toward those sisters and brothers who suffer. Perhaps the best example is the text that is well known by all Vincentians: "**the poor are my worry and my sorrow**" (Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993, p.117). I believe that one could not ask for a greater expression of solidarity, especially knowing (as we all know) the manner in which our Founder gave life to those words.

As in so many other situations, we could continue to cite different references to Vincent's writings. I hope that from heaven it does not appear to be presumptuous to attempt to sum up with one reference (not a long reference) what appears to me to be that which is most essential to Vincent's doctrine and that which so many members of the Vincentian Family, united today with Vincent in heaven, attempt to live. Let us listen attentively: "*God loves the poor, consequently, He loves those who love the poor ... let us devote ourselves with renewed love to **serve persons who are poor, and even to seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned**; let us acknowledge before God that they are **our lords and masters** and that we are unworthy of rendering them our little services*" (CCD:XI:349).

As I was preparing this presentation I remembered a gathering of young religious. After viewing the film, *The Mission*, a Jesuit novice exclaimed: *we cannot be pigmy children of giant parents.*

The theme of solidarity is present in our Constitutions and this began with the provisional Constitutions of 1975 and has continued to the present Constitutions. When speaking about the poor whom we are called to serve, it is stated: "*The Daughters of Charity see those who suffer, those stripped of human rights and dignity, and those in poor health as children of God and **brothers and sisters with whom they are in solidarity***" (Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, #16c).

We are referred to *Populorum Progressio* which speaks about the aspirations of humankind: "*Today we see people trying to secure a sure food supply, cures for diseases, and steady employment. We see them trying to eliminate every ill, to remove every obstacle which offends man's dignity. They are*

continually striving to exercise greater personal responsibility ... and yet, at the same time, a large number of them live amid conditions which frustrate these legitimate desires” (Populorum Progressio, #6).

Let us reflect for a few moments on the great encyclical on solidarity: *This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, “it is a **firm and persevering determination** to commit oneself to the **common good**; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for **all**” (Sollicitudo rei socialis #38).*

Today the ethic of solidarity is being replaced by a false view of **solidarity as a spectacle** and the media is converting this into another article of consumption. Social conflicts do not exist, only the occasional disagreement. Social, political and economic problems are covered up and we find missing any analysis of the reality. Therefore there is no possibility of **becoming aware of injustice** and no possibility of **mobilization against injustice**.

We are not accustomed to **solidarity as a campaign** or an immediate response to a situation of great urgency without asking ourselves about structural causes. If an earthquake causes death and suffering in Mexico, it is unfortunate that the poor suffer the consequences. Yet at no time is the questions asked: why does a seismic event of the same intensity produce different effects in Mexico and Los Angeles. Humanitarian aid is provided when these emergencies arise and each day we are better prepared for such emergencies. But we are very limited in our attempt to mitigate the consequences of these catastrophes and no one seems to **question their causes**.

We said that in Saint Vincent’s time the word *solidarity* was not used. Vincent spoke about the **common good** and through his life he gave witness to the meaning of **solidarity as an encounter**:

- the experience of finding oneself in the midst of the world of suffering and injustice and not remaining indifferent, and
- having the ability to **think and live differently**.

To live **solidarity as an encounter** led Vincent to know and love the poor, to participate in their lives and to establish a relationship of **true communion** with them. This led to the establishment of the Confraternities, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity and as a result of these initial foundations, other religious Congregations and lay Associations that follow his spirit were born.

To live solidarity as an **encounter** obliges us to place ourselves in a position where we are able to **model the society that we desire and thus we commit ourselves** to live our lives in accord with this desire. This supposes a change in values and adapting these values to a lifestyle that imitates Vincent as he attempted to follow Jesus Christ. With our life we ought to be able to say:

- that it is possible to **replace having with being** as the basic value of our society;
- that **we need much less in order to satisfy our basic human needs**;
- that the **quality of our relationships** provides a level of happiness that is much greater than that which is derived from possessing material goods.

The document, *Religious and Human Promotion*, that was published in 1978 by what was then called the Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes states clearly: *“The witness of religious for*

justice in the world, however, implies, for themselves in particular, a constant review of their life-options, their use of goods and their manner of relating, because the one who dares to speak to others about justice must above all be just in the eyes of others” (Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, *Religious and Human Promotion*, April, 1978, #3e).

The same idea is expressed in a more synthesized manner in *Vita consecrate*: **“To bear witness to Christ by one’s life, works and words is the particular mission of the consecrate life in the Church and in the world”** (*Vita consecrata*, #109)

To live in this way, with the integrity that we have just spoken about, and to commit ourselves to defending those persons who are poor leads to a tension between our **proclamation** and our **denunciation**. Our denunciation ought to be addressed not only to the transgressions of ethical values by those in public positions of authority but should also lead us to a critical examination of our own actions, especially when we limit ourselves to deal only with the more painful aspect of exclusion, namely, physical survival.

As in so many areas, Saint Vincent points out the path and shows us how to **make the poor authentic protagonists of their own promotion**.

AIC’s suggestions for reflection:

1. Define what the term “solidarity” means to you.
2. What catches your attention the most in the paragraph from the Dogmatic Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (on the first page) and what could seem subversive?
3. What was solidarity for St Vincent?
4. Share how you live in solidarity with beneficiaries in your group.