



Rome, 5 March 2025  
Ash Wednesday

To the members of the Vincentian Family

### Lenten Letter

**“When we feel totally abandoned, our garden starts to produce  
the most beautiful flowers ever imagined!”**

**A L I V E**

Dear members of the Vincentian Family,

May the grace and peace of Jesus be always with us!

*Alive* is the title of a 1993 film based on the true story of a Uruguayan rugby team which, accompanied by relatives and friends, was flying to Chile for a match. The plane crashed in the Andes mountains on Friday, 13 October 1972.

Flying over the Andes, upon emerging from clouds, the plane encountered turbulence and collided with a mountain. The wings and tail separated from the fuselage, which slid down a mountain slope before coming to a stop. Six passengers and one flight attendant were ejected from the plane and died. Another six people soon died, including both pilots. The survivors went inside the fuselage and curled up beside one another to stay warm. Two passengers died overnight. With nothing to hunt or gather on the mountain, one of the survivors declared they would use rationing when they found a tin of chocolates and a case of wine.

Later in the week, an avalanche struck the plane and filled much of the interior with snow. Eight of the survivors were smothered to death by the snow. The remaining 22 survivors were forced to stay inside the plane when they realized there was a blizzard outside. Over the following weeks, another six passengers would die.

One of the survivors, who had been flying with his mother and sister, regained consciousness. After learning of his mother's death, he watched over his sister vigilantly. About two months after the crash, knowing she would die from her injuries within a few days, he vowed to set off on foot and find a way out of the mountains. Another passenger went with him.

After a 12-day trek in sub-zero temperatures with inadequate clothing and shoes, the two alerted the authorities to their companions' location. Two helicopters, one of which had the two survivors on board, appeared overhead, leading the remaining 14 survivors to celebrate their impending rescue. Of the 45 people on the flight, only 16 survived, after 72 days in piercing cold that reached -40°C.

Seeing the movie, *Alive*, and recently returning to the notes I kept after viewing it several times almost 30 years ago, I came to realize what the title of this year's Lenten Letter expresses: "When we feel totally abandoned, our garden starts to grow the most beautiful flowers ever imagined!"

Despite the total abandonment the survivors felt after the crash and throughout the days that passed without a sign of hope, Somebody was always there slowly helping them to understand and see the reality they were experiencing in a different light, as survivors expressed in interviews. "Now, there's the God they taught me about in school, and there is the God that's hidden by what surrounds us in this civilization. That's the God that I met on the mountain." "It was two and a half months of a long spiritual retreat." "From moments of despair, vulgar words and thoughts, flashes of life's meaninglessness, disappointments, Jesus led us gradually to the path of light, to the encounter with the living God." "Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with you ... How many times, freezing in subzero temperatures, we prayed together—young boys, sportsmen, full of life and dreams—beginning to deepen our faith, and building it on God." "Jesus spoke to us. How often we felt Him in the rising and setting of the sun, through clear nights, when the full moon was spreading its light in front of our eyes, his mysterious presence through the majesty of the mountains, the continuous reality of ice and snow all around us, snowstorms and avalanches. Jesus was speaking to us, and we started to understand what He wanted to communicate." "We started to understand Jesus, in spite of the continuous deaths of relatives and friends in front of our eyes, we arrived at the moment we called a mystical experience!" They went from a feeling of total abandonment to the garden within them that started to grow the most beautiful flowers ever imagined.

Like the survivors of that airplane crash in the Andes, Saint Vincent de Paul, the Mystic of Charity, after a personal experience with Jesus, began to grow in his own garden five beautiful flowers that led to a "mystical experience." These flowers are called: simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal for the salvation of souls.

Vincent referred to these five beautiful flowers in our garden as "five smooth stones" (*Common Rules* XII, 12), after the stones with which David defeated Goliath. David represents

good, all that comes from God, and Goliath represents evil, our temptations, self-centeredness, all that tries to fight against Jesus and ignore Him. The five beautiful flowers, the five smooth stones of David, the five virtues become a part of the foundation of Vincent’s pilgrimage of faith, what we today call Vincentian spirituality.

The survivors were led through a 72-day spiritual retreat by Jesus Himself and, from feeling totally abandoned, began to acquire the five virtues by placing themselves in the hands of Jesus and opening up to the “mystical experience.”

When the only food they had available on the airplane—some chocolate and wine—ran out, the survivors were faced with a great dilemma, one never before considered or confronted: Should they start eating the flesh of the dead in order to stay alive and get back some strength for their totally exhausted and weak bodies? After much debate, physical revulsion, doubt, the five flowers of each one’s garden started to blossom.

The flower of simplicity, which allows us to be and present ourselves in front of others as Jesus dreams of us to be, without shame or feeling useless. “Ah, simplicity, which has no other view than God’s view, which refuses any other motive than God and what is apparent!” (CCD XII, 252).

The flower of humility, by which we recognize and accept with joy that we, as human beings, are not almighty, all-knowing or able to achieve everything we want, but there is Jesus who has the last word, and He knows best. “... humility, which consists in emptying ourselves completely before God, overcoming ourselves in order to place God in our heart, not seeking the esteem and good opinion of others, and struggling constantly against any impulse of vanity” (CCD XII, 247).

The flower of gentleness, which blossoms when we realize that all behavior opposed to gentleness cannot lead to anything good, but brings so much discord, hurt, and pain. “Gentleness not only helps us to excuse the affronts and injustices we receive, but it would even have us treat gently and with pleasant words those who do these things to us...” (CCD XII, 159).

The flower of mortification, by which we give up things and persons to which we are attached in an unhealthy way, and offer our own trying moments, pain, and struggles to help others in much more difficult situations. “We are, indeed, more sensitive to pain than to pleasure, to the prick of a rose than to its fragrance. The way to balance out this disparity is to be as willing to embrace what mortifies nature as to deprive ourselves of what pleases it and to incline our hearts to suffering by considering the good it brings with it. We should also be ready to accept it so that, when it comes, we will not be surprised or saddened by it” (CCD IV, 55).

The flower of zeal for the salvation of souls, so that every human being in the world might one day reach heaven. “The fifth teaching is zeal, consisting in a pure desire to become pleasing to God and helpful to our neighbor: zeal to spread the kingdom of God and zeal to

procure the salvation of our neighbor. Is there anything in the world more perfect? If love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is unconditional in the love of God” (CCD XII, 250).

The 16 gardens of the 16 survivors, each one with the five most beautiful flowers ever imagined, gave way to the moment when they did not just accept eating the flesh of the dead passengers to remain alive. The acceptance went much deeper, touching the core of their faith, and imitating Jesus: as Jesus gave his body and blood for us to remain alive and live, so we need to give our flesh and blood to others to remain alive and live. “As for reasons to make us see the reality of the Body and Blood of Our Lord in this Sacrament, we have only to consider what’s noted in Saint John, ‘This is my body: this is my blood; the bread I am giving you is my body: the wine I am giving you is my blood.’ No one doubts the truth of this except heretics, who want to make it understood in another sense. Our Lord himself assures us of this, even by oath, for He says that anyone who’s unwilling to eat His Flesh and drink His Blood will not have eternal life” (CCD XI, 176).

They came to a common agreement not just to eat the flesh of those who had already died, but together offered their own bodies to be used as food if they were to die, so others might remain alive and live. It came to be a “mystical communion, a mystical experience!”

As we enter the Lenten Season, I would like to suggest, if possible, that you see the movie, *Alive*, which is available online for those who have access to the internet, or read the book written about this experience, to help us pray, reflect, and meditate in our preparation for Easter.

A group of the survivors later returned to the site of the crash and buried what was left of the corpses under a pile of stones, marked by a cross in memory of the 29 deceased and 16 survivors: One Body in Jesus Christ! Amen.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Tomaž Mavrič, CM  
Superior General