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Ash Wednesday 9 March 2011

To all the Members of the Vincentian Family

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

As I write this Lenten Letter for 2011 I am very conscious of the fruits of the Jubilee Year that we celebrated, the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deaths of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. Hopefully it was a year that we were able to deepen our relationship with God, with one another as a Vincentian Family, and particularly with our lords and masters the poor.

As we know, Lent is a time of intense scrutiny of our own relationships, ever conscious of our own limitations and faults. Above all it is a time for us to reach out for healing, including to God, in order that our hearts might be filled once again to overflowing with His compassion.

Recently I participated in a special workshop that the Community of Sant'Egidio holds for Bishops and friends of Sant'Egidio. The founder of this wonderful lay movement, Andrea Riccardi, opened the gathering with a talk directed to all of its participants but particularly to the Bishops as pastors of the Church. He used Pope John Paul II as a model for Bishops. The main point of his sharing was the example that John Paul gave with regard to being a man of encounters, particularly his encounter with God and his encounter with the poor. It is interesting that the Bishops present, in the comments made, were edified by this simple but profound reflection. I myself was edified, but reflected on the fact that in essence it was nothing that we did not already know. It is something that Jesus Christ himself has taught us; and as His followers we are called to imitate Him in this unique relationship with the Father as well as imitate His reaching out in meeting the marginalized of society.

Certainly our own founder Saint Vincent de Paul, calls us to this encounter with God saying “Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of all things”<sup>1</sup>. He calls us into that deep relationship with the Father that Jesus Himself had. Saint Vincent also shares with us “that true religion we find among the poor”<sup>2</sup>; in other words, that deep encounter with God is also experienced in our encounter with the poor. And as Saint Vincent clearly tells us, among them we find our salvation. I ask that we, as members of the Vincentian Family, examine this two-fold relationship with God and with the poor in this Lenten season.

Recently I heard a song that is common among young people today which reflects on the need to bow our heads in prayer, especially as we look around and see the world of those who suffer today. A title of yet another song is “Born This Way,” the latest single of Lady Gaga, which is an anthem for the marginalized. One of the verses reads, “Whether life’s disabilities left you outcast, bullied or teased, rejoice and love yourself today, because baby you were born this way.” I am particularly touched to see how many young people focus their attention, rather than on themselves, on the needs of those who are poor as we too look closely at our world and all the different situations of suffering.

Let us focus especially on our relationship with the poor. I would like to speak about a number of situations that I have observed in my visits as Superior General to the different places where the Vincentian Family is serving and evangelizing. It struck me, and I have said this on a number of other occasions, that in every society there is a particular group singled out as what we call “scapegoats.” They are the ones most looked down upon; they are the outcasts from their own society. I find this experience to be true in every continent. In my most recent visit to Ethiopia, our Bishop confrere Markos spoke to me of a group of people that the confreres and Daughters of Charity minister to who are considered outcasts in the society of Ethiopia, who have a long-standing history of being looked down upon and discriminated against not only by those with whom they live day in and day out, but often by the authorities of the society. I had this same experience in Vietnam, in India, in the Congo, and even in first-world countries, as here in Italy. Just recently the whole Italian society’s eyes were opened to the horrible plight of the gypsies that abound in the city of Rome and live in situations that are inhuman. Four children were burned to death because of the poor conditions in which they are forced to live.

During a memorial service that was held for these four children, Cardinal Vicario Agostina Vallini spoke strongly in favor of the poor and our need to open our eyes to their reality, especially the reality of the immigrant poor. He challenged all

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<sup>1</sup> Coste XI doc. 67

<sup>2</sup> Coste XII p.171

present to examine their consciences, both individually and as a Christian community. Many times immigrant peoples obviously do not want to leave their homeland; but they do so as fugitives from war, from the violence that they experience, from hunger, searching desperately to live in peace and with dignity. There is no doubt that the presence of immigrants in any society creates new problems that oftentimes are complex and we can't look at in a simplified manner. But as the Cardinal said, we are Christians and we cannot not love and get involved in the lives of those who live in poverty, who are considered among the least of our brothers who are marginalized from our society.

The Cardinal spoke of them as the real presence of Jesus Christ. When hearing that, how clearly I could see Saint Vincent saying the same thing to us as members of the Vincentian Family, seeing Christ in the poor, especially among the most abandoned poor. Today my brothers and sisters, we are challenged to see and respond to these poor: the homeless, street children, prisoners, immigrants; those suffering from gender inequality, discrimination against women, the trafficking of women and children both for sex and for work purposes and children soldiers, which is a theme that at another time I would like to develop at greater length. For me it is incredible that our society uses young children to carry weapons, to continue the battles of people who seek only their own political interests and desires. What are we doing to defend the lives of these innocent children? It is horrible to see them carrying weapons that weigh as much as they may weigh and that can take the lives of others as innocent as they are. The Cardinal also said in his homily that before all types of poverty, whether they be old forms of poverty or new forms of poverty that we find that surrounds us in our cities, we should bend our knees and ask God for pardon, pardon of God and pardon of them for what we have not been able to do for them.

Many times in seeing the situation of marginalized people, the outcasts, which I have written about in previous letters, there is a joy that I feel in my heart to see that the Vincentian Family is in one way or another serving their needs and reaching out to them with the love God has placed in their hearts for the poor. In this Lenten season, we need to raise the question: Are we doing all that we can for those who are cast out from our societies?

In the Final Document of the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission we state that "Seeing what the Lord has done and is doing through us, we, in the manner of Saint Vincent, would like to do and be more for the poor." Would that this be a challenge for all of us of the Vincentian Family in this Lenten season – to do more and be more for the poor and with the poor.

I also ask us to focus on the poor in situations of desperation as victims in the midst of violence and mob destruction as we have witnessed in places throughout

northern Africa recently: in Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Egypt among some of the more significant situations. It is the poor who have cried out to have their needs heard. In the midst of the deafness of those responsible for caring for the common good, the suffering and the frustration, as well as the anger can no longer be contained and in “this bursting forth” God speaks. How do we, how can we, respond?

Another locus of where the poor are often found is in the conflicts that arise among religions, particularly when the expression of the religions is in its lowest fundamentalist form. I think of the many so-called “religious” wars and how often in God’s name violence and destruction have been brought about. Oftentimes it has been because of the inability of the human beings involved in these conflicts to sit down and dialog in an open way looking for peaceful solutions rather than resorting to conflict and violence and war.

In that encounter offered by Sant’Egidio, I had the opportunity to listen to a Muslim leader who spoke to us about the importance of living not just in a culture of tolerance of one of another, but the need to move beyond that to the development of a culture of acceptance, respecting one another for who we are, for the faith that we express, trying to understand clearly our own faith and the faith of others. It is something that is needed to be done on both sides of conflict situations.

It is all about building good trusting relationships that can come about in and through dialog. As followers of Jesus Christ in this time of Lent we are called to reflect deeply on attitudes that oftentimes divide us. Ignorance in itself is one of the root causes of fundamentalist attitudes where the search is many times for one’s own particular interests rather than for the common good of all. A ready solution that the Christian world has offered to this ignorance is education. This Muslim speaker said very clearly that where Christians have provided good, human, value-oriented education, the relationships between peoples, both Muslims and Christians, is much better. Education is a key and those of the Vincentian Family who are involved in education should reflect deeply on this ministry that we are providing and in this time of Lent to see if it is an education that is doing its utmost to provide a formation that is integral, a formation that helps people to build values, values that bring people together in relationships of understanding and caring.

Besides ignorance, there is also the challenge of fear that many times paralyzes people, keeping them from moving out of the themselves toward others in good, healthy, harmonious relationships. The gift of Jesus Christ in and through his death and resurrection that is at the heart of what Lent is about, gives us not only a sign, but the grace, the courage to be able to break down all fear. It is God’s love for His own Son that was able to conquer death and to break the paralyzing attitude of fear, enabling His Son to rise to new life in the Resurrection. It is the same gift of the resurrection, the same gift of God’s love that was poured out upon His Son and which

His Son poured out on the entire world, which gives us the courage to move forward and to build relationships.

My brothers and sisters, let me summarize by saying that the Lord speaks loudly to us in the cries of those who are poor. Can we do more? Can we be more? Let us examine our actions of solidarity with those who live in poverty. Let us refresh and be creative in deepening our relationship with those who are poor, walking with them as advocates for what is just and right. Just as we are called to be one with the poor and in solidarity with all humanity as we work toward a world of peace, we are called at the same time to be one with God who is the source of all life and love. Let us ever be mindful that we are called to act with justice for peace and the integrity of all creation, motivated by that which is at the heart of our vocation as Vincentians, the charity of Christ crucified. Let this gift that we have received through our Vincentian vocation, a gift which is a concrete expression of God's love for all of us, be at the heart of what purifies us and reconciles us and makes us anew as we celebrate this Lenten season, culminating in the great gift of new life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Let Alleluia be our song for we are an Easter people.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Gregory Gay, C.M." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.  
Superior General