



CONGREGAZIONE DELLA MISSIONE CURIA GENERALIZIA

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THE SEASON OF ADVENT, 2012 *A Journey to Christ and our Charism*

“The way of evangelization...is to let the truth become charity in me. Like fire, charity ignites my neighbor. Only in igniting one another through the flame of our charity does evangelization really grow. The presence of the Gospel is no longer just words, but a lived reality.” - Pope Benedict XVI, meditation at the opening of the Synod for New Evangelization (8 October 2012)

To All Members of the Vincentian Family

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

May the grace and peace of Jesus fill your hearts now and always!

I recently served as a delegate to the Synod for New Evangelization, which coincided with the start of the “Year of Faith” commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. The presence of the Gospel that our Holy Father noted above is a gift and challenge for all who follow Christ in the way of St. Vincent de Paul. It is a gift given us by Jesus, the Word made flesh. It is our challenge to make it a ‘lived reality’ in serving our lords and masters, God’s poor. The season of Advent offers us an opportunity to ponder the beauty, mystery, and awesome responsibility of our vocation as Christian disciples who follow the Vincentian charism. Our Advent journey has four distinct movements that mirror this liturgical season as well as stages in Christian discipleship.

A Time of Anxiety and Uncertainty

The world of today is wrought with anxiety and uncertainty of all stripes: economic, geopolitical, ethnic, and social, and personal. Wars, skirmishes, and natural disasters in turn, beget poverty, famine, hunger, homelessness, and human miseries impossible to catalogue. As alarming and disconcerting as our world is today, the Advent Sunday Scriptures remind us of similar situations in ages past. *“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars, and nations will be in*

dismay...people will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world.’ (Lk.21:25)
Our Holy Founders, Saints Vincent and Louise, faced catastrophic challenges in their lives: war, famine, disease, disregard for the poor, and ignorance and indifference to the practice of the Catholic faith among clergy and laity. What was their response to these trials and tribulations?

I believe it can be found in the same Lucan Gospel in the First Sunday of Advent: “*When these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads, because your redemption is at hand... Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy. Be vigilant at all times and pray.*” (Lk. 21: 28, 34-36) In coming to know Jesus more fully by meditating on his Word and receiving him in the Eucharist, Vincent and Louise made Christ the center of their hearts and lives. Jesus calmed their anxieties and moved them to undertake a dynamic and prophetic way of living the Gospel.

Their spiritual journey continues as we put into practice the charism of charity they gave us over 350 years ago. Let this Advent be a time we seek the person of Jesus Christ in Word and sacrament, trusting in God who “*will do what is right and just in the land,*” (Jer. 23:5). With Emmanuel, God-with-us as our mainstay, we will “*increase and abound in love for one another and for all...strengthening your hearts to be blameless in holiness before our God.*” (1 Thes. 3:12-14)

A Time of Awareness and Anticipation

Amidst life’s ambiguities, Advent offers growth in awareness and anticipation of the coming of our God among us. Advent is a time of beginnings and endings: a new liturgical year, and the end of the calendar year. But as Christians, we realize that despite this *chronos* time of endings and beginnings Advent shows us the true *kairos* moment: in the Incarnation, God is forever with us. The prophet Baruch reminds us to be a people “*rejoicing that they are remembered by God.*” (Bar. 5:5) No matter what the year has been for us, through Jesus, God calls us to more abundant love.

The prophetic voice of John the Baptizer brought Israel an awareness and anticipation of God’s coming. John proclaimed a “*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... a voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight his paths.’*” (Lk.3:2-3) John, prophet of the Reign of God, told of the coming of the Messiah in a life disciplined by asceticism and full focus on Jesus. Advent helps us turn our gaze to God’s only-begotten Son through the beauty of the scripture, readings, and hymns which awaken us to God’s mercy.

A steady gaze toward Jesus as “God-with-us” is the effect of an Advent asceticism, as it was in the lives of Vincent and Louise. For them, Jesus was their “all”. Vincent urged his followers to “*lead strong interior lives to make Jesus Christ reign in us...let us seek the glory of God; let us*

seek the reign of Jesus Christ.” (Coste, XII, pp. 131-32) Vincent and Louise advanced the reign of God on earth by serving Christ in the poor. Advent prepares us to do the same.

A Call to Conversion to Christ and our Charism

As Advent moves us from anxiety to anticipation, we find openness in our lives and hearts for Jesus to enter. In doing so, we encounter again the mystery of conversion, as Christ gently reveals new ways to live the Gospel truths. The refreshing words of St. Paul acquire new meaning for us: *“Rejoice in the Lord. I say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near.”* (Phil.4:4-5) That nearness gives us a taste of what conversion to Christ means. It calls us to a decision: on whom and what do I set my heart?

The ‘Gaudete’ Sunday Gospel portrays the first fervor of those whose hearts were moved to conversion by John the Baptizer. Luke tells us that although the crowds varied from ordinary folk to tax collectors and soldiers, all had the same question: *“What should we do?”* (Lk.3:10) And John’s response was simple and direct: Share all you have with the needy; do not collect more taxes than required; do not extort or falsely accuse anyone; and be satisfied with your wages. (From Lk. 3:11-15) John’s call to conversion was not a jump in the Jordan and a fleeting feeling of relief. It led to Jesus and a new, dynamic relationship with God and neighbor.

Our Holy Founders had their ‘conversion moments’: Louise’s Pentecost Sunday experience, and Vincent’s Chatillon and Folleville encounters. Both discovered following Christ was not to be found in esoteric spiritual exercises or abstract religious doctrines, but in ministering to others as though they were the Lord Jesus himself. Louise wrote, *“I felt in my prayer a great attraction for the holy humanity of Our Lord, and I desired to honor it insofar as I was able in the person of the poor and all my neighbors.”* (Spiritual Writings of St. Louise, A. 26, p. 809)

The Vincentian charism that now inspires and guides us came from our Founders’ conversion to Christ and their willingness to stake their lives on that belief every day. Advent allows us to rekindle our connection to the charism by living it as *“ambassadors for Christ”* (2 Cor. 5:20). Vincent reminded his first followers: *“In order to start right and to succeed well, remember to act in the spirit of Our Lord, to untie our actions with his, and to give them a totally noble and divine purpose by dedicating them to his greater glory.”* (Coste, Vol. V, pp. 456-457)

A Time for Redemptive Action

Once we allow Advent to renew us in Jesus’ love and mercy, we can give ourselves more fully to the Vincentian charism. In a prior letter to the Vincentian Family, I suggested this theme to enhance collaboration: *“Let us work together to share the Good News and to communicate life to those who are poor.”* (June, 2012) Like our charism, Vincentian spirituality is practical and

applicable. That was the genius of Vincent and Louise: they saw Christ in the poor, and the poor in Christ. We must work together to spread that charism of charity in our modern-day milieu.

However, both Vincentian spirituality and Advent remind us that what we seek for ourselves and those we serve is not merely temporary relief, but redemptive action. The Advent scriptures highlight ordinary people in salvation history called by God to play extraordinary roles: John the Baptizer, Mary, Elizabeth, and Joseph. By her openness to God's will, Our Blessed Mother accepted her role in God's redemptive action as Mother of the Lord, showing us a powerful path to faith and fidelity. No wonder Elizabeth would say to Mary upon her visit, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb...blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.*" (Lk.1:39-45). Mary's witness, as well as all the Advent stories can deepen God's grace in us, as we make their stories of salvation our own.

The Vincentian Family is composed of members with enduring faith who share in the mission to evangelize the poor. All are called to be missionaries who live the Good News. Last summer, I visited the Philippines to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the presence of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity there. The picture that graces the first page of this letter is taken from a play, "*San Vicente: A Zarswela*" produced at Adamson University for this great event. As I enjoyed this spectacular depiction of our history and of the mission in the Philippines, I was filled with gratitude for the many sacrifices made by the first missionaries, the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity who came there from Spain. It was also evident to me this former 'mission territory' has grown into a dynamic faith community with its own missionary outreach.

Advent reminds us that the work of God continues anew each year in all of us, no matter our age or state in life. The new evangelization begins with each one of us! So let us give ourselves to this holy season with open and willing minds and hearts and be lifted from life's worries and anxieties into a deeper communion with Christ and a renewed commitment to the Vincentian charism of charity. In the spirit of Jesus and our Holy Founders, I again ask: "Let us work together to share the Good news and to communicate life to those who are poor."

I pray the Lord Jesus may bless you abundantly in Advent and Christmas seasons!

Your brother in St. Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Gregory Gay, C.M." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General