

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION GENERAL CURIA



Lent 2015: Walking the Way of Reconciliation, Peace, and Humility

Rome, 18 February 2015
Ash Wednesday

My dear Brothers and Sisters of the Vincentian Family,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be forever in our hearts!

The season of **Lent** is a time ripe for reflection on the mysteries of our faith. Once again, we are invited to join Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem, to accompany him to Calvary, to wait quietly at the Tomb, and to know the glory of his Resurrection, which he shares with us. The Gospel for Ash Wednesday reminds us that, underneath the rich outward symbols of this season of grace, Lent is an inward journey: *“But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.”* (Mt.6:6)

My theme for this Lenten reflection centers on **reconciliation, peace, and humility**, which I chose after insights I gained in pastoral visits I made to apostolates of the Daughters of Charity in South Korea, Nagasaki, Japan, and Mauritania and Tunisia, Africa. Amidst the worries, tensions, pains, and sufferings we experience for our world and in our own lives, Lent provides us with many occasions to enter the ‘inner room’ of the soul to encounter and embrace a concert of consolations that come to us through **reconciliation, peace, and humility**.

Reconciliation

When I visited the Daughters of Charity in South Korea, they brought me to “Reconciliation Park,” a strip of land between South and North Korea. Built after the Korean War in a collaborative effort between government and citizens, Koreans come there to reflect and pray for reconciliation on a peninsula made up of two nations, but one people who share the same history, language, and culture. The Daughters made our visit like a pilgrimage, as we walked slowly through the park, meditating and praying. This experience relates to Lent, which calls us to seek reconciliation in our own lives, starting with **inner reconciliation**, as we realize we are God’s beloved children. Only then can we reach out to our families, neighbors, religious communities, work, ministries, and associations we belong to with gestures of reconciliation. In doing so, we deepen our bonds as brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we allow this spirit of reconciliation to permeate our lives, we can identify with the Lenten story of the Prodigal in the Scriptures. We who were dead “come to life again”; we who were lost “are now found” by our Father who wants to “celebrate and rejoice” with us. (Lk.15:32) Saint Vincent de Paul, whose life was given over to bringing about reconciliation between peoples of all strata of society, said: “The blessing of peace and reconciliation...is something so great and pleasing to God that He says to each of us: *“Inquire pacem et persequere eam.”* (Search for peace and seek to attain it.) (CCD: Vol. I, Letter 150, p.214, 16 September 1633)

This Lent, let us we pray for reconciliation between nations (i.e., North and South Korea), regions, countries, and in our families and communities, so we may be people whose lives and actions mirror the reconciling love of Christ. Only through the person of Jesus can we truly achieve an authentic reconciliation with a lasting effect upon our Church and society.

Peace

A fruit of reconciliation is **peace**, which brings me to my second pilgrimage in Kobe, Japan, when visiting my Vincentian confreres and the Daughters of Charity. We went to Nagasaki, a city with the largest number of Catholics in Japan. As history records, Nagasaki endured the atomic bomb on August 9, 1945. After this horrific experience, Japan, along with people of good will, sought a visible way to promote peace amidst this tragedy. They constructed a “Peace Park” that we visited, one filled with symbols of peace donated by nations and people across the world.

The central symbol that caught my attention was the statue of a man, who sits with one arm outstretched, and the other arm raised to heaven, which is meant to be a call for peace. With one foot on the ground and the other crossed over his knee, it is meant to symbolize that seeking peace entails a need for contemplation (a crossed foot), and action (a foot on the ground). The outstretched hand also symbolizes the need for all people to be peacemakers, and the hand reaching upward points to the need for divine assistance in bringing about true works of peace.

The root of reconciliation is peace, necessary for each of us, and it begins in our hearts. Only then can it take root in our families, religious communities, neighbors, work, ministries, and the associations to which we belong. As a Vincentian Family, we must strive to cultivate peace and promote it in any way possible. Saint Vincent reminds us that, *“Charity demands that we strive to sow peace where it does not exist.”* (CCD: Vol. 5, Letter 2054, p.602, 23 April 1656).

This Lent provides an ideal time to pray for **peace**, as we live among a backdrop of constant threats of war, terrorism, and violence in our world. A movement toward reconciliation, whose fruit is peace, comes about in practicing the virtue of humility. I saw this virtue in action in a very powerful way during my visit to the Daughters of Charity in Mauritania and Tunisia.

Humility

To exercise their ministry of service to the poor in these countries, the Daughters of Charity must do so in an unassuming, humble way. In Mauritania, which claims to be 100% Muslim, the Daughters work with religious communities of Christian descent which are not recognized as visible entities in that country. In these countries, the Daughters practice great humility, both as individuals and as a community, because they work in secular service associations that serve the poor. They are not in charge, and they must work with others who direct their activities.

To live and work in such an environment demands reconciliation and inner peace with one's status in life. Most of all, it calls forth a real humility, a “kenosis” to empty oneself. To live in an environment where you are not recognized nor acknowledged is difficult. It is more challenging when there is not the ability to make a public witness to the Church or to our Vincentian charism.

In so doing, this exercise in the virtue of humility is possible only by a strong interior life of prayer and mutual support in community. Letting go of the human ego needs for control and to seek approval and recognition is never easy. The presence of the Daughters in the Province of North Africa is a quiet, but firm witness to the virtue of humility. It enables the continuance of our charism in serving the poor, especially those living on the margins. These are God's and St. Vincent's poor, the little ones whose personal dignity is often discounted and even negated.

Daughters of Charity and members of the Vincentian Family, serve in similar situations across the world today. In their humble, often hidden service, they become one with the poor by their intentional witness. Saint Vincent said that “Humility 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...Humility causes us to empty ourselves of self so that God alone may be manifest, to whom glory may be given.” (CCD: Vol. 12 Letter 211, p. 247, 22 August 1659)

From my own experience, to work for **reconciliation** and gain **peace** in one's heart, we must acquire and practice the **virtue of humility**. This is best done by examining oneself with total honesty and openness before God. It leads us to what Saint Paul called a 'kenosis', an emptying of oneself. Our model is Christ, who "*although he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself, becoming a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance.*" (Phil. 2:6-7) The humbling experience of 'emptying oneself' in the Christian life is not only an individual endeavor, but a core part of our identity as Church. Lent calls us to personal and communal conversion of heart.

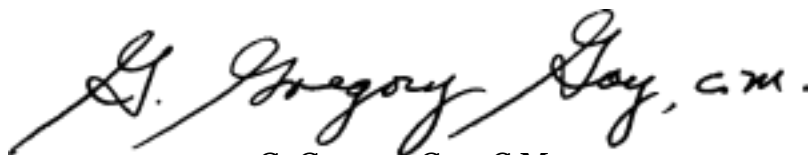
A heart filled with mercy

Pope Francis' 2015 Lenten Letter is titled "***Make your hearts firm***" (Jas.5:8), a fitting theme for our reflection. Only by practicing humility, peace, and reconciliation can our hearts become firm and be grounded in the mercy and love of Christ. Lent is the time to seek interior renewal in prayer, immersion in Scripture, the daily Eucharist, and living our Vincentian charism of service of the poor. All this calls for a firm heart. Listen to these words of our Holy Father:

"A merciful heart does not mean a weak heart. Anyone who wishes to be merciful must have a strong, steadfast heart closed to the tempter, but open to God. A heart that lets itself be pierced by the Spirit, to bring love along the roads that lead to our brothers and sisters. And ultimately, a poor heart, one that realizes its own poverty and gives itself freely for others. During this Lent, brothers and sisters, let us all ask the Lord, "*Fac cor nostrum secundum cor tuum- Make our hearts like yours.*" (Message of His Holiness, Pope Francis for Lent, 2015, p.3)

May this Lent help us grow in love of Christ and our Vincentian charism, as we walk the way of reconciliation and take the path of peace, with "humbled and contrite hearts." (Ps. 51:19)

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.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General