



A path that will make us effective mediators of God's promises

Rome, Advent 2015

My Dear Brothers and Sisters, Members of the Vincentian Family,

God's Promises

I will be your God and you will be my people! (Leviticus 26:12).

My love shall never leave you! (Isaiah 54:10).

I rescued the poor who cried out for help, the orphans, and the unassisted! (Job 29:12).

Behold, I am doing something new ... do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19).

Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die! (John 11:26).

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood remain in me and I in them! (John 6:56).

I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you (John 14:18).

Behold, I am with you always until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

Those biblical texts embody and express the covenant relationship that God established with humankind. All the promises that I have referenced above require a form of presence in order for those words to be fulfilled. Let me place before you some examples to explain what I mean.

When the people cried out against their oppressors who had enslaved them in Egypt [God was present, listening to their cries], God called Moses: *Come, now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people out of Egypt* (Exodus 3:10) [God was present, initiating a solution to the situation]. After a bitter struggle Pharaoh relented and the people crossed the Red Sea to begin their journey through the wasteland [God was present, saving the people]. When the people were hungry, God provided them with manna; when they were thirsty, water flowed from the rocks [God was present accompanying the people in their time of need]. Indeed, God became present in the midst of the people's struggles through Moses's leadership. Centuries later, when people gathered in another deserted place to listen to the teachings of the Master, they witnessed the multiplication of the loaves and the fish and their hunger was satisfied [God was present, this time physically in the person of Jesus, as teacher and healer and comforter]. The Master, however, desired to satisfy not only their physical hunger, but also their spiritual hunger: *I am the bread of life; those who come to me will never hunger and those who believe in me will never thirst* (John 6:35). The following words from the letter to the Hebrews sum up what I am attempting to say: *In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days he spoke to us through a son* (Hebrews 1:1-2).

What has any of this to do with the liturgical season of Advent? We, as Vincentians, are called to continue the mission of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the Good News to those people who are marginalized and living on the peripheries of society: *Yes, Our Lord asks us to evangelize the poor; that's what He did, and what He wants to continue to do through us.*¹ As we engage in this process of evangelization, we are preparing the way for the Lord and, at the same time, we become mediators who bring to fulfillment God's promises. Through our various ministries/services, we unite ourselves with John the Baptist's desire: *he must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3:30).

A Missionary Experience

Let me use one of my missionary experiences to illustrate this point. During my visit to the Province of Madagascar in 2011, at the time of its centennial celebration, our confrere, Father Anton Kerin, shared with me some of his experiences as he engaged in ministry in a very remote part of that country. He spoke about the joy that he

¹ Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC, and Marie Poole, DC, et al.; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XII, p. 71; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD:XII:71.

experienced as he saw the ways in which the Good News of Jesus was becoming rooted in the people. Father also spoke about the difficulties that he encountered as he attempted to give witness to people who had never before heard the name of Jesus. I desired to see this mission for myself and so I promised Father Anton that I would visit him on a subsequent trip. It was not until April 2015 that I was able to fulfill that promise. In order to do so I had to travel for two days over some of the worst roads I have seen during my eleven years as superior general. Obviously, I was unable to travel this distance by myself since I had no familiarity with the roads. This meant, then, that others had to accompany me. In this specific instance, the Visitor, a layman, and Father Anton (who drove the last nine hours, the most difficult part of the trip) became my companions on the journey. When we finally arrived at our destination, Father Anton led us to the chapel where we were welcomed by local government and church officials. The next day I had the privilege to celebrate the Eucharist with the people of that community. It was Vocation Sunday and I preached my homily in English, which was then translated into Malagasy. I was also able to visit and celebrate the Eucharist at one of the newer missions, established some four years ago and now flourishing. Yes, I fulfilled my promise to Father Anton and, at the same time, I discovered that Father Anton and those who ministered with him were mediators in bringing to fulfillment the promises that God and our Founders had made to the people of Madagascar.

During this season of Advent, we recall the fact that God has been faithful to the promises that were made to our ancestors and that have been extended to us as the people of God living in the midst of the world during this year of 2015. As we reflect on those promises, we also realize that our cooperation is necessary for these promises to become reality. Therefore, I would like to reflect with you on my missionary experience in Madagascar and, hopefully, outline a path that will make us effective mediators of God's promises.

Collaboration

First, I, all alone and by myself, was unable to do what I had said I would do. In order to fulfill my promise I needed the help and the collaboration of many other people, namely, guides and drivers, who were familiar with the roads and who knew where we were going. Our Founders made a promise to *our lords and masters* that we would proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. No one of us, alone, can fulfill that promise. From the beginning, Vincent realized that he had to involve others in his ministry in order to be effective. Therefore, *after having seen proof of the virtue and ability of François de Coudray, Antoine Portail, and Jean de la Salle*, Vincent invited those individuals to join him in preaching popular missions (cf., CCD:XIIIa:222). Within a short period of time the Missionaries realized that they, too, needed collaborators since it became clear that *the poor suffer more from a lack of organization than from a lack of generosity* (cf., CCD:XIIIb:8) and so the Confraternities of Charity came into existence. Later, during the 19th century, when Frédéric Ozanam founded the Vincent de Paul Society, he called upon one of the Daughters of Charity to advise and accompany the

members of this newly formed group of university students: *Sister Rosalie [Rendu] ... gave them invaluable advice, drew up for them a list of poor families to visit, furnished them with bread and meat tickets until such time as the Conference would be able to issue its own.*² During that same period of time, Catherine Labouré called upon Father Jean-Marie Aladel to collaborate in the establishment of a group of young men and women that today is known as the Vincentian Marian Youth Association.

Collaboration is fundamental to our being as Vincentians. No one alone can proclaim the Good News in an effective manner; no one alone can put in place the structures that will unite the world in a network of charity; no one alone and no one branch of the Vincentian Family possess the only path, or the privileged path, that enables its members to follow Jesus Christ, the evangelizer and the servant of the poor. When, however, we share our gifts and talents, when we join together in a common project, when “we” and “our” become more important than “me” and “mine,” then we, together in Christ and as Vincentians, can and do make a difference; then we, together in Christ and as Vincentians, make it possible for the promises of yesterday to be fulfilled today.

Being uncomfortable and taking risks

Second, in order to fulfill my promise to Father Anton Kerin, I had to travel along some difficult roads, which involved taking risks and allowing myself to feel uncomfortable. The same can be said about us as a Vincentian Family if we are to remain faithful to our promise to be the servants of those who are forgotten and abandoned and cast aside, the servants of our brothers and sisters who live in the midst of poverty and misery. If we are honest, I believe the majority of us would have to admit that we are not very comfortable with the reality of collaboration. A collaborative approach to ministry/service is more demanding than a lone-ranger approach. Because it is more demanding, we will naturally feel uncomfortable and might even attempt to avoid engaging in such an approach.

Let us take a minute to look at some of those demands that we might find threatening: collaborative ministry/service implies a willingness to surrender control and power, a willingness to join with others as equal partners in the decision-making process, a willingness to invite the poor to sit with us around the table where those decisions are made (decisions that affect them and their families). That style of ministry/service demands open and honest dialogue, as well as a willingness to compromise – a word that, in recent years, has taken on negative meanings, such as weakness, a betrayal of ideals, and a surrender of moral principles. All of that may make us uncomfortable because there is an implied risk, namely, at the very heart of the matter is the true and certain reality that today, you and I are being invited to change (and we will always feel

² Baunard, *Ozanam in his Correspondence*, Translated by a member of the Council of Ireland of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, Dublin, 1925, p. 72.

uncomfortable and insecure when confronted with the need to change). You and I are being invited to change the ways in which we interact with one another, to change the ways in which we minister/serve, to change the ways in which we express our solidarity with the less fortunate members of society. The degree to which we are willing to engage in this process of conversion will determine the manner in which we, together in Christ and as Vincentians, make a difference today and tomorrow. It will determine the manner in which the promises of yesterday become a reality today.

Elements that will enhance our collaboration

Certain elements should characterize all of our joint efforts to make a difference in the world today and to bring to fulfillment the promises of yesterday. I know that if we were to make a list of those necessary elements, we would include prayer (in all its different forms), the practice of virtue, reading and reflection on the scriptures, attentive listening, etc. You know the list of elements. Here, however, I would like to refer to some other elements that do not always find a place on our lists, but elements that I believe are necessary if we are to be effective and influential mediators of God's promises. My list, in addition to the elements mentioned above, would also include:

- Curiosity: As we engage in joint ministry/service with the other branches and members of the Vincentian Family, we necessarily become involved in a constant search for order in the midst of chaos and for meaning in the midst of turmoil and suffering. That search leads us to ask the question, "why?" and as we continue our search, we discover another question, another "why?", and then another question and another "why?" This curiosity, however, should give us the courage to walk along new roads even if that means becoming bruised, hurting, and dirty because we have opted to journey along roads that are still under construction (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, # 49).
- Critical analysis: Curiosity and critical analysis go hand in hand. Curiosity asks, "is this true?", while critical analysis enables us to look behind such statements as, "this is the way we have always done things! This is the way we have always acted!" This element of critical analysis is especially noteworthy since we are called to participate in the process of the New Evangelization, a process that is new in its ardor, new in its methods, and new in its expression.
- Creative imaging: *Love is inventive to infinity* (CCD:XI:131). *Your community [your group or your branch of the Vincentian Family] was not yesterday what it is now and there is reason to believe that it is still not what it will be when God has perfected it as he wants* (cf., CCD:IX:194). Curiosity leads to creative forms of imagination, which in turn sustain us in our efforts to proclaim the Good News as a present reality that is both "good" and "news" for those who are poor.

- Earthen vessels: an awareness of which enables us to maintain our perspective and see ourselves for what we are: *remember, you are dust, and unto dust you shall return* (Liturgy for Ash Wednesday); *I praise you because you made me in such a wonderful way. I know how amazing that was!* (Psalm 139:14). Listen to some of the words that Vincent used when speaking about himself: *I am a farmer's son who tended swine and cows, and ... that is nothing compared to my ignorance and malice* (CCD:IV:219); *wretched man that I am, I preach to others but I'm so full of cursed thoughts* (CCD:X:10); *O Savior, forgive this wretched sinner, who spoils all Your plans* (CCD:X:247); *I intend to be steadfast in the good I have begun, because that will be pleasing to God* (cf., CCD:X:159). Each of us has gifts and talents and strengths; each of us has limitations and blind spots and weaknesses. We are both great and small!
- An ability to dream of a better world: As members of a large extended Family we have dreams and visions of a new day: *we dream of a new heaven and a new earth in which every tear will be wiped from the eyes of all our brothers and sisters ... we dream of a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more death or mourning wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away* (cf. Revelation 21:1, 4); *we dream of justice rolling down the mountain side like surging waters and we dream of righteousness as an ever-flowing stream* (cf., Amos 5:24). Nevertheless, we minister in one small area of the world and we can be tempted to think that our ministry/service is inconsequential in the overall scheme of reality. But that is not true. We should imagine that we are all part of a large jigsaw puzzle, a puzzle that is composed of hundreds of pieces. While we are just one piece, that piece is, nevertheless, essential and has great value; that piece, our piece of the puzzle, along with all the other pieces, does in fact contribute to changing the world. Together we make a difference.³

Conclusion

We live in a world where people make promises of one kind or another every day and then forget that such promises were ever made. People, however, expect us to act differently; they expect us to be courageous and to keep our promises, to keep God's promises and the promises of our Founders. In 19th-century France, people were discouraged and disheartened. Promises had been made to them and yet the majority of people continued to live in poverty. Frédéric Ozanam understood that situation and challenged the members of the Vincent de Paul Society with words that continue to challenge us in the 21st century. I would like to conclude this reflection with Frédéric's words: *The earth has become a chilly place. It is up to us Catholics [as Vincentians] to rekindle the flame of human warmth which is going out. It is up to us to recommence the*

³ For further discussion of these elements from the perspective of systemic change see, Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, Vintage Books, a division of Random House, New York, 1971, p. 72-76.

great work of regeneration even if it means another era of martyrs. Can we remain passive in the midst of a world which is suffering and groaning? And as for us ... are we going to make no attempt to be like those saints whom we love? If we do not know how to love God, for it seems that we need to see in order to love and we can only see God with the eyes of faith, and our faith is so weak! But ... we do see them [the poor] with our eyes of flesh! They are there before us and we can place our finger and hand in their wounds and the marks of the crown of thorns are visible on their foreheads. Thus there is no possible room for unbelief and we should fall at their feet and say to them with the Apostle: "My Lord and my God! You are our master and we will be your servants. You are for us the sacred image of the God we cannot see. Since we know not how to love him otherwise, we will love him in your persons."⁴

May God bless us all as we celebrate this season of Advent, a time in which God fulfills the promises that were made to our ancestors and that are renewed in this present era; a time in which God fulfills those promises by using us as humble instruments and zealous ministers.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,



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Superior General

⁴ *Ozanam*, editors: Amin A. de Tarrazi and Fr. Ronald Ramson, CM; text: Pierre Pierrard, Amin A. Tarrazi, Caroline Morson, and Fr. Ronald Ramson, CM, Editions de Signe and printed in Italy by Albagraf, Pomezia, 1997, p. 22.