



## CONGREGAZIONE DELLA MISSIONE CURIA GENERALIZIA

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Rome, Lent 2016

My dear Brothers and Sisters, Members of the Vincentian Family:

### **Lent: a time for Fasting**

*A Story:* During a visit to Venezuela where I met with members of the various branches of the Vincentian Family, people spoke about the country's social and economic crisis and its impact on everyday life. People have to wait in long lines to buy basic foodstuffs such as bread, milk, rice, beans, etc.; people have to wait in long lines to purchase soap, toothpaste, paper products; people have to wait in long lines to obtain medicine and medical supplies; people have to wait in long lines at bus stations because of reduced schedules resulting from



fewer spare parts and no new tires for those vehicles used in public transportation; people have to wait in long lines in order to obtain travel visas and again they have to wait in even longer lines at airports. Waiting for hours, however, provides no guarantee that one will obtain the desired goods and provides no guarantee that one will not hear those dreaded words: *we have run out of bread* (or whatever one is looking for). That declaration means that one will have to wait until the following week since one can only become part of “long line” when the last number of one's personal identity card corresponds to a specific day of the week. At the same time, however, people have spoken about positive effects of this crisis, pointing out the fact that the bonds of solidarity have been strengthened. One of our confreres stated that the present situation has led them to adopt a simpler lifestyle and has brought the community closer to the reality of the poor. This social, economic, and political situation and its negative and positive elements can be viewed as a movement from the cross (the crisis) to the resurrection (solidarity and greater identification with the situation of those who are poor).

**A Jesus Story:** *And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us* (John 1:14). God, all loving, all merciful, all compassionate, never abandoned humankind. *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). Jesus mingled among the people who formed the long lines of outcasts, waiting and hoping to participate as active members of society. Jesus fed the multitudes and not only was no one turned away but baskets and baskets of leftovers were gathered up (Mark 6:34-44). Jesus extended unconditional



forgiveness to sinners, *seventy times seven* (Matthew 18:22) and exhorted his followers to be as compassionate toward their brothers and sisters as God was compassionate toward them (Luke 6:36). As a result of the Incarnation, Jesus today can be found in all those long lines that are found in countless cities throughout the world, long lines of men and women who cry out every hour of every day, demanding to be included as equal members of society.

**A New Story:**

Yes, Lent is a time for fasting, but during this Year of Mercy our fasting must take on a new form, one that leads to personal and community conversion. Our fast should mean that we can never be *accused of passivity, indulgence or culpable complicity regarding the intolerable situations of injustice and the political regimes which prolong them* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #194). Our

fasting must penetrate our very being, must pain us to the very depths so that we can hear and understand anew the cries of our brothers and sisters. Then, as we listen to those cries, let us run to serve them *as if we were running to a fire.*<sup>1</sup> Let us remember, however, that as we

<sup>1</sup> *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jaqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XI, p. 25; 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:XI:25.

establish relationships with those on the peripheries, *we have to sympathize with them in order to suffer with them ... we have to ... make them [our hearts] sensitive to the sufferings and the miseries of our neighbor, and ask God to give us the true spirit of mercy, which is the characteristic spirit of God* (CCD XI:308). May our fast during this Lenten season give us, members of the Vincentian Family, a new heart, a heart of flesh, a heart that enables us to establish ever stronger bonds with *our lords and masters*, with the countless men and women who are forgotten and abandoned throughout the world. May our Lenten fast reflect that same movement that our brothers and sisters in Venezuela experience, a movement from the cross (our own situation of crisis) to the resurrection (solidarity and greater identification with the situation of those who are poor).

### **Lent: a time for Prayer**

**A Story:** Last month, on the Feast of the Epiphany, I traveled to Notre Dame de Prime-Combe, a shrine that is administered by the confreres from the Province of Toulouse and by a well-prepared lay pastoral team. At one time as many as 50,000 people would gather together to celebrate the feast. Today, perhaps 300 people come to commemorate the Feast of Our Lady, but each Sunday, whenever possible, a confrere celebrates the Eucharist there. I was deeply impressed by the simple faith of the some 50 members of the congregation who had gathered there to celebrate the Eucharist. They were, all of them, 60 years of age or older (no young people were present). Sharing life with this community of faith is a group of Benedictine monks who, since the 1990s, have lived in one of the buildings on the grounds of our property. This group of monks, however, is a very special community. Each member lives with some handicap. Yet, these men lead their lives in a joyful and simple manner and provide the surrounding community with a powerful example of the manner in which work and prayer can be interwoven with one another.

**A Jesus Story:** Jesus often withdrew from the crowds and from his disciples in order to spend some time in prayer. He told his followers: *pray for those who persecute you* (Matthew 5:44) and he himself prayed that *they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you* (John 17:21). We are all familiar with the account of Jesus' anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42). At the same time Jesus extolled the humble prayer of the tax collector: *O God, be merciful to me a sinner* and stated that it was the tax collector who went home justified because *those who humble themselves will be exalted* (Luke 18:9-14). Jesus also praised the generous offering of the poor widow who went up to Jerusalem to pray (Mark 12:43-44). Before he departed this world, Jesus left his followers the legacy of a prayer that combines two great desires centered on God, with three cries of petition centered on the urgent basic needs of humanity. Jesus tells the Father the two desires of his heart: *hallowed be your name* and *your kingdom come*. That is followed by the three cries of petition: *give us bread, forgive our debts, and do not bring us to the time of trial*.<sup>2</sup> As a result of the Incarnation, God understands our needs, understands that we are broken and wounded, and in the person of Jesus all those realities are raised up to the Father!

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<sup>2</sup> José Antonio Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*, translated: Margaret Wilde, Convivium Press, Miami, 2014, p. 313-316.

*A New Story:* Yes, Lent is a time for prayer, and our prayer, like our fasting, must also take on a new form during this Year of Mercy, one that leads to personal community conversion.



**Our Lady of Prime-Combe**

*Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out. The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer (Evangelii Gaudium, #262). Our prayer and fasting give meaning to our ministry/service and our ministry/service gives meaning to our prayer and fasting. My hope is that during these 40 days of Lent we might take time not only to listen to the cries of the poor, not only to serve and minister on behalf of the poor, but to pray **with** the poor. Furthermore, are not all of us like the members of the Benedictine community at Notre Dame de Prime-Combe, that is, are we not in some way broken and in need of healing, in need of the prayers of others? Therefore,*

like the Benedictine monks, our “handicaps” should not prevent us from contributing to the building up of our community, the association, the Congregation.

Finally, what would it be like to ask people, as Pope Francis continually does, *please pray for me?* What would it be like to invite the poor into our homes to share with them a time of prayer? I would encourage you to do this and then during the Easter Season we could share with one another our experience of sharing prayer in such a manner with our *lords and masters*.

May our prayer and fasting enable us to die with Christ during this Lenten Season of 2016 so that we might rise with Christ on Easter Sunday and sing our song of Alleluia.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, CM  
Superior General