

Paris, June 30th 2006

CIRCULAR TO MY DEAR FELLOW MEMBERS OF THE CONFERENCES OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL WORLDWIDE

Dear friends and fellow members:

To begin with: some reflection

For the Society, like for the very Holy Church, the consideration and importance of suffering, is endorsed by the unique and unrepeatable condition of every human being that endures it. All of them made at the image and resemblance of the God Creator himself. In the Conferences the devotion to poverty, to fighting against it has always been presided by the singular vision of it. This is: by the individual suffering that, for each man is produced by a state of lacking the essential. This has always been the main concern of the Conferences: to help personally, to the extent of our means, every man that suffers. In the Conferences, it could not be otherwise, since they were born deeply Christian.

Born in the first third of the 19th century, the Conferences appear as an answer to the problems caused by the closest and most pressing material poverty. We personally look after people in whom the material scarcity they endure is quite easily spotted. Thus, the Conferences spread all over the world with the same characteristics: to assist in the material poverty and most of the time, an urgent poverty.

The world witnessing the Society of Saint Vincent's birth has little to do with the one in which we are living at present. If we set up a kind of "poverty yardstick" between both centuries, we would see that the difference between two persons lacking the essential in the 19th century on two opposite sides of the world was practically zero. Poverty was felt the same in the north or in the south of the planet. Only sometimes, the environmental conditions made survival easier on one side or other of the world. But, all in all, both were extraordinarily close in their manifestations and in the suffering they brought.

At the beginning of the 21st century, what has been put forward in the previous paragraph has dramatically changed. Indeed, the economic change appeared in and with the development of the so-called first world, comparing it with the rest of the world, has enormously increased the differences between the poor of one place or the other of the Planet.

Regarding all this, I wonder sometimes if we Vincentians will be aware of these deep changes when it comes to considering our personal apostolate for and

with those who suffer. I wonder if our personal devotion to them, foundation of our activity, is or not conditioned and influenced by all this facts. Without the slightest doubt, all these changes should be kept in mind when it comes to preparing our activities, when it comes to practising our vocation of service (1).

Therefore, allow me to review, in the intimacy of this contact with each of my fellow members worldwide, three aspects that, although dealt with in previous Circulars, will be worth remembering and trying to open new questions for our dear Conferences, in order to encourage us to carry on developing our service to those who suffer.

Attention to the material poverty

The new requirements

Let's start by insisting on the fact that today it is not at all the same to be poor (poverty understood in its material sense), in the north of the planet than in the south. Nowadays, it does exist a huge difference between the poor of north and south. The advances of the social security systems of the so-called "welfare states", although at present they could seem to be unfortunately going backwards, have caused that we cannot, nor should, attend the poor in the same way depending on what part of the world they are. Our attention as members of the Conferences in many places, essentially in the so-called "first world", should undoubtedly change and be adapted to the new forms that poverty has taken.

This will not mean to abandon material poverty where the slightest rest of it remains. No doubt, although we should carry on paying a very special attention to the so-called basic needs, as civilization progresses and whole areas of the world reach a certain "welfare state". We could feel the temptation of thinking that our field is only the attention to the material needs and that the charity work of the Conferences gets to an end with the arrival of that, on the other hand, slight improvement of the poor's situation. But it is obvious that the Conferences' modest resources could not be easy to use in certain areas of the world and through the personal contact we

(1) "Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly struggles to renovate and adapt itself to the changing conditions of times. It seeks to be aware of the changes that take place in the human society and of the new kinds of poverty that could be identified or foreseen" (*Rule of the SVP, 1.6*).

are used to. This is maybe one of the challenges of our century for the Conferences. Indeed, some Conferences in the developed countries should enlarge the assistance scope of the unused resources, to other places of the world where other Vincentians have real shortages they cannot cope with for not having the means. In other words: the Vincentians of the oft-repeated “first world” should get used to sharing with other fellow members of the poor world, resources that are nearly not necessary for the first ones. To feel this need of sharing with those who are far away, is a challenge that we have to include in the daily life of our Conferences.

But there is even more. If we carry on using the ways and customs that are so dear to us since our foundation: essentially the personal meeting with the one who suffers. Today this way of behaving that is still very good and absolutely indispensable to be kept and encouraged, it is not however enough, considering the magnitude with which the Good God has blessed our Organisation. So far, the Society of Saint Vincent has been using in a really poor way its extraordinary extent all over the world and the huge strength to do good of the nearly seven hundred fifty thousand members. It is necessary to take on the collective challenges that could be felt in each of our basic units, as accepted and their own. The blessing of our scope which I mentioned above, should materialize in a better service to the poor, otherwise we will be doing a bad use of it; a bad use of a good that the Lord has granted us not for our pride, but to better serve those who suffer.

In conclusion, we cannot forget the huge change that we have experienced along the last decades and which has opened to us the way to a globalized world where the needs and the ones in need, should not be considered only according to their closeness. On the contrary, this open and perpetually changing world demands that we also “globalize” our vision (2); a transformation that should not imply the loss of the personal contact with the one who suffers, indeed, but that we assume that sometimes we will have to delegate this contact to the Vincentians close to this suffering person.

I will devote the second half of this Circular to these new kinds of poverty and to try to identify some of them.

The challenge of new sorts of poverty

The Conferences’ attention to all who suffer, our Rule’s nearly sonorous assertion that “no work of

(2) “The parable of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10, 25-37) specially takes us to two important clarifications. Whereas the concept of “fellow men” referred until then to the fellow citizens and to the foreigners that settled down in the land of Israel, and therefore to the compact community of a country or of one people, now this limit disappears. My fellow men are anybody who needs me and whom I can help. The concept of fellow men becomes universal, but remaining at the same time specific” (*Benedict XVI, “Deus Caritas Est” 15*).

charity is outside the Society”, should take us to examine with real interest what is happening around us and what new kinds of destitution and suffering we should attend (3); to do so with special interest when the work of assistance to the material poverty, (basically in the first world as I have already pointed out) decreases in many places and so does the intensity of our devotion. For it, we should be extraordinarily aware of what is happening around us (4).

And to understand clearly, for example, that nothing is more impoverishing for men than the absence, intended or not, of the concept of God in our lives (5). Morally, man needs references beyond himself and beyond what he can discover with his own capacity (6), which he will not unless he encounters the infinitely merciful image of God. The situation being so, how many around us even boast today about their lack of faith in something superior to man? This is a field appropriate for the Conferences, because it is a kind of deep poverty that causes suffering and that we, with our company, with our life example, with our words (7), with our joy of trying to live in the presence of God even if it is with the obvious human limitations, can help to overcome (8). Our founders, the founders of the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul, are the best example to follow. They knew how to use the apologetics as a weapon to defend faith (9). The faith today is being forgotten in the whole western civilization, it is tried to live with one’s back to it, but if we are consistent with and aware of our charisma, we have to prioritize the struggle against this doctrinal poverty, this absence of God, which impoverishes so much the human nature.

Because if food, clothes, the access to education are fortunately guaranteed in large areas of the world, how many destroyed families do we know in the same areas? The attack to the very concept of family that we often see

(3) “The charitable action can and should include today all men and all their needs” (*Benedict XVI “Deus Caritas Est” 30^a*).

(4) “The ways of apostolate have to be duly adapted to the present needs, bearing in mind the men’s conditions, not only spiritual and moral but also social demographic and economic” (*Second Vatican Council, Decree “Christus Dominus” 17*).

(5) “Frequently, the deepest root of suffering is precisely the absence of God” (*Benedict XVI, “Deus Caritas Est” 31c*).

(6) “... reason has to be constantly purified, because its ethical blindness that stems from the preponderance of interest and power that dazzle it, is a danger which should never be totally discounted” (*Benedict XVI “Deus Caritas Est” 28*).

(7) “Because the disciple has the serious obligation towards the Master Christ of knowing more and more every day the truth that he has received from Him, of faithfully proclaiming and defending it with courage, excluding the means opposite to the evangelical spirit” (*Second Vatican Council Statement “Dignitatis humane” 14*).

(8) “The Vincentians have a sincere interest for the deepest needs and for the spiritual well-being of the persons they help, always showing a deep respect towards their conscience and towards the faith they profess” (*Rule SSVP, I.11*).

(9) “Faith is a gift received to convey to others and it has not been welcomed properly if we think that it is only for ourselves. Christianity inwardly well experienced is marked by a dynamic that encourages us to share it. ...It is the same when we receive a great joy: there is the urge of tell it at once, of sharing it with others, otherwise it is not a complete joy” (*“The Salt of the Earth” Cardinal Ratzinger, Editions Palabra page 191*).

in many of the societies we live in, create another field of work for the Vincentians: to tell and highlight the people's need of having an education and development in suitable environments that provide the total development to which every human being is entitled.

As for the very concept of single-parent family, definition that originally indicated the unwanted absence of one of the parents, there are today who even claims it as a desired solution. It is a clear example of cowardice before life, of lack of hope in the human being's capacity of socializing and an obvious desire of not sharing with the other one the huge responsibility of the children's education and the very conjugal life in marriage (10). Children, so often understood and conceived more as a right of the would-be parents than as subjects themselves –the children– to the rights of growing up, receiving an education and developing in an environment which makes them free; children that are to be protected.

Loneliness increases, the radical loneliness that stems from the selfish and perverse individualism in which many live, precisely in the most affluent part of the world. Family, as a supporting group, goes through a crisis in an important part of the world. We have been going from the traditional family in which everybody was involved, aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents, within which many of their members' problems were solved and, above all, where everyone felt sheltered in times of misfortune, to the nuclear family consisting exclusively of parents and children and which is giving way to the wrongly called single-parent family that I have already mentioned. The human being is gradually left without supports, in a society without God, without family, without authority. The elder, the parents, have lost their "autoritas" in a society that only values money and the capacity to spend it. What to say of the elderly people, so often abandoned and lacking the appropriate care!

We have to say it aloud, with the huge strength of the personal contact, of the capacity of the volunteers, of the lay, which the Council points out (11) when it defines our mission of helping to regenerate the world. We have to get used to taking the hope in the capacity of good and of men, in order to improve the world that God himself has entrusted us. The Conferences cannot be indifferent to these kinds of poverty that are spreading among us. We cannot be tempted to believe, as I pointed out above, that "there aren't poor any

more". They exist and with a degree of suffering and perpetuation much more obvious and even dangerous than the mere material poverty.

We are witnessing, dear fellow members, how any rule is being emptied of its moral and ethical content, emptied of the pure natural morality and not only of the Christian one. An emptying of which it will be very difficult to come out for whom has fallen in it. Whereas food, clothing, all the basic needs are easy to identify by any person by means of feeling cold, hunger, etc., moral lacks are very difficult to accept that they are missing if they are not known. If the world around us does not appreciate them for their true worth and teach them to each of the persons that join it, it will be very difficult for them to get to feel their lack. These values, are basically learned in the family, and in the fundamental family and desirably made of a couple of a man and a woman that, duly trained, feel in turn the need of conveying this knowledge, these feelings, these values to their children (12).

The young today, lacking so often the necessary voice and a close example that teach them to live together with a series of values that could allow them to grow and to get to be really "free men", to reach the real condition of freedom, frequently so lacking in hope, are a good example of service on the part of the Conferences (13).

We Vincentians, dear fellow members, have the serious obligation of feeling in each of our Conferences these needs and of giving, within our limited resources, the answer of our hope and the strength of our faith. We have to share with them, not the vision of a decadent world to which all of us have to get used for not fighting against the absence of values of the prevailing "unculture". On the contrary, we have to assure that another world is possible and we have to do so with the joy and the trust in the future that have always characterised the followers of that Nazarene that gave himself for all of us.

We have to devote whole sessions in each of our Conferences to examine the world in which we develop our activity and then take on its "ailments", get ready to collaborate with the Good God, to carry out the "role" that He has assigned to us, in the improvement of the world since the Creation.

We are –the Vincentians– specially called and more committed to action than others (14). Indeed, if

(10) "...from a perspective based on the creation, the eros directs man towards marriage, a bond marked by its unique and definitive character; thus and only thus, his intimate fate is achieved. To the image of the monotheistic God corresponds the monogamous matrimony" (*Benedict XVI "Deus Caritas Est" 11*).

(11) "Such evangelisation, that is, the announcement of Christ proclaimed by the testimony of his life and words, acquires a specific characteristic and a singular efficiency by the fact that it is carried out in the world common conditions" (*Second Vatican Council Constitution "Lumen gentium" 35*).

(12) "The family is the first school of the social virtues that all societies need" (*Second Vatican Council Statement "Gravissimum educationis" 3*).

(13) I refer to the SSVV General Presidency's Circular (*Paris 30.06.2002*).

(14) "In our present time, this call becomes especially urgent. But if it is urgent for the whole People of God, it is particularly so for us that have undertaken a clear commitment at the service of the poor. We have to preach with the example of our actions. It is true. But we have also to get used to preaching to men, aloud, that God loves them. The Holy Church, needs specially today agents for the spreading of the Good News" (*General Presidency of the SSVV, Circular, Paris 30.06.2001*).

for any Christian there is the call to keep the baptismal promises, for us, the fellow members of the Conferences, there is also the obligation of the Vincentian commitment, of that “certain vocation” about which my predecessor the President Pierre Chouard spoke and is today included in our Rule (15). A vocation of service to the poor in whom we try to see the suffering Christ that chose them as his real image.

We are not alone

We cannot rely only on our own strength (16). We will not be able to achieve anything really useful, if we try to rely only on our own knowledge or even on our own merits. It is in Christ’s devotion, his abandonment “freely accepted” (17) by and for men, where we shall find the strength to carry on serving our friends in need (18).

On this difficult road of swimming against the tide, of accepting that we are not able of everything, that on the contrary: so many things are left out of the reach of our strength! Only in the prayer (19) we will find the capacity both to accept our limitations without being discouraged, and to overcome the barriers imposed by our fallen humanity (20).

If it has always been essential among us, in the Conferences, the individual and community prayer (21) of the group of friends that make up each of them, today it becomes indispensable to increase our insistence on the prayer; a prayer taking us to a better knowledge of our God, the Good God that receives us. This prayer has to encourage us to deepen our formation and to accept that we are in an ongoing process of learning, regardless of our age or our life experience (22).

A prayer that should make us feel the close and always evocative presence of the Spirit that is to show

(15) “The vocation of the members of the Society, called Vincentian fellow members, is to follow Christ through the service to those in need and thus bear witness to his compassionate and liberating love” (*Rule SSVP, 1.2*).

(16) “Who remains in me and me in him, but without me you can do nothing” (*Gospel of Saint John 15.5*).

(17) Ordinary time of the Holy Mass; Eucharistic Prayer II, Consecration of the bread.

(18) “The love to God and the love to others are inseparable, they make a single commandment. But both live on the love stemming from God who has loved us first” (*Benedict XVI, “Deus Caritas Est” 18*).

(19) “Pray without interruption” (*1 Thessalonians 5.17*).

(20) “Let us remember that with the public worship and with prayer, with penance and the free acceptance of life’s works and misfortunes with which we resemble the patient Christ, we can reach all men and help in the salvation of the whole world” (*Second Vatican Council, Decree “Apostolicam actuositatem” 16*).

(21) “Indeed the Christian, called to pray in common, should nonetheless, go also to his room to pray to the Father in secret; even more, he should pray without respite, as the apostle teaches” (*Second Vatican Council Constitution “Sacrosanctum Concilium” 12*).

(22) “It is essential that the Society should continually foster the formation of their members and the persons in charge in order to deepen their knowledge of the Society, their spirituality, to improve the sensitivity, quality and efficiency of their service to the poor...” (*Rule SSVP, 3.12*).

us (23), to lead us through the new paths that the world is claiming in order to better serve it. To serve the world better and to adapt it to God’s plan.

We are not alone. It is Christ who walks with the world, although we do not see him; although it is sometimes difficult for us to identify His presence when it seems that we are surrounded by so much evil. He is still close to us, waiting for us to call Him, to rely on Him. We should not try to do everything on our own. To feel Christ’s presence through the prayer is an always present task for the Conferences.

Dear friends: on finishing this annual letter to all of you, a letter that causes me so much joy, both for sending it and for your beautiful answers, I want to do it as usual, recalling and appealing to Mary.

Her life was a complete example of prayer and acceptance of the Father’s will. May she, together with Vincent de Paul and our founders, together with Frederick Ozanam, lead us to serve better and better the men whom God loves and at the service of whom we want to be.

With my prayer and affection

José Ramón Díaz-Torremocha
XIV General President
i.n.e.D

PS1.—Finally, let me recommend to all my dear fellow members, a careful reading of the recent Encyclical Letter “*Deus caritas est*”, by our Holy Father, the Pope Benedict XVI. If a calm reading is necessary for every Christian, I deem it particularly useful for our fellow members and Conferences all over the world. For those who have any problem getting it, they can find it in the Society’s website www.ozanet.org.

PS2.—I advise you to pay attention to the international campaign of the General Council for Africa. We try to set up a very important and committed action of the Conferences worldwide towards the African continent that in principle will last until the year 2009, under the motto “**The Conferences of Saint Vincent for Africa**”. To this end, you can send your donations to the bank account: *CIC-Paris-10041.00010581201*, indicating in the remittance the Campaign motto, and those fellow members wishing to collaborate personally in the Campaign, can address to the General Council asking for further information.

(23) “What proves this multiple and urgent need is the Holy Spirit’s obvious action, which gives to the lay an every day clearer conscience of their own responsibility and encourages them everywhere to the service of Christ and of the Church” (*Second Vatican Council Decree “Apostolicam actuositatem” 1*).

(24) “The perfect model of apostolic spirituality is the Holy Virgin Mary, Queen of the Apostles which, as long as she lived in this world like the others, a life full of family concerns and works, she was constantly united to her Son and collaborated in a very singular way with the Saviour’s works” (*Second Vatican Council Decree “Apostolicam actuositatem” 4*).