



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY ON THE FOURTH CENTENARY
OF THE CHARISM**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the fourth centenary of the charism that gave birth to your Family, I would like to express to you my gratitude and encouragement, and to reaffirm the importance of Saint Vincent de Paul for our own time.

Vincent was always on the move, ever open to the discovery of God and himself. Grace entered into this constant quest: in his priestly ministry, he encountered Jesus the Good Shepherd in a striking way in the poor. On one occasion in particular, he was deeply touched by meeting the gaze of a man pleading for mercy and by the faces of a destitute family. There he saw Jesus himself looking at him, unsettling his heart and asking him no longer to live for himself, but to serve him unreservedly in the poor. Vincent would later call the poor “our lords and masters” (*Correspondance, entretiens, documents* XI, 349). His life then became one of unflagging service, even to his dying breath. A verse from Scripture showed him the meaning of his mission: “The Lord has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor” (cf. *Lk* 4:18).

Burning with the desire to make Jesus known to the poor, Vincent devoted himself passionately to preaching, especially through popular missions and by careful attention to the training of priests. He quite naturally employed a “little method”, speaking first by his life and with great simplicity, in a familiar and straightforward way. The Spirit used him as the means for a great outpouring of generosity in the Church. Inspired by the early Christians who were “of one heart and soul” (*Acts* 4:32), Saint Vincent founded the Confraternities of Charity, who cared for those in greatest need by living in communion and joyfully sharing their possessions, in the conviction that Jesus and the poor are the treasure of great price. As he loved to repeat, “When you visit the poor, you encounter Jesus.”

The “mustard seed” sown in 1617 grew into the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity, then branched out into other institutes and associations and became a great tree (cf. *Mk* 4:31-32) which is the Vincentian Family. Everything, however, began with that mustard seed. Saint Vincent never wanted to be in the forefront, but only a “seedling”. He was convinced that humility, gentleness and simplicity are essential for embodying the law of the seed that by dying gives life (cf. *Jn* 12:20-26). This law alone makes the Christian life bear fruit, for it teaches us that in giving we receive, by losing our lives we gain them, and in hiddenness our light is best seen. Vincent was also convinced that this can only come about in union with others, as a Church and as the People of God. Here I cannot fail to mention his prophetic insight in recognizing and appreciating the remarkable abilities of women, which flowered in Saint Louise de Marillac’s spiritual sensitivity and human understanding.

Jesus says, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (*Mt* 25:40). At the heart of the Vincentian Family is the effort to seek out “those who are poorest and most abandoned”, together with a profound awareness of being “unworthy of rendering them our little services” (*Correspondance, entretiens, documents XI*, 392). I pray that this year of thanksgiving to the Lord and of growth in the experience of your charism will prove an opportunity to drink from the source and to find refreshment in the spirit of your origins. Never forget that those wellsprings of grace streamed from faithful hearts, rock solid in love, “lasting models of charity” (*Deus caritas est*, 40). You will be filled with that same primordial freshness only if you look to the rock from which it all flowed forth. That rock is Jesus in his poverty, who asks to be recognized in those who are poor and have no voice. That is where he is to be found. When you encounter human weakness and broken lives, you too must be rocks – not hard and brittle, impervious to suffering, but rather a sure support, steadfast amid the tempest and unshaken by adversity, because you “look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the quarry from which you were taken” (*Is* 51:1). You are called to go forth to the peripheries of human existence to bring not your own gifts, but the Spirit of the Lord, the “Father of the Poor”. He has sown you throughout the world like seeds that spring up in dry land, like a balm of consolation for the wounded, a fire of charity to warm hearts grown cold by indifference and hardened by rejection.

All of us are called to drink from the rock that is Christ and to satisfy the thirst of the world with the charity that flows from him. Charity is at the core of the Church; it is the reason for her activity and the soul of her mission. “Charity is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine. Every responsibility and every commitment spelled out by that doctrine is derived from charity which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the entire Law” (*Caritas in veritate*, 2). By pursuing this path, the Church will become ever more fully a mother and teacher of charity, with a love that increases and abounds for each and for all (cf. *1 Thess* 3:12). With serene fellowship within, and openness and acceptance towards those without, the Church must have the courage to renounce her own advantage in order to imitate her Lord in all things; in this way, she becomes fully herself, making the apparent weakness of charity her only cause for boasting (cf. *2 Cor* 12:9). The words of the Council are eloquent in this regard: “Christ Jesus... ‘being rich, became poor’ for our sakes. Thus,

the Church, although she needs human resources to carry out her mission, is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, even by her own example, humility and self-sacrifice. Christ was sent by the Father ‘to bring good news to the poor’... Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering, and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of her poor and suffering Founder. She does all she can to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ” (*Lumen gentium*, 8).

Saint Vincent embodied this in his own life, and even now he continues to speak to each of us and to all of us as Church. His witness invites us to keep moving, ever ready to let ourselves be surprised by the Lord’s gaze and his word. He asks of us lowliness of heart, complete availability and humble docility. He prompts us to live in fraternal communion among ourselves and to go forth courageously in mission to the world. He calls us to free ourselves from complicated language, self-absorbed rhetoric and attachment to material forms of security. These may seem satisfactory in the short term but they do not grant God’s peace; indeed, they are frequently obstacles to mission. Vincent encourages us to invest in the creativity of love with the authenticity of a “heart which sees” (cf. *Deus caritas est*, 31). Charity, in fact, is not content with the good practices of the past, but aims to transform the present. This is all the more necessary today, given the complexity and rapid evolution of our globalized society, where some forms of charity or assistance, albeit motivated by generous intentions, risk abetting forms of exploitation and delinquency, without producing tangible and lasting benefits. For this reason, Saint Vincent continues to teach us the importance of reflecting on our practice of charity, developing new ways of drawing near to those in need, and investing our efforts in formation. His example also encourages us to make time and space for the poor, for the new poor of our time, of which there are so many, and to make their worries and troubles our own. A Christianity without contact with those who suffer becomes disembodied, incapable of touching the flesh of Christ. We need instead to encounter the poor, to show preferential love for them, to let their voices be heard, lest their presence be ignored by a frivolous throw-away culture. I am confident that the World Day of the Poor, to be celebrated this year on 19 November, will help us in our “call to follow Jesus in his own poverty”. In this way we will become “an ever greater sign of Christ’s charity for the least and those most in need”, in reaction to “a culture of discard and waste” (*Message for the First World Day of the Poor, “Let us love, not with words but with deeds”, June 13, 2017*).

I pray that the Church, and each of you, may be granted the grace to discover the Lord Jesus in our brothers or sisters who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, lacking clothing and dignity, sick and imprisoned, as well as in those who are uncertain, ignorant, persisting in sin, sorrowing, offensive, irascible and annoying. May you find in the glorious wounds of Jesus the vigor of charity, the blessedness of the seed that dies to give life, and the fruitfulness of the rock flowing with water. May you also find the joy of leaving yourselves behind, in order to go forth into the world, free of nostalgia for the past, fully trusting in God, and creative in the face of every present and future challenge. For love, in the words of Saint Vincent, “is infinitely creative”.

From the Vatican, 27 September 2017

Memorial of Saint Vincent de Paul

Francis

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