

**AIC ASSEMBLY OF DELEGATES
CHÂTILLON-SUR-CHALARONNE, FRANCE
HOMILY – 12 March 2017**

It is an honor and a privilege for me to be here with you today to celebrate this Eucharist together. As the successor of Saint Vincent, I am delighted to join with the members of his very first foundation as you celebrate its 400th anniversary. Our Holy Founder could never have dreamed that, from the eight women, literally a mustard seed, who, on 23 August 1617, “charitably joined forces to take their turn to assist the sick poor of the town of Châtillon,” 400 years later, there would be the large tree that is the International Association of Charities. That is not all, for your organization was the forerunner of some 225 other branches, now known as the Vincentian Family and present in 150 countries with over two million members throughout the world.

Saint Vincent was exceptional in responding to the promptings of the Spirit. He did not hesitate to involve the laity and, in particular, women, in his undertakings, as we read in the account of the Charity of Women:

Because, however, it is to be feared that this good work, once begun, might die out in a short time if they do not have some union and spiritual bond among themselves to maintain it, they have arranged to form an association that can be set up as a confraternity.

From the beginning, he recognized their capacities and did not shirk from giving them a place in the service of the Church, the people of God. When that first Confraternity of Charity was established on 8 December in Châtillon, the women themselves took on all the roles of administration, with one exception. In keeping with the thinking of the time,

because there is reason to hope that there will be foundations made in aid of the confraternity, and that it is not appropriate for women to handle them on their own, the Servants of the Poor will elect as their Procurator some pious, devout priest or an inhabitant of the town who is virtuous, devoted to the good of persons who are poor, and not too caught up in temporal affairs.

Obviously, this is no longer the case, because women throughout the world hold positions involving finances, including in your own organization.

In setting up this first Confraternity of Charity, Saint Vincent outlined, in great detail, how the women were to provide their services to the sick: “she will also bring him other small items he needs, such as a bed tray, a napkin, a cup, a pitcher, a small plate and a spoon.” However, he also insisted on spiritual service to the sick, “the Servants of the Poor will strive and take great pains to dispose those who recuperate to live better, and those who seem to be approaching death, to die well.” Realizing that these good women could not give what they did not have, he also outlined for them a series of devotional practices and told them to “take care in practicing humility, simplicity, and charity, each deferring to her companion and to others.”

Our Founder constantly challenged the Ladies to live up to the commitments they had made. Who could forget his famous conference, urging them to continue caring for the Foundlings:

Well then, Ladies, compassion and charity have led you to adopt these little creatures as your own children; you have been their mothers according to grace since the time their mothers according to nature abandoned them. See now whether you, too, want to abandon them. Stop being their mothers to be their judges at present; their life and death are in your hands. I'm going to take the vote; it's time to pass sentence on them and to find out whether you are no longer willing to have pity on them. If you continue to take charitable care of them, they will live; if, on the contrary, you abandon them, they will most certainly perish and die; experience does not allow you to doubt that.

I too wish to challenge you today. As I just mentioned, Vincent insisted on both the spiritual service of the sick and the Ladies' attention to their own spiritual needs. I encourage you to make sure all your works have a spiritual foundation and that each of you is grounded in Vincentian spirituality too. To do this, you must be careful to assure your own formation, as well as that of those you serve. In this digital age, there is no dearth of materials available for this purpose. Your Association website provides training booklets and spiritual reflections. The FamVin website has an entire section devoted to formation.

Even in his time, Saint Vincent sought to move beyond simple charitable assistance and prepare persons who were poor to improve their own lot in life. This was done in a number of ways: the Daughters of Charity ran schools, especially for girls; some Confraternities provided workshops where the able-bodied and youth could learn a trade; and the Ladies sent seeds and tools to the devastated areas of the country. You too must move from welfare to actions that will promote those who are poor. It is for this reason that we established the Commission for the Promotion of Systemic Change. It is important that we do not just assist those who are poor, but help lift them out of their poverty.

Saint Vincent told the Ladies that a *means of maintaining the Company is to do your part to fill it with other devout, virtuous Ladies. For, if you don't encourage other persons to join, it will be short of members and, with dwindling numbers, will be too weak to carry these pressing burdens any further. That's why it was suggested in the past that the Ladies who were close to death should prepare in advance a daughter, a sister, or a friend to join the Company.*

In my letter of 25 January, I encouraged you along the same lines: each one of us, collectively in groups or individually, will set for himself or herself, during this Jubilee Year, this concrete goal: to pray, be attentive, look for, encourage, and invite one new candidate to the consecrated life for one of the Congregations within the Vincentian Family or to join one of its lay branches as a member. I trust you will commit yourselves to this effort and develop innovative strategies for increasing your numbers.

In his time, Vincent noted that people “have sometimes suffered a great deal, more through a lack of organized assistance than from lack of charitable persons.” While that is less of a problem today, there is still the need for collaboration and cooperation among various agencies and organizations, both governmental and charitable. In the same way, the different branches of the Vincentian Family must work together to assure that the very best service is provided for our “lords and masters.” If each of us is centered upon his or her own works, ignoring what other branches do for the same purpose, our efforts to assist the less fortunate will not be as efficacious. For that reason, I urge you to develop and participate in common projects, in collaboration with the entire AIC, as well as other branches of our Vincentian Family. In this year dedicated to “welcoming the stranger,” we are putting forth an effort to reduce homelessness throughout the world. This project can associate all the branches of our Family. You will hear more about it in the coming months.

Let me reiterate these challenges:

- Provide a good spiritual base for all your works and solid spiritual and Vincentian formation for your members.
- See to it that your actions do not only assist the poor, but also, through methods of systemic change, seek to lift them out of their poverty.
- Work to increase your numbers by inviting others to join forces with you.
- Collaborate among yourselves and on common projects with other branches of the Vincentian Family.

In closing, allow me to make my own the words of our Holy Founder:

Let's ask God to accept the new offering we're going to make Him on our knees, by giving ourselves to His Divine Majesty with all our hearts to receive from His infinite goodness the spirit of charity. Let's also ask Him to grant us the grace of corresponding in this spirit to the plans He has for each of us in particular and for the Company in general, and to inspire everywhere this spirit of fervor for the charity of Jesus Christ, in order to merit that He may shed it abundantly on us and, by helping us to produce the effects of it in this world, may make us eternally pleasing to God His Father in the next. Amen.

Tomaž Mavrič, CM
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