

BE ENCHANTED BY POOR PEOPLE WITH CHRIST

Source for Vincentian Work in Education

Opening: Prayer of St Vincent:

« O Lord, send good workers to your Church, / but may they be good; / send good workers, / such as they ought to be, / to work hard in your vineyard; / people, Lord, who are detached from themselves, / and their own comfort and their worldly goods. / Let them even be few in number, / provided that they are good. / Lord, grant this favour to your Church ».

I am going to share with you a few ideas to help us spiritually to reflect on the theme and on the work of this Assembly.

An event from real life: Dom Helder Camara (1909 – 1999) was a Brazilian Bishop who was close to the Vincentian Family. Truly committed to poor people, he shared an interesting story with his friends: He said that, during his work with marginalized women, he had met a prostitute. This woman had become a great friend and often came to visit him. On one occasion Mgr Helder asked her: « How are you getting on with your faith, my child? » She replied without any hesitation: « I don't get involved much in the church, but there is something that I never fail to do. At Easter I go to the prison to spend the night with the man who is the loneliest and most abandoned in the prison ». Mgr Helder replied: « My child, God is with you! ». Hearing this story, we can add: « God uses the sufferings of the poor, and even things that are morally wrong in their lives, to teach us the main points of the Gospel».

In this anecdote I see a fine example of the enchanting **power which reveals the wisdom of God in the reality of poor people**. God speaks to us, teaches us and educates us through the distressing and disconcerting reality of poor people. St Vincent lived the experience by which God, through poor people, gave new meaning to his life. Vincentian work arises and develops from this enchanting power which poor people have of revealing the wisdom of God.

1. AIC arose from the spiritual experience of St Vincent de Paul who, through contact with poor people, discovered the presence of God in them. He discovered in poor people the image of a disfigured Christ. He discovered that announcing the Good News to poor people was at the heart of the life and mission of Jesus. This encounter showed him committed faith through mission and charity. From this encounter, St Vincent developed, in deep harmony with the Spirit, the three pillars on which his spirituality and his customary practice were based¹: *The supremacy of God; the centrality of Christ; and Passion for poor people.*

St Vincent discovered in Jesus Christ, evangelizer of poor people, « the real model and the great invisible framework to which all our actions will have to conform ». By fixing his gaze on Jesus, St Vincent found the spiritual direction which he would give to his life, and which was going also to guide the action of his successors. It is the gift which the Spirit gave to the Church through St Vincent. It is there that we find the origins of AIC, its nature, its spirit, the light and strength to carry out its mission successfully.

2. The enchanting experience of meeting Christ in poor people is the most authentic source of Vincentian spirituality. AIC, in serving poor people, is called to drink from this source. This enchanting experience enlightens and gives an evangelical flavour to charitable service. We talk about « *enchan-*

¹ Cf. Celestino Fernández, Vincentian Keys for New Evangelisation (Claves Vicencianas para la Nueva Evangelización), in the Boletín Informativo, (Information Newsletter) June-September 2012, pp. 5-8.

*ting experience » and we use the word « enchanting » to signify everything which leads us towards beauty and enchantment, everything which brings us to give a full and enthusiastic meaning to our lives and our actions. **Three words will allow us to understand enchantment :***

a) To be enchanted is to be **fascinated**; it is to be enveloped by something exciting which gives life its full meaning. When he actively saw Christ in the poor, St Vincent was fascinated by the immensity of His love – a love inventive to infinity. St Vincent was literally enveloped by this love, which gave a passionate meaning to his life and made him a dynamic and fascinating being. He committed himself to work which he carried out with a great deal of simplicity, humility and charity. The Christ who is loved, respected and served in poor people envelops us and fascinates us. This fascination lights up our crosses, allows us to overcome our disappointments, enhances and gives meaning to all our dreams and all our work.

b) To be enchanted is to tame or **win over**, to create links. Here is a passage from « *Le Petit Prince* » (The Little Prince) by Saint-Exupéry: « *The fox said: My life is monotonous. I hunt chickens, men hunt me. All chickens are just alike, and all the men are just alike. And in consequence I am a little bored. But if you tame me, it will be as if the sun came to shine on my life. I shall know the sound of a footstep that will be different from all the others. Other footsteps send me hurrying back underneath the ground. Yours will call me, like music, out of my burrow.* » St Vincent felt ‘tamed’ or won over by poor people;

he looked at them with the gaze with which God looks at them and with the respect that Christ showed them. Poor people became a sacrament of Christ, and the life of St Vincent became a melody which reveals Christ in poor people. Enchanted by the love of Christ, we follow in his footsteps which invite us to leave our comfort and our selfishness, to give ourselves generously to the service of the poor. The infinite love of Christ for poor people frees our life from monotony and gives it meaning; it wins us over and leads us to win others over.

c) To be enchanted is to be **captivated**. To captivate is to give charm to life, to flood it with feelings and attitudes of love which enhance it, make it charming and enjoyable. The Holy Fathers used a mythological figure to show us the alluring love of Christ. They said that Orpheus represented the image of Christ. By playing the lyre divinely well, Orpheus enchanted everyone. At the sound of his music, the trees bent, the rocks swayed, the animals sat down to listen to it. When his wife Eurydice died, Orpheus went down to Hell, and with his lyre he captivated the sea monsters who guarded the place and he freed his wife, restoring her to life. Captivated by the love of Christ in poor people, St Vincent was a person who enchanted, who successfully carried out numerous transforming actions. He found the source of his enchantment in Christ, who became poor, humble, simple, gentle and full of zeal to serve poor people. Lived in charity and in mission, the merciful love of the captivated Christ, restores strength, transforms reality, creates harmony, and offers us grace, pleasure and bliss.

3. In this Assembly, AIC is seeking knowledge, skills and new suggestions, in order to extend its educational work with poor people. The meeting of Christ with poor people is an enchanting experience which brings a new meaning, methodology and spirit to this educational work.

a) The enchanting experience of Christ in the poor person shows that **God reveals his strength and his wisdom in the weakness and destitution of poor people.** Saint Paul tells us: « While Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, we preach Christ crucified » (1Co 1, 22-23). The scandal of the Cross is the supreme expression of the love of Christ who was poor and merciful. God on the Cross of Christ disturbs the dominant wisdom and shows us that salvation and wisdom come to us from Jesus, poor and crucified; that He evangelizes us through the poor, that He announces to us that justice is the way which allows us to build a unity made of mutuality and harmony. Since the folly of the Cross, we discover that poor people are God's folly, that through them He educates us and creates a new world. We must believe in the strength and wisdom of the little ones, in the capacity for evangelizing and teaching poor people. Their reality of suffering and struggle is an opening towards God. It has the hidden treasure of creativity to solve problems. In it we find values and suggestions for an education towards global solidarity. By going to their school and learning from them, we give and we receive, developing, in that way, a movement of mutuality, an exchange

of knowledge and a new sensitivity to mutuality and solidarity.

b) The encounter with Christ in the poor invites us to **develop a transforming teaching method through the poor**. Jesus chose poor people and taught us through poor people. The poor person is at the centre of the teaching action of Jesus: starting from His coexistence of solidarity with the poor person, from a clear knowledge of his problems, from the recognition of his values and dignity, He identifies with the poor person and develops a transforming action. Jesus presents us with a new educational dynamic. Education must be carefully thought out and organized starting from the suffering reality which is the life of poor people. It must seek to save and to strengthen self-esteem, dignity and the resilience of poor people, without paternalism and without making them dependent. In a teacher – learner relationship which is both respectful and patient, in which dialogue takes precedence, education must emphasize the knowledge and culture of marginalized people, while strengthening links of solidarity and encouraging forms of cooperation and organization. Education must also offer elements of analysis and suggestions for actions to eradicate poverty and to build a more humane and fairer society.

c) The enchanting experience of Christ in the poor person requires a **teaching attitude of simplicity and humility**. To grow in humanity, the teacher and the learner need each other. That is why simplicity and humility are fundamental virtues. Indeed, simplicity consists in seeking

truth and living it. It opens us up to listening and to a dialogue with reality, with poor people, in order to discern and to analyze in a realistic way the values and shortcomings which we have to work on in education. Simplicity is an invitation to discover truth, to open oneself up to new things and to welcome differences, formulating reasoned and constructive criticism. As for humility, the inseparable companion to simplicity, it presupposes that we constantly empty ourselves, and rid ourselves of our arrogance and our self-sufficiency. It presupposes that we emerge from ourselves and our personal interests, to update our knowledge, agreeing to collaborate with other people, and to develop with them and to discover other needs, other ways of thinking and to understand existence. No one is self-sufficient; we grow and learn in harmony. Simplicity and humility teach us a new attitude of mutuality, interdependence and openness to collaboration with others, within a fraternal relationship, without discrimination or interests of power. When it is sincere and humble, the exchange of gifts and talents allows us to progress in a union of the knowledge and strength necessary to fight against exclusion, and to move forward to a life which is fairer and more fraternal.

d) The enchanting experience of the encounter with Christ leads us to **develop the education of the whole person**. Human and professional development must lead us to discover and to make clear the presence of God who is Love as the foundation and centre of life. All educational work must lead to openness to others and to

transcendence. « *The one who excludes God from his horizons falsifies the notion of « reality » and, consequently, can only end up in blind alleys and with recipes for destruction (...)* »². Education must help the learners and teachers to develop an experience of encountering God which is personal and loving, which helps them to live in a supportive way and to act in a free and responsible way in building a better world. The strength which arises from the conviction that God is love, harmony and justice is the only way capable of building « another possible world », of peace, solidarity, justice and liberty.

e) It is true that a good education really needs techniques and methods which are proven, and it needs knowledge, effective planning, dedicated work and support, but all that is not enough. Enchantment is like a perfume; it radiates, it intoxicates. An artificial flower does not smell of anything. **The enchanting experience of encountering Christ in poor people must be the real and main motivation, the first objective** for AIC educators. This experience must be cultivated through constant prayer, listening to the Word, in training and in contact with poor people. It is the love of Christ which gives strength and consistency to educational work, which guarantees perseverance, which enlightens the search for solutions to problems and which confers on educational work evangelical qualities. It is essential that educators develop

² Inaugural Speech of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, at the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida (Brazil), 13 May 2007.

educational work starting from their testimony of faith.

Let us end with the words of Jesus: Mt 11, 25-26 – « *At that time Jesus said: « I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do ».* By announcing the Kingdom of God, Jesus understood that wise and intelligent men are not able to perceive and welcome his Good News. Poor people on the other hand understand the meaning of the Gospel; they let themselves be transformed by this word and become evangelists. It is this evangelical and Vincentian light which must enlighten our work. « *Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do ».* It is only in this way - fascinated, captivated and charmed by Christ – that AIC volunteers will be able to develop an Education in Mutuality, fruitful from an evangelical point of view, an education of freedom and hope starting from the poor, with the poor and for the poor.

Question to reflect on:

What attitudes and what suggestions should we develop so that the educational work of AIC is increasingly an up to date expression of this « enchanting » experience of encounter between Christ and the Poor?

Fr. Eli Chaves dos Santos, CM
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