

CONGREGAZIONE DELLA MISSIONE / CURIA GENERALIZIA

2014: Lent and the Lesson of Lampedusa



A wreath placed by Pope Francis floats in memory of the dead at Lampedusa, Italy

To all members of the Vincentian Family

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

Let me begin with these words from Sacred Scripture to frame our focus for Lent:

“For you know by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that although he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (2 Cor. 8:9) We may wonder at times what it means to be poor or to be rich. But as Lent begins, these words of St. Paul remind us that this season calls us to see poverty and riches through the eyes of God.

The ‘Riches and Poverty’ of Lent:

Viewing riches and poverty from the lens of contemporary society may seem a waste of time. Today, to be rich is always associated with material wealth, a desired goal granting power, privilege, and access to the finer things of life. Poverty, on the other hand, is seen as a scourge and mark of inferiority, often dehumanizing the poor and scape-goating them for society’s woes.

What a difference it makes when viewing poverty and riches in the way of Jesus Christ! The Lenten Scriptures tell stories of wealthy people whose lives are turned upside down by Jesus. In Mark’s Gospel, a rich young man is attracted to follow Jesus, but when asked to give away his earthly treasures to the poor, he “went away sad, for he had many possessions” (Mk. 10:22) In Luke’s parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the poor man has a name and place in heaven, while the rich man is consigned to anonymity and damnation, due to his indifference to the beggar in his midst. (Lk.16:19-31) One seeks, but cannot come to conversion; the other cannot see beyond

his life of ease. St. Paul offers us a sobering image on worldly wealth: “Their end is destruction. Their god is their stomach...their minds are occupied with earthly things.” (Phil.3:19)

St. Vincent de Paul saw poverty not only as a means for ministry, but an evangelical end: achieving a life of union with Jesus Christ. Members of the Vincentian Family who take the vow of poverty, along with our laity whose baptismal vows commit them to our charism, must strive for conversion to Christ before we can walk in the world of the poor. To ready his first followers for this path, Vincent said: “Let us seek to lead strong interior lives, to make Jesus Christ reign in us...let us seek the glory of God and the reign of Jesus Christ.” (Vol. XII, Conf. 198).

This season of grace is a time to seek and savor both the riches and poverty that Lent offers. Its riches are many: a treasure trove of Gospel and daily Scriptures for reflection and prayer; devotions centering on Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection; moments of quiet in the presence of the Lord assessing the direction of our lives; and sharing in the sacramental life of the Church, including the sacrament of penance. Lent is a season providing great spiritual nourishment.

Lent is also a time of confrontation, as we come face to face with the poverty in ourselves. What holds me back from living as a disciple of Jesus and follower of St. Vincent? What worries and fears lurk in the dark places of my mind and heart, blocking God’s grace, and keeping me from serving those in need? In experiencing emptiness, Lent leads us to Jesus, who helps us pray from the heart, discipline our desires, and give generously of our time, talent, and treasure. When we do this, we act in solidarity with the Lord who comes in the least among us.

The ‘Logic’ of Love

In his first *Message for Lent*, Pope Francis described the Incarnation of Jesus as “the logic of love”. Christ entered the human condition to “be among people who need forgiveness, and to take upon himself the burden of our sins. In this way, he chose to comfort us, to save us, and to free us from our misery.” (Message, 2014) It might seem strange linking ‘logic’ and ‘love’ in the same phrase. But in accepting the Father’s mission of salvation, Jesus reveals its purpose: to manifest fearless love and selfless service to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth.

What motivated and drove Jesus’ mission was his unity with the Father, and a desire to share God’s unceasing love with all, especially the poor. Pope Francis noted that “love makes us all similar, it creates equality, and it breaks down walls and eliminates distances.” In the Incarnation, “God did this with us.” (Message, 2014) At its core, Jesus’ love for us is a truly sacrificial one, a “love unto death”. (Rom. 5:8) Lent is the time to ponder and remember that love.

St. Vincent came to believe in and to embrace this ‘logic of love’. As the Lord gave him deeper faith, it freed him to love God, serve the poor, motivate and equip his Missioners, Daughters of Charity, and laity to do the same. In the poor, Vincent met the suffering Christ and became a true disciple and servant. He reminds us that despite their outer appearances, the poor “are taking the place of the Son of God who chose to be poor”, and that “we ought to have the

same spirit and imitate Christ's actions...take care of the poor, console them, help them, and support their cause." (Liturgy of the Hours, vol. IV, 27 September, Office of Readings) Vincent's Christ-centered spirituality became the genius of his apostolate in serving the poor.

This Lent, I suggest you take time to read and reflect on the life and writings of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Many excellent printed and digital resources are available to us. Renewing the bond we share with our Holy Founders deepens our understanding of them and an appreciation of our charism, awakening a desire to be more and to do more as disciples of Jesus.

To recognize and encounter 'People on the Periphery'

The 'logic of love' Jesus modeled by his life led Vincent and Louise to serve the poor and the 'people on the periphery.' In a meeting with the Union of Superior Generals, Pope Francis challenged us to motivate our members to go out to the margins: "We have to look at things from the periphery. We have to go there in order to really know the life of the people." (Vatican Press Office, November 2013) I know this is easier said than done, so where do we start?

We can start with the Lenten Sunday Gospels. They provide opportunities to reflect on the 'people on the periphery' before we encounter them in ministry. Beginning with the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert (Mt. 4:1-11), we see how Christ chose to enter the periphery by going to the desert, a place of danger and desolation to fast, pray, and endure temptation. But Jesus overcame it all. Thus, the periphery became a springboard for the public ministry of Jesus.

There are many Lenten scriptural passages that speak of the "people on the periphery", but two in John's Gospel stand out. They are the encounters of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn. 4), and the man born blind whom Jesus heals (Jn. 9). Jesus sees two people stigmatized by society and religious officials, due to behavior or illness. He enters their lives, heals them, binds up their wounds, and leads them from the periphery back into the community.

The lives of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were a continual journey to people on the periphery; to help, guide, lead, and empower them. Perhaps this Lent can be a time to reflect and pray on new ways to seek out people on the periphery in our own settings. Pope Francis said there is but one true poverty: "not living as children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ." (Message, 2014) Let this Lent guide us to seek and serve the poor in Christ and Christ in the poor.

Challenging the "Globalization of Indifference"

The theme of this letter and the image displayed on the first page highlight Lampedusa, a small island off Sicily that has become a flashpoint for asylum-seeking refugees. Tragedy struck recently when an overloaded boat sank, killing hundreds of men, women, and children from Libya and Eritrea. Fr. Zeracristos, our Assistant General, was called away from our retreat to go to a morgue to identify some of the dead who were from his village in Eritrea. Like millions before them, they are anonymous 'people on the periphery', relegated to the ash heap of history.

Pope Francis made his first trip of his papacy outside Rome to Lampedusa. There, he prayed, visited survivors, thanked those caring for the refugees, and put a wreath in the ocean in memory of the dead. In his homily at a Mass that day, the Holy Father coined a poignant phrase defining the reason for the plight of these and countless other ‘people on the periphery’. He called it the “globalization of indifference”. Here is an excerpt from his homily that day:

“The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, indeed; it even leads to the **globalization of indifference**. We become used to the suffering of others: it doesn’t affect or concern me; it’s none of my business! Has any one of us wept because of this situation and others like it?” (*Homily, 8 July 2013*)

As with poverty, war, violence, and acts of terror, indifference also kills: not only people, but the human spirit as well. Overcoming the “globalization of indifference” starts when each member of the Vincentian Family recognizes one’s riches and poverty before the Lord and then decides to put them at the service of our Vincentian charism for the good of God’s poor. This Lenten season, we who share the heritage of hope - our Vincentian charism - should see these words of the Holy Father as a clarion call to conversion. On Ash Wednesday, the Scriptures tell us what makes for a Lenten conversion: “Rend your hearts, not your garments.” (Joel 2:13)

Lent’s gifts are paradoxical, but they reaffirm a great truth: in bringing both our poverty and riches to the Lord, we are renewed and strengthened as followers of Jesus in the Vincentian way. May Christ’s riches and poverty be yours, bringing you blessings and a fruitful Lent!

Your brother in St. Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

-Quotations of Pope Francis taken from publications on the Vatican web site: www.vatican.va