



Rome, 13 February 2023

LENTEN LETTER

“Making our families and communities a foretaste of heaven”

Dear members of the Vincentian Family Movement,

May the grace and peace of Jesus be always with us!

From the creation of the world, God wished that not a single human being would live in a hermetic environment, where there would be no connection whatsoever with another person, an island in an ocean where there would be no possibility of movement anywhere, where the only person she or he would meet in the whole world would be herself or himself and no one else. On the contrary, from the creation of the world, God wished that human beings would be in continuous relationships and contact, needing one another for the sake of personal growth, having other persons as mirrors in which they could see much more objectively the dark as well as the bright areas of their being. In the beginning, God created man and woman from whom families were formed. This universal model of being together was replicated in all societies and throughout human history up to our day.

Consecrated people often use the word “communities” to designate families that are put together to form regions, vice-provinces, provinces, and congregations. Even contemplative congregations have the same way of being together, as do hermits who most of the time live alone physically but are part of a community, a family. Likewise, lay associations use different names to highlight members’ being together, words like groups, or teams, etc. in which a certain number of persons gather for specific reasons and objectives. God shapes our lives in this way with a very concrete objective, mission.

Behind it all, there is Jesus’s only desire to see all of humanity in “Heaven,” in a state of “Eternal Happiness,” in a state of “never-ending fulfilment of our biggest dreams and desires.” Our families, communities, groups, teams, etc. are paths to reach that goal. Thus,

we are encouraged to contribute to building excellent families, communities, groups, and teams to collaborate in Jesus's deepest desire.

Saint Vincent de Paul, the Mystic of Charity, made being together very much part of his charism and spirituality. Community living is, in fact, one of the essential ways of living out the Vincentian Charism and Spirituality. The more we put our hearts and our all into building healthy, deeply spiritual, contemplative families, communities, groups, and teams, the more we will realize our dreams and goals, the more we will fulfill the mission Jesus entrusted to each of us on earth.

As human beings, we know well that we are not perfect. We are especially aware of this in a relationship when our different thoughts, views, priorities and personalities meet and, instead of happiness, produce sadness, disappointment, pain, rejection. As Saint Vincent wrote to one of his Brothers:

If it is true that you know yourself so well, you should consider yourself unworthy of living, and be amazed at how God bears with you. The humility that must be born of this knowledge should cause you to keep yourself in the background rather than to put yourself forward. The graces God has granted you are for you alone, to make you better suited for the place and state in which He has placed you.¹

In my 2017 Lenten Letter, I reflected on the Holy Trinity as one of the foundations of Vincentian Spirituality. I would like to come back to some of the points of that letter that can help us to build healthy, deeply spiritual, contemplative families, communities, groups, and teams.

What is the message of the Holy Trinity for me personally, for the family, community, group, team to which I belong?

Jesus helps us understand the Holy Trinity: the identity, mission, and purpose of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus helps us to understand the relationship among the three Persons, the inner connectivity among them, and the influence of the Trinity on each individual person, on each family, community, group, team.

As we discover and develop, with God's grace, an unbreakable bond between the Trinity and the individual person, between the Trinity and the family, community, group, team, we will get ever closer to the ideal model of "relationships," basic components of our

¹ CCD VI, 165; letter 2181 to a Coadjutor Brother, 10 December 1656. CCD refers to the series, *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; future references to this work will use, as above, the initials, CCD, followed by the volume number, then the page number.

lives, where, in the depth of our being, we are one with God, which means, with the Trinity and with each other.

Jesus communicated to us what we know about the Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus presented the Trinity to us as the ideal model of “relationships.”

Our reflection on the Trinity needs to be accompanied by the wish and goal of incarnating that ideal model of “relationships” in the concrete life situation in which we find ourselves, in the family, community, group, team to which we belong.

The Holy Trinity is the ideal model of “relationships”! Jesus shows us the ideal.

The mutual relationship between the Father and the Son.

The mutual relationship between the Father and the Spirit.

The mutual relationship between the Son and the Spirit.

The relationship among the Father, Son, and Spirit.

What can we see in these “relationships”?

- 1) We can see that the attention is always directed to the other person and not to oneself.
- 2) We can see that the priority is always given to the other person and not to oneself.
- 3) We can see that praise, thankfulness, admiration are always given to the other person and not to oneself.
- 4) We can see that each one of the three Persons of the Trinity always expresses the need for collaboration with the other Person to fulfill the mission.
- 5) We can see that each of the three Persons of the Trinity always clearly expresses that it would be insufficient and ineffective for each of them to act alone.

What does the model of relationships in the Trinity say to me about my own life in:

- a) my relationship with God,
- b) my relationship to the community?

Saint Vincent teaches us how to apply the Trinity’s model of relationships to ours in our family, community, group, team:

If we want to have within us the image of the adorable Trinity and a holy relationship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, let’s establish ourselves in this spirit. What creates unity and single-mindedness in God, if not equality and the distinction of the Three Persons? And what creates Their love if not Their resemblance? And if there were no love among Them, what would be loveable in Them, said the Blessed Bishop of Geneva? So then, there’s uniformity in the Blessed Trinity: what the Father wants, the Son wants; what the Holy Spirit does, the Father and the Son do and act the same way; They have only one power and one way of acting. That’s the source of holiness and

our model. Let's make ourselves uniform; we'll be many as if we were only one, and we'll have holy union in plurality. If we already have a little, but not enough, let's ask God for what we lack, and see in what we differ from one another in order to try to resemble one another and be equal; for resemblance and equality engender love, and love tends toward unity. So then, let's all strive to have the same likings and to be in agreement regarding the things that are done or are allowed to be done among us.²

Live together as having but one heart and one soul (cf. Acts 4:32) so that by this union of spirit you may be a true image of the unity of God, since your number represents the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity.

I pray for this to the Holy Spirit, who is the union of the Father and the Son, that He may be yours likewise and give you profound peace in the midst of contradictions and difficulties, which can only be frequent among the poor. But remember also that this is your cross, by which Our Lord calls you to Himself and to His peace. Everyone has a high opinion of your work, and good people acknowledge that there is no other work on earth more honorable or holy, when it is performed faithfully.³

As a complement to contemplation of the Trinity, the mural made by Brother Mark Elder, CM, at the entrance of the General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission of Saint Vincent de Paul in Rome, can help us to reflect on ways to strengthen our families, communities, groups, and teams for the mission. As members of the Vincentian Family Movement, we are invited to continue integrating ever more in our own lives, and in the lives of our families, communities, groups, and teams, the Vincentian Charism and Spirituality.

Placed at the entrance of the house, the first thing every person who comes from outside into the house sees is the mural, covering all four walls of the main entrance. On the front wall, we see the image of Saint Vincent de Paul made up of countless faces of different persons, who symbolically represent the whole Vincentian Family Movement and those whom we are called to serve. The Vincentian Family Movement, at any point of history, is a continuous portrait of Saint Vincent.

The wall on the left side represents the five virtues that shape our Vincentian identity: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal for the salvation of souls. Although every Congregation or Lay Association belonging to the Vincentian Family may emphasize some of these or other gospel virtues more than others, all of them very much shape and enrich our Vincentian identity.

² CCD XII, 210-211; conference 206, "On Uniformity," 23 May 1659.

³ CCD IV, 238-239; letter 1389 to Sister Anne Hardemont in Hennebont, 30 July 1651.

The wall on the right side represents the evangelical counsels or, as we also call them, vows: chastity, poverty, obedience. Each person is called to live the evangelical counsels according to his or her own identity, as lay persons or persons in consecrated life. Among the different Congregations, we may find an addition vow or vows, such as the vow of stability depicted on this mural.

The fourth wall is the wall of the main entrance, or rather, the wall of the exit from the house. What do we see? On the top of the wall, over the main door, we see the image of the Holy Spirit and the word “Evangelize.” On both sides of the main door we see a wheat field where the wheat is mixed with the same human faces that make up Saint Vincent’s portrait on the first wall we see as we enter the house.

Allow me to make a comparison. The richness of icons, frescos, liturgical singing, candles, the smell of incense, and rituals in Byzantine churches makes you feel as if you are in Heaven, experiencing the Heavenly Liturgy when you are in the church, present at the Eucharist. The world outside the church is radically different, but upon entering the church and participating in the Eucharist, you enter Heaven. Filled with all the needed graces, from the church, you go back into the world.

The same might be said about the mural we just described. Filled with the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Vincentian Charism and Spirituality, we go out, as the mural invites us, into the wheat fields of the world, to evangelize.

Before going into the wheat fields of the world, our families, communities, groups, and teams need to be shaped on the model of the Holy Trinity, clothed with the Vincentian Charism and Spirituality, so we as families, communities, groups, and teams will be filled with the Spirit, and then go out into the world to bring the Good News to the Poor!

“May He [God] grant all of you [the grace] of living in such a way that the good odor of your life and work will attract others for the growth of our holy religion.”⁴

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Tomaž Mavrič, CM

⁴ Cf. *CCD* V, 435; letter 1924 to Charles Ozenne in Krakow, 24 September 1655.