

***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has sent me to bring good news to the poor*** (Luke 4:18).

*Evangelizare pauperibus misit me.*

These words of the Lord place us at the very heart of our celebration today. These words resounded time and time again from the soul and the lips of Vincent de Paul. These same words resound and indeed ought to resound from the lips and the heart of every Vincentian who follows Vincent's path. We have gathered here this afternoon to celebrate an act of thanksgiving on the 350th anniversary of the death of Saint Louise de Marillac and Saint Vincent de Paul. The beginning of this Jubilee Year was celebrated in the place where these saints lived and today we are participating in the closing of this Jubilee in the Papal Basilica which preserves the most ancient memories of the Church and, beginning with that of Saint Peter, guards the bodies of so many martyrs, in the *very heart of the Catholic Church: a vibrant heart, thanks to the Holy Spirit who always keeps it alive*<sup>[1]</sup>. As sons and daughters of Vincent and Louise we place ourselves on the uninterrupted line of pilgrims who throughout the centuries have come here to pray before the tomb of Peter, who have come here to prolong his profession of faith: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God* (Matthew 16:16). This is Peter's profession of faith, the unbreakable faith of the Church, the faith that animated Vincent and Louise. This is also our faith.

We are here this afternoon to repeat our hymn of thanksgiving, to sing with the psalmist: *Lauda anima mea Dominum (Let my soul praise the Lord)*. **Thank you** for having given the world and us Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, two geniuses of charity and two athletes of holiness ... thank you for having given them to the world and to each one of us. **Thank you** for the countless sons and daughters who have followed the example of our Founders and have embraced the invitation *ad evangelizare pauperibus (to evangelize the poor)*. The thanksgiving that is raised up to the Lord profoundly moves us as we see the fruitfulness of the Vincentian charism in the Church. This afternoon countless sons and daughters of Vincent and Louise have gathered together here with the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity in order to give thanks to

the Lord. We are part of a family that is composed of more than three hundred groups, institutes and movements who share the same charism and who have chosen to dedicate themselves completely to the apostolate of the poor, that is, to those persons who they recognize as *their lords and masters*[2]. All of you in positions of leadership of the different branches of the Vincentian Family and all who are members of this spiritual family who are united in love: love of God and love of the poor, allow me to extend to all of you, a warm and fraternal embrace. I especially want to greet and thank the superior of the Congregation of the Mission, Father Gregory Gay and the superior of the Daughters of Charity, Sister Evelyne Franc, and together with them the leaders of the International Association of Charity and the Saint Vincent de Paul Society.

This Jubilee Year has emphasized two key words: *charity* and *mission*. The Holy Father in his letter to the Superior Generals highlighted this reality: *placing this Jubilee under the sign of charity and mission you have desired to rightly reveal something at the very heart of the heritage you have received*[3]. Charity and mission have been the hinges of the life and action of Vincent and Louise, cornerstones that they wanted to leave to us and which are expressed in their first works: *The Confraternities of Charity, The Daughters of Charity, and The Priests of the Mission*. A famous and illustrious group of personalities became outstanding in France during the 1600's. In literature (it is enough to recall here Corneille, Racine and Molière), in philosophy the *cógito* of René Descartes and the *Pensées* of Pascal: *What a difference there is between knowing God and loving God*[4]. This was the century of Richelieu and Mazarin and the countless intrigues for power. This was also the century of Saint Francis de Sales, Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle, Jean-Jacques Olier and the grater orator, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet.

But the XVII century was also a time of spiritual and material misery. Vincent de Paul wrote to Pope Innocent X and as he described the situation he asked for the Pope's intervention: *Confident of your paternal affection, with which you graciously hear and receive all your children, even the least, dare I also make known to you the very pitiful state of our France, which is most deserving of compassion. The royal house is divided by dissensions, the people are split into various factions; cities and provinces are ruined by civil wars; farms, cantons, and towns are destroyed, ruined, and burned. The farmers cannot harvest what they have sown and no longer plant anything for the coming years. Soldiers do as they please; the*

*people are exposed not only to their thefts and pillaging, but also to murder and all kinds of torture. Most of the country people are perishing of starvation if not by the sword. Not even priests escape the soldiers' hands; they are treated with inhuman cruelty, tortured and killed. Young women are raped, and even nuns are victims of their lust and fury. Churches are profaned, plundered, and destroyed; those left standing are, for the most part, abandoned by their pastors, so the people are deprived of the sacraments ...[5]*

In light of this situation Saint Vincent prepared himself to evangelize the poor. He said to his missionaries: *So, our vocation is to go, not just to one parish, not just to one diocese, but all over the world; and to do what? To set people's hearts on fire, to do what the Son of God did. He came to set the world on fire in order to inflame it with His love. What do we have to desire but that it may burn and consume everything. My dear confreres, let's reflect on that, please. It's true then, that I'm sent not only to love God but to make Him loved. It's not enough for me to love God, if my neighbor doesn't love Him[6].*

Our mission is to inflame the hearts of people. *Charity and mission are two sides of the same coin: love God and make God loved by other people; to love the Lord and to love one's brothers and sisters; affective and effective love: Let us love God, my brothers, but let us be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows [7]. To be a Christian and to see our brother suffering without weeping with him, without being sick with him! That's to be lacking in charity; it's being a caricature of a Christian; it's inhuman; it's to be worse than animals[8].* Vincent did not hesitate to say that the Church had greater need for apostolic men than for contemplatives: *The Church ... has a great need for evangelical men who work to purify, enlighten, and unite her to her Divine Spouse[9].* Vincent wrote to Claude Dufour, a missionary who wanted to abandon the Company in order to enter the Carthusians: *the apostolic life does not exclude contemplation but encompasses it and profits by it to know better the eternal truths it must proclaim. In addition, it is more helpful to our neighbor, whom we are obliged to love as ourselves and consequently to assist in a way solitaries do not[10].* Vincent invited the

missionaries to be Carthusians in their houses and apostles outside them<sup>[11]</sup>.

We often run the risk of being Christian in name only, or worse, of being Vincentian in name only because we lack a continual union, a back and forth movement between contemplation and action, because we have forgotten to kneel before the Father and prepare ourselves with the sweat of our brow. In our apostolate we often lack knees, arms and sweat. It is true that there are different ways of speaking about spirituality. Our spirituality is one of incarnation, a spirituality of service and not one that seeks refuge in the world of the spirit in which everything is perfect and pure but rather a spirituality that recovers its original character of life according to the Spirit. We discover that our spirituality is rooted in daily life, with its hardships and tensions, with its delights and disappointments, thus revealing sound spiritual paths — personal and community spiritual paths — paths that are filled with life and mystery.

In order to remain firm in this spirit and in order to persevere, Saint Louise invited the Daughters to a great love: *I desire all of them to be filled with a great love which will immerse them so sweetly in God and so charitably in the service of the poor that their hearts will no longer have place for so many thoughts which endanger their perseverance. Courage then, my dear Sisters! Seek only to please God by faithfully observing His commandments and evangelical counsels because the goodness of God has deigned to call us to this. This should lead us to observe our Rules exactly but also cheerfully and diligently. Serve your masters with great gentleness*<sup>[12]</sup>.

Thus the center of the life of our Founders is Jesus: his incarnation and mission. *Jesus Christ is our father and mother: he is our everything*, are the surprising words of Saint Vincent. Again he stated: *The primary objective to which God has called us is that of loving our Lord Jesus Christ ... if we distance ourselves even a little from the thought that the poor are living members of Christ, we diminish within ourselves charity and gentleness*. Vincent did not encourage people to lose themselves in God but rather to consume themselves for God and in God. In fact charity is born from an undistracted attention to the reality that we are united to Christ, living and recognized and loved. According to his biographers, *Jesus was*

the last word that Saint Vincent spoke before he died. Also in the Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity we read: *Christ is the rule of the Daughters of Charity. They endeavor to follow Him as Scripture reveals Him to them and as their Founders perceived Him: Adorer of the Father, Servant of His Loving Plan, Evangelizer of those who are poor*[13]. Christ is essential. With our hearts in Christ and with Christ's heart we can regenerate the will to love the poor, *our lords and masters*[14]. This is the mission that Vincent entrusted to Louise and in Louise was entrusted to all the Daughters: *Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil and finally, that he may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works*[15].

This is a demanding path, one that reveals all our weaknesses: our faltering faith, the difficulties that our communities encounter in welcoming all persons, the weariness from our charitable activity that does not allow us to interpret the events of life nor enables us to live a life that is unified. The difficulties that often surround an attempt to understand a world that is changing and the harshness of the confrontation with the world has given rise to feelings of ineffectiveness in our activity and this had led to frustration in many communities of religious men and women. More and more frequently this weariness leads to activism, the result of an anxious and fearful generosity of individuals closed in upon themselves or communities to focused on their own activities, plans and initiatives.

We know that the difficult times arise when we fail to ground ourselves in that which is essential, when we do not allow the grounding to become more profound, and it is then that fervent prayer is necessary so that the Holy Spirit might once again descend upon us and fill our daily activity. These are the times when the words of the Lord Jesus should resound in our hearts: *Take courage, I have conquered the world* (John 16:33).

The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission ask us to remain in a continual state of renewal, faithful to the gospel, attentive to the signs of the time, opening up new ways and using new means adapted to the circumstances of time

and place[16]. This continual state of renewal ought to be above all else a work of the Spirit: the Spirit continually makes us new creatures who are able to provide concrete and durable responses to the urgent demands of our time.

Pope Benedict writes: *The Christian's programme —the programme of the Good Samaritan, the programme of Jesus—is "a heart which sees". This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly[17].* The Lord gave Vincent and Louise hearts that were *big, vast and ample[18]*, and in their hearts they were able to embrace all men and all women. Saint Vincent told the Missionaries: *If we can do nothing of ourselves, we can do everything with God. Yes, the Mission can do anything because we have in us the seeds of the omnipotence of Jesus Christ. That's why no one can excuse himself on the grounds of his powerlessness; we'll always have greater strength than is needed, especially when the occasion arises; for, when it does, a man feels like a completely new man[19].*

From the time of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise until today, many things have changed, but the demand for love today is just as real as it was in the seventeenth century, perhaps even more real. The accelerated changes that characterize the world in which we live and the repercussions that this has on our way of thinking about life, the human person and the religious dimension of the person ... all of this demands that each one of us and every Christian community become ever more aware of this situation. How can the voices of these two saints find echo in the present world, every more secularized and focused on itself and in the midst of a unprecedented world crisis, a crisis that is moral, cultural, economic, and spiritual? In a world in which people live as though God did not exist *there is a sort of fear of silence, of recollection, of thinking of one's own actions, of the profound meaning of one's life. All too often people prefer to live only the fleeting moment, deceiving themselves that it will bring lasting happiness; they prefer to live superficially, without thinking, because it seems easier; they are afraid to seek the Truth or perhaps afraid that the Truth will find us, will take hold of us and change our life[20].* How can Vincent's and Louise's lived experience of God be useful to us? In what way can we, as Vincentians, continue to be worthy children of our Founders?

To be Vincentian today means that we continue to follow Christ, the evangelizer of the poor and that we place Jesus and his mission in a primary position in our life. To be Vincentian today means that we are missionaries who inflame the hearts of

people with a lifestyle of simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal[21]. To be Vincentian today means that we are Carthusians in our homes and apostles outside the home. To live the Vincentian spirit is to live as the Son who has been given to us as a model: the same total love, a love that day by day becomes a word of trust, a gesture of mercy, an attitude of awareness and gratitude, a commitment that shares the concerns of the search for meaning and freedom that so many desire. This love opens the door to a definitive life beyond the realms of death.

A Vincentian ought to have something more than mere knowledge of the poor: true Vincentians know Christ and place Christ at the center of their lives; they know Saint Vincent and Saint Louise and the other Vincentian saints; they know the poor [22]. They allow themselves to be evangelized and changed by the poor and they work and labor on behalf of the poor because *charity cannot remain idle*. [23] To be Vincentian means that our hearts are filled with imagination because *Charity is inventive to infinity*[24]. Vincentians kneel down and use their arms and the sweat of their brow. Above all else, Vincentians are *totally for God and for the service of the people*[25].

Saint Vincent frequently said that charity is a *fire* that inflames people[26]. Through the intercession and the example of Vincent and Louise and all the Vincentian saints, let us allow ourselves to be enflamed with this love. I conclude with the words and the exhortation of Saint Louise, asking God to bless all our undertakings: *Please continue to serve our dear master with great gentleness, respect, and cordiality, always seeing God in them*[27].

[1] Benedict XVI, Address on the occasion of his Visit to Saint Peter's Factory, March 14, 2007.

[2] CCD, IX:97; SVP, IX:119; SVP:ES, IX:125.

[3] Benedict XVI, *Letter to the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*

and the Superior General of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, June 14, 2010.

[4] Blaise Pascal, *Pensieri*, 280.

[5] Antonio Sicari, *Santi nella carità discepoli, amici di Vincenzo di Paoli*, 1998, ed. Jaca Book; CCD, IV:445; SVP:ES, IV:427.

[6] CCD, XII:215; SVP, XII:262; SVP:ES, 553.

[7] CCD, XI:32; SVP, XI:40; SVP:ES, XI:539.

[8] CCD, XII:222; SVP, XII:271; SVP:ES, XII:561

[9] CCD, III:204; SVP, III:202; SVP:ES, III:181

[10] CCD, III:344; SVP, III:246-247; SVP:ES, III:320.

[11] Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, New Rochelle, N.Y., 1993, Volume I, page 124.

[12] *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, New City Press, Brooklyn, New York, 1991 p. 75.

[13] *Constitutions and Statutes of the Company of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul*, C.,.8.

[14] CCD, XI:97; SVP, IX:119; SVP:ES, IX:125.

[15] CCD, I:64-65; SVP:ES, I:135-136.

[16] *Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission*, #2.

[17] Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, #31b.



[18] CCD, XI:192-193; SVP, XI:203; SVP:ES, XI:3:122.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, August 25, 2010.

[21] Cf. Coste I (Translator's Note: No volume or page number is given in this citation).

[22] Cf. Robert P. Maloney, *Abdate in tutto il mondo! Predicate il Vangelo ad ogni creatura. La spiritualità missionaria de San Vincenzo de Paoli*, a cura de S.ANGIULI, Edizione Vincenziani, Napoli.

[23] CCD, XII:216; SVP, XII:264, SVP:ES, XI:4:444

[24] CCD, XI:131; SVP, XI:142-148; SVP:ES, XI:3:65

[25] CCD, XII:357; SVP, XI:402; SVP:ES, XI:3:281.

[26] CCD, XI:203; SVP:ES, XI:132.

[27] *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, p. 421.