

CONGREGAZIONE DELLA MISSIONE - CURIA GENERALIZIA

ADVENT 2013



“...and a little child shall guide them.” Is. 11:6

To all members of the Vincentian Family:

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

This year, 2013, has been one of milestones. We celebrated the “Year of Faith” which coincided with the 50th anniversary of the start of the Second Vatican Council. This was also the year of “the two popes”, giving us two unlikely events not seen for centuries: the resignation of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and the election of a non-European, Pope Francis.

However, one milestone of 2013 that touched me deeply was attending the beatification of 42 members of the Vincentian Family in Tarragona, Spain. These Vincentians, Daughters of Charity, and a laywoman all gave their lives for the Catholic faith. As with Vincentian martyrs of past generations, these Spanish Vincentian Family members died as they lived: preaching Jesus Christ in the service of the poor. It is a powerful witness to ponder in this “Year of Faith”.

Placed near the end of the calendar year, Advent is a time of hope and renewal. It comes amidst changing seasons with less light and warmth as winter begins. But Advent is the ember of a fire stoking the hearth of the soul to a deeper reality: God is at work in our world, no matter what time or season. And in Jesus Christ, we find a reason for our hope and a way to renewal.

Hope and renewal are sorely needed in today’s world. The realities of war, violence, poverty, hunger, and injustice all plague us as we live out the Vincentian charism. However, they are not “problems to be solved” but points of entry into solidarity with the human family. Advent awakens and renews our hearts in hope with Christ, our way, truth, and life.

The Event: Incarnation

Our Advent Scripture readings show the longing of ancient Israel for not only a covenant, but a connection: human contact, to close the gap between heaven and earth. Isaiah foretold that

which Christians now know and rejoice in: *“The Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”* (Isa.7:14) Before we can welcome ‘God with us’, we must ready ourselves to receive this great gift. This is where the Advent season - its hymns, readings, and liturgy – assists to prepare to celebrate the Incarnation.

Our Advent readings, coming primarily from the prophet Isaiah and Matthew’s Gospel, provide us with a rich scriptural mosaic of God’s desires for the human family. Isaiah uses vivid images: scaling the *“mountain of the Lord”* (2:1-3); *“parched deserts”* into *“springs of life”* (35:1-2); and a ‘peaceable kingdom’, where *“the wolf shall be the guest of the lamb... the calf and young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them”* (11:6-8). Isaiah’s images symbolize God’s creative power for the good; the Divine desire to bring us healing and hope.

Matthew also present great images for Advent, such as Jesus’ call to *“Stay awake... at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come”* (24: 42, 44); the cry of John the Baptist to *“produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance”* (3:8); and Jesus’ work in bringing about God’s reign: *“the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them”* (11:5). In these stories of salvation, our Savior becomes one of us to do God’s work and save humanity. Let us resolve this Advent to allow these Scriptures to stir our imagination and deepen our identity with the Lord Jesus.

The Result: Transformation

It is not enough to “enjoy” Advent’s trappings and bask in the “glory of the Christmas story”. Like all moments in the Church’s life and liturgy, Advent is a season of formation for transformation. It challenges us to imitate Christ who, *“for your sake became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”* (2 Cor. 8:9) The poverty Jesus undertook for us and the richness he bestowed on us came in his incarnation, literally, his “enfleshment” of our human condition. How do we “enflesh” Christ in our lives?

Jesus’ total gift of himself to us sets the standard for discipleship with him and in living out our Vincentian charism. The transforming message of Advent is that the coming and birth of our Savior is God’s ultimate affirmation of the value of humanity and the worth of every person. As Jesus’ disciples, we need to put aside our own quests for status, security, and comfort, and become collaborators with Christ, allowing the needs of the “other” to be our own concern.

The donation of self in love of God and service of neighbor is the greatest gift we can give at Christmas, or at any time of year. To give of ourselves for the good of others, especially to our lords and masters, God’s poor, binds us to Jesus and the human family he redeemed. Advent is a time for transformation to a way of love that shows itself in solidarity with others.

Solidarity with others brings us into oneness with Christ, who came *“not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mk.10:45). In a world where suffering abounds, fear takes hold, and the poor are neglected, belittled, and abused, the “Good News” may seem an empty promise. But when entering into solidarity in Jesus’ name, we affirm God’s love to all, putting our lives at the service of the Gospel. Like our Holy Founders, Vincent and Louise we become *“ambassadors for Christ... God appealing through us.”* (2. Cor. 5:20)

The Response: Living Vincentian Virtues

A favorite poster I once received was of the back yard of a small country house. At its center was a woman hanging laundry out to dry, a familiar scene the world over. It held a simple message: *“Love is hard work.”* How true! Sometimes, the “hard work” of discipleship can feel overwhelming or impossible. That is how transformation starts: allowing the person of Jesus and the way of St. Vincent to shape our lives, so we become a virtuous extension of the Gospel.

St. Vincent stressed the virtues of simplicity and humility to follow Christ and serve in solidarity with the poor. Centuries later, they are still in season! In simplicity, we speak directly and honestly; to say what we mean and mean what we say. Humility keeps us grounded in God’s love, and not let our own biases keep us from serving Jesus. These virtues were Vincent’s spiritual roadmap; they helped him navigate the terrain of his interior life and generously respond to the demands of the apostolate. He said, *“Our Lord is found and is pleased only in humility of heart and simplicity in words and actions.”* (Vol. XII, # 204, P.182)

This Advent let us take time to examine the level of simplicity and humility in our own lives. Often at odds with the “ways of the world”, they were essential to Jesus and St. Vincent. In my travels, I am always edified in my encounters with the members of the Vincentian Family who live the virtues of simplicity and humility in word and deed. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, inspires the world with his great witness of simplicity and humility. Reflect on his words below:

“Look, there is Someone who wants what is good for you- Who calls you by name- and Who has chosen you. The one thing that is asked of you is that you let yourself be loved.”

It is a sentiment most appropriate as we begin our Advent journey. May God bless you!

Your brother in St. Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General