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John Freund C.M.

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Marguerite Naseau - pointing to Cyberspace?

BY

JOHN FREUND, C.M.

The following is the prepared text of a presentation which was to have been made to the Daughters of Charity gathered in Paris for their "Vincentian Month." The presentation was canceled due to the tragic events of September 11th, 2001. It was to include a demonstration of web sites illustrating many of the points made in this presentation.

Introduction

Does it make any sense to speak of walking in cyberspace with Marguerite Naseau?¹

At one level it is certainly an anachronism. But at another level it is entirely possible that Vincent would repeat what he said of Marguerite in 1642: "Certainly, certainly, my daughter, I advise you to do so."² Let us look at some hints from history to see why.

I. Hints from History

I invite you to reread with me Vincent's words about Marguerite Naseau. In 1642 Vincent said:

Moved by a powerful inspiration from Heaven, the idea occurred to her that she would instruct children and so she bought an alphabet but, as she could not go to school for instruction, she went and asked the parish priest or curate to tell her what were the first four letters of the alphabet. On another occasion, she asked what were the next four, and so on for the rest. . . . Little by little she learned to read, and she then taught the other girls of her village. She afterwards made up her mind to go from village to village instructing the young, accompanied by two or three other girls whom she had taught.³

¹ The inspiration for this article came as I was listening to a presentation of Sr. Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., speaking about Marguerite Naseau to the Ladies of Charity National Meeting in Washington, 7 September 2001.

² Cf. Lucie Rogé, D.C., "Contemplating Marguerite Naseau," *Echoes of the Company* (October 1970): 686.

³ "On the Virtues of Marguerite Naseau," July 1642, in *The Confernces of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M. (Great Britain: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1979), 71.

From Vincent's conference in 1646 we know how she then responded to another need and made a transition to new ministry of working with the sick. She was sent to the confraternity in the parish of Saint Savior where Dr. Levesque, of the faculty of Paris, taught her how to administer medicine and order whatever nursing services were necessary.

Vincent, nine years after her death, holds her up as a model when he said she "was the first Sister who had the happiness of pointing out the road to our Sisters, both in the education of young girls and in nursing the sick."⁴

Vincent had heartily endorsed her desire to teach the other girls in the fields, "Certainly certainly, my daughter, I advise you to do so," as quoted by Mother Lucie Rogé.⁵

Why do I begin with this story?

a) Marguerite was someone who saw a need.

Her vision, her goal was to help village girls of all ages become literate. And make no mistake about it, it was a radical vision for her day, a day in which people were dealing with survival needs and some were starving. In this she stands in a long line of people who look beyond immediate needs.

b) But it was also a vision fully compatible with the words of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity.

Built on respect, the indispensable basis of all evangelization: respect for person, for their way of life, for the socio-cultural realities of peoples, and for the Spirit of God at work in the world.⁶

c) No idle dreamer, with great courage and ingenuity she taught herself to read.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rogé, "Contemplating Marguerite," 686.

⁶ *Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity*, 2.9.

I cannot but think of Vincent's words to a dying brother much later in his life: "Love is inventive unto infinity."

d) Aware of her own needs she sought help in acquiring the skills she needed for her ministries.

First it was from a passerby who knew the alphabet. Later it was from a renowned physician at the local university.

e) She attracted others to work with her in fulfilling her vision.

She invited others to work with her. Their collaboration attracted still more. As Mother Lucie Rogé wrote, she "attracted to the work other girls whom she had helped" and who wished "to embrace a devout life."⁷ In this she exemplified the command of Vincent, "We should assist the poor in every way and do it both by ourselves and by enlisting the help of others. To do this is to preach the gospel by word and by work."

f) Further, she trusted in providence.

"Moved by a powerful inspiration from heaven. . . ."⁸ She had no financial resources in her project of teaching other girls to read. The only help she had was from divine providence. In this she imitated Vincent's dedication.

Marguerite Naseau also stands firmly in an ecclesial tradition that does whatever it takes to make God's love visible and known.

Phyllis Giroux, a Sister of Charity of Halifax, expresses this ecclesial tradition almost poetically when she writes that throughout the ages "we have proclaimed the love of God through stories told and stories scrolled, on catacomb walls, cathedrals reaching skyward, stained glass, in medieval calligraphy, in sculpture and statue, Gutenberg's press, electrical currents and illuminating light, radio waves, television signals, microwave beams, and now, computers and modems, the world wide web."⁹

⁷ "Virtues of Marguerite," *Conferences*, 72.

⁸ "Virtues of Marguerite," *Conferences*, 71.

⁹ Unpublished worship service. Used in "Tools for Prophets in an Information Age Workshop," Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1996.

From the beginning Vincentian men and women have stood firmly in this inventive tradition of using tools of communication in the service of the poor.

Vincent is reported to have written 30,000 letters. Surely no one would claim he wasted his time writing, or that he could have done more if he had not written so much. Communication was the life blood of his effectiveness. Part of his genius at networking lay in communicating his passion for those who were poor and giving expression to their needs. Regardless of the exact count, it is clear he used the available means of communication. We can only speculate how he would have used the phone and e-mail. What he would have done with e-mail is a legitimate question.

Other branches of the family embody this tradition. Any visitor to the international web site of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul¹⁰ sees the almost prophetic words of Frederic Ozanam emblazoned on its opening screen "I wish to embrace the globe in a network of charity."

So Marguerite, in her day, did the inventive and, I might add, radical thing when she taught country girls to read.

She responded to the cries of persons who are poor in ways which people of her day probably thought were wasteful, whether on the score of simply teaching reading while there was so much hunger, or teaching reading to women who would have no use for such skill. And yet, it was to this that Vincent said "Certainly, Certainly!"¹¹

By her example she challenges us to respond today with *Creative Fidelity* to our charism.

John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* invites all to follow: "a call to pursue competence in personal work and to develop a dynamic fidelity to their mission, adapting forms, if need be, to new situations and different needs, in complete openness to God's inspiration and to the Church's discernment."¹²

Centuries ago a Japanese poet, Basho, expressed this last point in a different way: "I do not wish to imitate what the great ones of the past did. I would rather seek what they sought."

I suspect this is part of what Vincent had in mind when he wrote, "And that was the beginning of your Company. As it was not then

¹⁰ www.ozanet.org

¹¹ Rogé, "Contemplating Marguerite," 686.

¹² Pope John Paul II, "Creative Fidelity," No. 37, *Vita Consecrata*. Delivered in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on 25 March 1996.

what it is now, there is reason to believe that it is still not what it will be when God has perfected it as he wants it."¹³

Thus the more appropriate question for reflection today is not what Marguerite did then but what would she do today, how would she seek to serve today.

II. Marguerite and the Cries of the poor today -- Seeking what Marguerite Sought (or Widening "Circles of Poverty" and Widening "Circles of Solidarity")

If we are seeking what Marguerite sought we must look to the needs of our day. Reverend Robert Maloney, C.M., has expressed his analysis of the world of today. In an address to the members of the Vincentian family gathered in Rome, July 1998, Reverend Maloney spoke of a "growing circle of poverty":

There are some striking realities that are very important for our family now as the year 2000 approaches. I will not attempt to prove them, since I think you all experience them in your own life and work. I merely mention them here very briefly as a preface . . .

1. The gap between the poor and the rich is growing wider. As Pope John Paul II pointed out in Brazil (1980), Canada (1984), and Cuba (1998), the rich are often richer precisely at the expense of the poor.

2. Poverty has new, and previously unknown, forms. Never has the world known so many refugees. Traffic in arms keeps local wars alive. The international debt creates staggering burdens in poor nations. New diseases like AIDS or new forms of old diseases, like malaria, are of epidemic proportions.

3. We are a huge family that can be a powerful force in the service of the poor, an "army," so to speak, with more than two million members.

¹³ *Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity.*

4. Rapid, almost instantaneous, communication among us is possible, with means like fax, e-mail and the internet.

It is my conviction that this widening circle of poverty needs to be matched by a widening "circle of solidarity." But it is not my conviction alone.¹⁴

Speaking at the Angelus on the Feast of Saint Vincent, Pope John Paul writes:

Only if the culture of solidarity grows within individuals and families, will it be possible to deal effectively with the great challenges of poverty and social injustice. . . . It is urgently necessary to promote a culture and policy of solidarity, beginning in the heart of each person, in his ability to let himself be challenged by those in need. Of course, given the complexity of these problems, personal commitment is not enough. Some problems, such as the international debt of poor countries, require a concerted response on the part of the international community.¹⁵

The internet provides us with another tool in forging a culture of solidarity. Instantaneous communications allows people oceans apart to learn of the tragedies that have befallen their brothers and sisters. The internet provides us the tools for raising our voices together in such a way that the powerful of the world will hear the cries of the poor. Will we use these tools?

Implications for the Vincentians

How can we mobilize this huge family to address these problems with Vincentian concreteness and practicality? How can we utilize the tools of communication in the service of our ministry?

¹⁴ Robert P. Maloney, C.M., to the members of the Vincentian Family gathered at the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, 13 July 1998.

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Angelus*, 27 September 1998.

What does it mean to stand at the side of the poor who are so often silenced in an information-based economy?

Are we being called, as Marguerite was, to see anew the need for literacy in a world increasingly controlled by those who have access to information and its technologies?

Are we being challenged to learn new ways for the more effective delivery of services, as well as giving voice to the voiceless?

What kind of formation is required to minister effectively in an information age?

All these questions are another way of raising the question of what it might mean to stand in the tradition of Marguerite Naseau. The more appropriate question is not what Marguerite did then, but what would she do today, how would she seek to serve today.

In short, what do we need to do to see, as Marguerite saw, and not merely do what she did? This is where, as we shall see, the internet in general, and “FamVin” in particular, can play a powerful role in building a culture of solidarity.

Call of the Church in an Information Age (or The Voice of the Church in an Information Age)

With increasing insistence the Church has called for involvement in technology. A decade ago Pope John Paul challenged us, “Whether we are young or old, let us rise to the challenge of new discoveries and technologies by bringing to them a moral vision rooted in our religious faith, in our respect for the human person, and our commitment to transform the world in accordance with God’s plan. On this World Communications Day, let us pray for wisdom in using the potential of the “computer age” to serve man’s human and transcendent calling, and thus give glory to the Father from whom all good things come.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, “The Church Must Learn to Cope with Computer Culture,” delivered on World Communications Day, 27 May 1990.

The Second Vatican Council called on the whole Church to attend to the “signs of the times.” It was the Pontifical Council for Social Communications that reminded us in *Aetatis Novae*: “. . .as the Church always must communicate its message in a manner suited to each age and to the cultures of particular nations and peoples, so today it must communicate in and to the emerging media culture.”¹⁷

The Bishop’s Conference of Peru has said it well, “Social communication is the new global form of love of neighbour and people. It is a love shown mainly through information and formation, helping people to think rather than suggesting how to think, assisting them in making choices and in their quest for personhood.”¹⁸

Roger Cardinal Mahony, Archbishop of Los Angeles, writes “These means are to be put to the service of our dialogue with the world, of human life and its full flourishing, of ecclesial communion, and a New Evangelization.”¹⁹

What does this mean for those who stand in the Vincentian tradition?

Pope John Paul II expressed a clear challenge to Vincentians gathered in 1988 when he asked that we address all forms of poverty, paying particular attention to underlying causes and long term solutions.

Cardinal Mahony identifies a series of “new justice issues” that seem in an increasing way to fall into these categories. He points to “a statistical correlation between the lack of information technology in the less developed countries and the poverty in those countries.” He aptly describes an “Information Apartheid” that develops as few of the world’s people have access to increasingly necessary means of communication and learning and even earning a living. He therefore concludes “What some “have” and many others “have not” is information -- and access to it. Thus, this is the key “new justice issue” posed by the Information Revolution.”²⁰

¹⁷ Pontifical Social Communications Council, “Media at the Service of Dialogue with the World,” No. 8, Pastoral Instruction on Social Communications, *Aetatis Novae*, 17 March 1992.

¹⁸ Web page, title caption. Attributed to the Bishops Conference of Peru.

¹⁹ Roger Cardinal Mahony, “The Church and the New Justice Issues: The Information Revolution and the New Haves and Have Nots,” presented at Denver, Colorado, 28 March 1998.

²⁰ Ibid.



Marguerite Naseau, whose work in educating illiterate young girls, and later aiding the sick, might be seen as a calling to us even still.

Public Domain

Perhaps a simpler way of stating this arises from our own Vincentian tradition. We are fond of referring to the following adage in our Vincentian family, "Give a person a fish and that person will eat for a day. But teach persons to fish and they will eat for a lifetime." In the increasingly information based economy that is hurtling at us through time this statement may be a half-truth.

What this image presumes is that the poor have tools with which to fish and a place in which to fish. Lacking these, all the knowledge in the world will not produce the next day's catch. Having information technology at one's disposal -- having access, both to the tools and knowledge, is one aspect of the long term solution.

It may well be that we need to reimagine Lazarus as begging for the crumbs from the information table that will be necessary to gain some measure of control over destiny.

Again, an international commission of the Benedictines writes, "Technological literacy in the contemporary world is as important and crucial as basic literacy or knowing how to drive. Access to information in today's culture empowers not only the person who has it but also the people who are served by that person."²¹

²¹ Benedictine Internet Commission, "Introduction," *Final Report*, 15 January 1998. Find it at: www.osb.org/bic/report.html

III. Responding to the Cries of the Poor -- How the internet helps

Our Vincentian heritage is clear, and the call of the Church becomes more emphatic each day. In the remainder of this article I will quickly review the way technology fosters the mission to which we have vowed ourselves. Direct service, giving voice to the voiceless, seeking long-term solutions, availing ourselves of the best possible formation, indeed all the ways of proclaiming the saving love of our God and widening the circle of solidarity can benefit from a wise use of technology. When all is said and done technology can be one of the most powerful tools in fulfilling our mission.

Direct Service

Emergency and disaster relief. We have the example of Vincent. In his biography of Vincent, Román writes:

Although at the outset he was very much opposed to the idea, Vincent decided to capitalize on that enormous stack of reports and mount a publicity campaign to attract further support. Every month he would read out to the Ladies in Paris the amount of aid distributed, and in this way he encouraged them to persevere in their efforts; 'they were very encouraged.' He started something else -- a technique he was to perfect later on -- to send the most heart-rending of the letters he received to various places, 'to move the rich to compassion by describing such suffering, and also to give encouragement to benefactors by letting them see the happy result of their almsgiving.' These letters were passed around from hand to hand so the effect was multiplied.²²

²² José María Román, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, trans. Joyce Howard, D.C. (London: Melisende, 1999), 518.

Again Román writes:

The first thing they had to do was to organize a publicity campaign. His experience in Lorraine had shown him that this was absolutely essential. On that occasion the missionaries' letter had proved a very effective lever for moving people's hearts and gathering in funds. Vincent decided to use the same method again and he would perfect his techniques and extend the range of his influence. Instead of using hand-written copies, he decided to have pamphlets printed and these were distributed all over Paris. These pamphlets indicated the places where alms should be deposited. All this must seem self evident today when worldwide campaigns for all sorts of needs are a common place. In seventeenth century France it was a novelty. The credit for inventing the system should be given to Vincent de Paul.²³

Surely Vincent would not hesitate a moment to embrace the use of e-mail and web sites to make need known.

For those who have not yet experienced the internet as a new way of doing what Vincent did, let me share with you some experiences showing how the Vincentian Family has already utilized this new technology to address emergency needs.

In the past few years we have seen and heard of floods and earthquakes -- Columbia, Turkey and Madagascar to mention a few. Through the use of e-mail such as the Vincent list, Ozanet (the e-mail link of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul), and other Vincentian Family sponsored electronic newsletters, very significant amounts of money have been raised. Today the internet provides an improved kind of communication once possible only through shortwave. Pictures posted on the internet can speak even more eloquently than letters and voices, and thus move hearts.

A small but very specific example of this is the collection of funds among the students of Saint John's Preparatory school in New York, a

²³ Román, *Biography*, 572.

secondary school with a long Vincentian history, on behalf of the students in the Saint Georges-Kolleg Istanbul which is administered by the members of the Austrian province of the Congregation of the Mission. The two student groups had been in e-mail contact prior to the major earthquake of 1999, and exchanged pictures on their respective web sites. Students, themselves poor, gave of their means to aid the rebuilding effort in a far away land.

Delivery of services especially the “Globalization of Charity” campaign of the Vincentian Family

The current two year focus of the family on “The Globalization of Charity: The Struggle Against Hunger” provides a rich new way of coordinating the efforts of the various branches of the family united in a common cause.

The internet will serve as a powerful tool in this collaborative project. Through the use of e-mail and web sites we can accomplish much in the way of consciousness raising about the problem, coordinating our direct services to provide food for the hungriest, advocating for long range solutions and systemic changes required to end food inequity.

Since the technology is still new to many of us we will probably just scratch the surface of what can be done, and done more effectively using the tools of technology.

In his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* Pope John Paul calls us to “launch out into the deep.”²⁴ We would be poor stewards of our charism and mission if we did not voyage out into cyberspace and if we failed to use these powerful tools. It would be the poor who would suffer from our timidity.

There are many other ways we can directly improve the situation of the poor using the internet.

Increasingly the internet will allow missionaries in remote areas to have access to the best available medical advice from large medical facilities run by various branches of our family. Through a program often called “twinning” these medical centers can provide many forms of timely assistance to remote areas.

Already, other religious communities are setting up web sites which provide pathways of direct access for poor artisans to world markets,

²⁴ Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Bishops Clergy and Lay Faithful at the close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000,” No. 1.

without the limiting and expensive intermediaries who so often exact benefits far greater than their services are worth. What good is producing a product if you have no market to sell it to, or if most of the benefit goes to what are called "middlemen"?

There are so many inventive ways of inviting others into the circle of solidarity. What might not be so obvious is how the internet can extend the functional life of long-time community members and of those whose mobility is restricted.

For example, a retired community member can be an invaluable resource as a cyber-chaplain to discussion lists of various types. A further example is the rapidly growing phenomenon of the new life the Web has injected to senior residences and nursing homes. The stereotype of being too old to learn new tricks shatters as seniors in the secular world seek and find intellectual stimulation and companionship on the internet. They discover new ways to expand the boundaries of their lives. Evidence is beginning to accumulate that the mental stimulation of contact with a world outside of a given health facility aids in maintaining mental alertness.

What an opportunity to reflect on the spiritual meaning of life's passages. Mobility and physical strength, so necessary for other forms of direct service, may even be inconsequential as new avenues of service develop. Although nothing can replace a warm smile or a friendly touch, we have all experienced the welcome sound of someone's telephone call. E-mail can be another form of keeping in contact much more inexpensively.

In a related manner, one of the newer phenomenon to arise is that of "cyber volunteers." These are people, perhaps retired or physically incapacitated, who are willing to serve as links connecting people. Among the things these people are doing are searching out the best possible prices for goods to be purchased for the poor, or writing to those in power about the needs of the poor. The possibilities are only limited by our lack of imagination.

Giving voice to the voiceless, and changing oppressive structures which impoverish peoples

Going upstream

A story is told of a man who saw someone drowning in a rushing river. He jumped in, swam to the person and pulled him to shore. A crowd witnessed this and was applauding his deed. But someone sud-

denly pointed to another person caught in the torrent. Our hero jumped in and rescued this person. No sooner on shore than another person was spotted. The man jumped back in and once again pulled this person to safety to the admiring cheers of the gathered crowd. When once more the cry went up about another body in the river our hero did not jump in but rather turned to walk upstream. "Where are you going? Someone else is drowning!" the crowd shouted. He simply continued walking but shouted over his shoulder, "One of you jump in and rescue the person. I'm going to find out who is throwing them into the river."

Vincent was adept not only at jumping into the river, and enlisting others in his rescue efforts, but also of going upstream to do something about the underlying causes of people drowning in the river of poverty in the first place.

Even a quick reading of Vincent's life shows him speaking to the privileged, giving voice to the voiceless. When he walked the corridors of power he was always quick to seize opportunities to speak on behalf of the poor. We know of his efforts on behalf of galley slaves. "Light of the Clergy" summed up his efforts to go upstream and provide for a better formed clergy so the poor would have better pastors. When he spoke on the appointment of bishops he was also a voice for the voiceless.

In terms of working for the long term solutions and structural changes, as John Paul II challenged us, the effectiveness of our advocacy can be geometrically multiplied when we as a family unite around common issues whether at the local, regional or international level. As Vincentians we are challenged not merely to rescue people from the river but to go upstream, find out who or what is throwing them in, and take effective action.

In being a voice for the voiceless, an amazingly efficient organizer and one who focused on formation, we see a picture of Vincent as what we might today call a networker.

Vincent had a great ability to move within, and between, all levels of society. He entered lives of people in the streets and gutters, and he prowled the corridors of power where the movers and shakers held court. He reworked existing structures and, when needed, created new structures, such as the Daughters of Charity and the Confraternities of Charity, to call for service of the poor and respond to their needs. Vincent unwittingly described his own efforts, when in speaking to a dying brother, he said "Love is inventive unto infinity." In so many ways, he brought widely separated worlds together in unexpected ways to achieve extraordinary results.

Vincent, who so often lobbied at the royal court and even sent his emissary to Rome to lobby for the recognition of the Congregation, would surely be involved in this. Vincent's work at the Court of France finds expression today in the work of the various family branches that have established NGO (Non-Governmental Organization)²⁵ status at the United Nations. This presence is desperately needed since others have learned how to wield influence far beyond their numbers using this political tool. We need only think of the NGO's devoted to solutions hostile to the protection of embryonic and fetal life. Would not our presence be an example of the saying "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness"?

Advocacy may be one of the more important aspects of long term solutions in our service of those who are poor today.

There will always be a need for bringing the food and bandaging the wounds. But even Vincent de Paul, the paragon of direct service to the poor, saw in his age the need to do more -- to network, organize and get at root causes. Otherwise the poor are condemned forever to eating the scraps from Dives' table.

Not to have access to the internet is already increasing the gap between the rich and the poor, providing a huge advantage to those who have access. As a noted scripture scholar, Walter Brueggeman writes, "to be reduced to silence is to be excluded from power" and self-determination. Someone needs to address the issues involved in providing the poor with a voice, a voice which will be more and more necessary as we move further into an information age. For without this voice the poor will be ever more deeply mired in the voiceless anonymity of suffering, with little chance of more than merely surviving in an information age.

Since we have so much direct contact and credibility in our work with the poor we can and must be among those voices. The Daughters of Charity Constitutions call for this. "They plead the case of the underprivileged who do not have the possibility of making their legitimate demands and aspirations heard. . . ." ²⁶ The internet is a powerful tool

²⁵ See: www.famvin.org/CMNGO/

²⁶ *Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity*, 2.9.

to continue this facet of Vincent's service of the poor.

Long term solutions and changing structures

The Benedictine Internet Commission statement expresses another truth. "Technological literacy in the contemporary world is as important and crucial as basic literacy or knowing how to drive."²⁷

Marguerite's vision of literacy would surely find her today teaching herself not only the alphabet but also computer skills so that she could teach others. Literacy in general, and technological literacy in particular, provide pathways out of poverty.

Vehicle for Formation

The call of the church has been particularly clear about ongoing formation of those who serve. The world-wide Vincentian Family is placing increasing emphasis on nourishing those who minister. Indeed your very presence here in Paris at this Vincentian Month is a clear response to these calls. But what of those who can not come, or whose houses of formation do not have access to the formation materials presented here? Who can afford extensive libraries?

Through the internet the presentations of the programs presented here and at the International Center for Vincentian Formation²⁸ at Rue de Sèvres can become instantly available around the world. Indeed, one of my purposes in coming to Paris was to work out the processes whereby the rich materials, presented in many languages over the years, will be available to all members of the family around the world.

Many of you have already seen how Father Maloney's letters and other writings have become instantly accessible. One has only to visit one of the growing numbers of catechetically oriented sites to realize that materials that would formerly cost great sums of money are now readily available on the internet in a variety of languages. I have frequently been told how articles from www.famvin.org have been used as a source for bulletin board material in our houses. In this way community bulletin boards become "silent formators."

I am sure you also realize that by its presence on the internet all of this material also becomes readily available for the formation of laity.

²⁷ Benedictine Internet Commission, "Introduction."

²⁸ See: www.famvin.org/cif/default.htm

A wonderful example of this is the work of Sister Gwen Tamlyn, D.C., of Australia. As Spiritual Advisor to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Australia she has prepared a series of brief reflections for use by the local Councils in their weekly meetings. These have been posted on the famvin web site.²⁹ I can personally testify to the fact of their use around the world. If I am late in posting them to the famvin site, or if there is difficulty in finding them on the web site, I hear about it.

I recognize the difficulties of internet access in mission territory. The next phase in my work, of promoting the use of technology in the service of the poor, will be to seek ways to provide access to this technology by those who are themselves poor. The voice of the poor may be initially heard through people like us, but ultimately the poor themselves must be empowered to speak in their own voices and to sit at the table of the new measure of wealth – information.

Even in mission territories access is coming, perhaps even more rapidly than most might think. The issue is whether there will be a Catholic and Vincentian presence to counteract the kind of negative formation being provided.

Evangelization, especially among youth

There are many tried and true means for evangelization that have proven effective over the centuries. At a very fundamental level nothing can replace the physical presence embodying anew Christ Evangelizing the Poor. But even these traditional means can be greatly enhanced through the use of technology.

Much of what was written about ongoing formation applies here. People are already beginning to search the internet for nourishment for their spiritual hungers, particularly in more developed countries. I can not begin to tell you of the opportunities for evangelization I have encountered in my daily e-mail. However, today there is a need for the evangelization of a new territory which is not a physical region, but that territory we call “cyberspace.”

At the moment some have the impression of cyberspace as a wasteland. And indeed there are vast sections of it that deserve this description. However, people are hungry for spirituality. And various evangelical groups have established strong missionary outposts in this wasteland. I have already noted the increasing calls from the Church

²⁹ See: www.famvin.org/en/article.php?sid=963

for evangelizing this new medium. But the process must be seen in the light of its calls for inculturation.

Is it unrealistic to compare present-day cyber apostles to a group of missionaries setting out to live among the people of a certain village and engage in the work of evangelization? At the outset, these missionaries neither know the language of the villagers nor understand much about their culture. Feeling inadequate to the task that faces them, they accept that they have a lot to learn. Since their group is small, the missionaries realize too that, from the very beginning, they must give priority to recruiting new members from among the people of the village.

What can these missionaries do to prepare themselves? First of all they can learn the language of the people they are called to serve. Next, they can work to understand and appreciate their culture. Finally, they can pledge to put aside a significant amount of their time for the work of vocation promotion.

This brings us to another dimension of the opportunities of cyberspace -- reaching youth. While many young Catholics may not be found in the vestibules of churches, they are frequent visitors to cyberspace. We need to use the internet more effectively to spread the Good News. Father Maloney constantly invites, no, challenges, us to work with youth. Cyberspace is becoming one of the most important places for meeting youth today.

Historical precedents abound for adapting new technologies in the service of ministry. We see the genius of Gutenberg in adapting the bible to the new paradigm, of others using ships as means of transporting missionaries across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

"A true Daughter of Charity is ready to go any place."³⁰ Should this not include cyberspace? However, we may be facing some new situations, especially in more developed countries, that call for us to be as inventive as Marguerite in educating ourselves.

Vocational (charism) Outreach

There are also some very practical reasons for religious institutes to explore this new technology. A technologically mediated apostolate can be open and appealing to the old and the young, the healthy and the frail. Certainly, though, it engages the young. Increasingly, youth will be not only computer literate but will speak the internet's lan-

³⁰ "On the Spirit of the Company," *Conferences*, 536.

guage with all the ease of their native tongue.

"Fidelity to their origins prompts them to work jointly with Vincentian groups and to urge young people and adults to become involved in serving the most deprived."³¹

In the United States the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul has a nationwide network of "Thrift Shops" which allow those who do not have financial means to buy used furniture and clothing. Many of these shops are already including discarded computers in their inventories. It is mostly the children and grandchildren of Society members who administer this service. Not only do those who are poor gain access to technology, but the Society is drawing the young into its ministries.

However, it is not just the young who can be recruited into our charism of service through technology. The fastest growing segment of users of the internet is senior citizens. If they encounter our vision on the web, would this not be another way of invigorating the laity and inviting them into the circle of the charism of Vincent and Louise?

Tool of Collaboration

This vision of how the internet aids us in fulfilling our mission is magnified when coupled with the realization that all of these functions can be done more effectively in collaboration with others committed to the same goals, and that technology fosters this collaboration. Vincent's organizational skills were legendary. We all know the story of how he organized the charitable efforts of those who responded to his plea for a sick family. Román writes: "Vincent de Paul was no dreamer, but a prudent and realistic organizer. . . . In a century when social assistance was unheard of, the charity association at Macon represent a massive attempt to meet the needs of the poor."³²

There is a greater need than ever for developing Vincent's gift for organizing and networking. I write this as I hear reports on TV about the flood of volunteers wishing to help in the rescue efforts at the World Trade Center. They are being told, "We have more than enough now, but we will need you more next week and the week after that." Surely this strikes an echo with the experience of Vincent after he preached on the needs of the sick peasant family.

³¹ *Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity*, 4.

³² Román, *Biography*, 145.

What are the dimensions of this networking today? How is it already working?

- Someone of our large, diverse Vincentian family sees the need to provide a technological voice for the poor. The word goes out through a Web site or an email list.
- The Vincent de Paul Society, with its grassroots networks of thrift shops, begins to expand its horizons to collecting and recycling earlier (but still serviceable) model computers destined for the mouth of a garbage truck.
- A project to alleviate sufferings in slums, such as the Payatas garbage dump in the Philippines, needs help in writing the kind of proposal required when seeking public or private funding.
- Through electronic communication, experienced and effective people in three different states collaborate in research and in helping with a draft of the proposal for a collaborative project of the Vincentian family in one of the poorest areas of New York.
- An educational institution can facilitate education through recycling of equipment which, though obsolete for its purposes, may be more than adequate for the basic elements of distance education. Increased opportunities in what is called "distance education" promotes new opportunities for students who cannot afford travel time and money to attend regular classes, and for whom education is, nevertheless, the pathway out of poverty.
- A hospital sponsored by religious women inspired by Vincent, Louise, or Elizabeth Ann Seton can put some of its informational resources at the disposal of missionaries.

Notoriously, and frustratingly, various legislative, "justice and peace" alerts have a way of reaching people weeks or more after a crucial date has passed. With e-mail and Web sites, notification can happen seconds after a document is created and sent. In a similar vein, I recently came upon a doctoral dissertation on how the internet can be, and is being, used in the service of human development worldwide.

There is no need for each of us to reinvent the wheel. The various branches of the family can profit from complimentary efforts of other branches. The International Association of Charity (AIC) has this principle so deeply ingrained in its approach today that it takes as its motto, "Working Together Against All Forms of Poverty."

Another dimension of networking is as old as the Acts of the

Apostles, as historical as the "Annals of the Jesuits," and as supportive as the letters Vincent and Louise exchanged with each other and their brothers and sisters serving far away, in isolation. More than one member of a religious institute and Society of Apostolic Life, isolated either geographically or professionally from other members, has found a renewed sense of community and solidarity via the internet. They share information, resolve, and mutual encouragement, which strengthens them for continuing to live out the charism of our community.

In this review we have not even begun to look at many other new possibilities of ministry, both inside and outside our communities. Vincent coped with his increasing infirmity by finding new ways to do what he had always done. We have the example of Vincent as his physical strength declined. Faced with his increasing infirmities he would write: "When I can no longer ride a horse I will take a carriage to continue my work. And when I can no longer do that then I can write."

A contemporary manifestation of this spirit might well be found in new ministries for alert elderly and infirm members of the Vincentian Family. The internet opens the door to the possibility of people remaining active longer. It can empower the frail, and may be a source of second career energy for those in "burn-out."

Might not an information age application of Vincent's approach be found in making it possible for those sisters who no longer have the physical strength for the rigors of direct ministry to become involved in forms of ministry that they accomplish from within the confines of their community houses and rooms? An aging sister might not be able to travel to the homes of the poor. But what about the possibility of having such sisters keep in contact with homebound senior citizens via the internet?

Examples abound of the importance of keeping seniors citizens alert by stimulating their interests. Although still at the anecdotal stage, reports are increasing about the decline in the necessity of medication in homes where senior citizens have access to email and the internet. The members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul are beginning to realize that they have a supplementary way of making home visits. Establishing an interactive presence on the internet is but another way of living out the Vincentian charism of the home visit.

Then too, there is the possibility of widening the circle of solidarity by enlisting "cyber volunteers." These might be people who have great skills, but have neither the strength to visit the poor in their homes, or who fear the journey into "unsafe" neighborhoods. As mentioned above, these volunteers can be the life line for this most rapidly growing segment of internet users.

How Vincentians are Using the web

At this point it may be helpful first to speak a bit about web sites in general.

What is a web site? Although there are many ways of describing web sites, for our purposes I think it would be helpful to think of a web site as another form of community room, not a replacement for a community room, but fulfilling many of the same functions.

In their initial phases web sites were merely electronic bulletin boards. However they have rapidly evolved to the point that I think we might better understand their potential if we view them as much more. They truly can function much like community rooms.

In my experience it seems to me that a community room often serves as a meeting room, a place to relax, to share concerns and questions, plan the house and province work there in house meetings. Our recreation room bulletin boards provide a convenient source of information about who is doing what in our houses, and the province, and indeed the world.

The community room is frequently the library and repository of Vincentian related materials of all kinds. It has been a place to entertain guests who, in many cases, broaden our horizons. And now it is even a place where we invite the young to get to know us better. Our recreation rooms seem to fulfill the function of a family room, living room or kitchen in most homes.

All of these useful functions are to be found in an effective web site. Far more than merely being a bulletin board for posting information, web sites today are becoming gathering places where people can exchange ideas, undertake planning, keep updated on current events, whether in the world or the Vincentian Family, doing just about anything one might do in a community room.

This is indeed the operative image behind the international website of the Vincentian Family: <http://www.famvin.org>

FamVin is intended as a tool specifically created to provide opportunities for the Vincentian Family to engage in all of the above functions. Since a modern web site is something like a painting, or a piece of music, it is difficult to write about. Just as one must see a painting or listen to music one must experience first hand the possibilities of a web site.

At this point on this particular web site members of the family can:

- Collaborate on various projects, most notably the two year campaign to globalize the fight against hunger, and also relief for the victims of various natural disasters.

- Follow latest developments in various specific ministries such as evangelization, youth, homelessness, and strategies for combating poverty.
- Engage in dialogue with people interested in specific forms of various private on-line discussion groups.
- Search for Vincentian formation material, such as the latest circular letters of Reverend Maloney, quotes from Vincent, Louise, etc.
- Search for material helpful in preparing liturgies and presentations on the Vincentian charism.
- Find out what is happening in the wider Vincentian Family.
- Find links to web sites of various branches of the Vincentian Family and their specific ministries.
- Find out what happened in Vincentian history on this particular day.
- Post notices of meetings in one common calendar for the purpose of either not conflicting with other meetings or, sometimes, to collaborate with other groups meeting at that time.
- Find links to online newspapers from just about every country in the world.

These possibilities are best experienced rather than described.

The FamVin site is currently available in five languages – English, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. The English version of the site drew more than 100,000 page views in the first six months of its current form. But these numbers will surely grow as more and more people begin to realize the vast resources they now have at their disposal. The other languages should grow rapidly as a result of the International FAMVIN.ORG workshop held at Saint John's University in August of 2001. More than 40 people from five continents attended, representing fifteen countries and eight branches of the Vincentian Family.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the site is that, with proper authorization, anyone can post material. The only technical requirement is the ability to use a word processor in a given language. One simply has to type in the material in the form provided or, even more simply, copy and paste material already existing on local computers. The material is then submitted to a corps of editors who perform a quick check to certify that it is suitable for publication and then release it to the web site. It is no longer necessary for members of the family to learn complicated computer codes. The ability to post news stories and engage in discussion with other members of the family no longer depends on having direct access to technically skilled persons.

One of the other features of the site is its collection of web links to other sites of interest to members of the world-wide family. This is extremely important, for if dialogue is to take place within, and across, branches of the family of the followers of Vincent, Louise, Frederic, Catherine Labouré, Elizabeth Ann Seton, etc., we must know more about each other and what we are doing. A visit to the Vincentian Family section of the Web Links page will open unsuspected riches of information about the more than two million people who walk the Vincentian way.

The Limits of Technology

Before we conclude some healthy skepticism about computers is in order.

Computers and technology do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or shelter the homeless. People do. Computers do not take vows to serve the poor. People do. The poor cannot eat mechanical mice, wear floppy disks, or live in computer casings.

The Good News must be incarnated in flesh and blood. The human touch and contact will be even more important than ever if we are to be signs of God's love. We will always need that direct human touch as we break the bread of God's word and share our table with the poor.

The internet will not solve all ministerial problems. Indeed, it may even create some of its own. But it will become an increasingly valuable and indispensable tool. The internet is another way to gather the folks and tell the story. Only a few hours of surfing the Net discloses that there are many seekers. Who will feed them? Likewise, the internet is another way to serve the poor. A few hours of surfing uncovers invaluable sources of information and networks for people who join in the common cause for the poor.

At this point it may be helpful to see perspectives on the use of technology by people committed to a vowed life. Those who stand in the Vincentian tradition are not the only ones to grapple with the issues involved in the use of technology. Again, the International Benedictine Commission writes:

In chapters 31-34 of the Rule, Benedict discusses the use and care of the utensils, goods and tools of the monastery. He takes great pains to assure that the abbot or prioress and those they appoint will be prudent

and careful with these goods of the monastery. In chapter 33 Benedict mentions specific tools -- books, writing tablets, stylus -- the tools of that time.

Throughout history Benedictines have used the tools of each age prudently and carefully even as the tools themselves have changed. Besides the tools mentioned in chapter 33, those of Benedict's time must have included animals, plows, hoes, scythes. One of Gregory the Great's miracles in the *Dialogues* includes a "brush hook" with an iron blade. The tools of this age include automobiles, tractors, bush hogs, and typewriters. One of today's most powerful tools is technology, especially computer networking and the internet.

One of the many challenges for contemporary monastics is to determine how to utilize modern tools to enhance our way of life and ministry. Because community life is so important, we are compelled to find ways to use today's tools so we are not directed by the tools themselves, become addicted to their use, or use them inappropriately. We must be on guard not to allow their use to become a divisive force in our communities or make us elitist, dividing us from those without the same access.

Technological literacy in the contemporary world is as important and crucial as basic literacy, or knowing how to drive. Access to information in today's culture empowers not only the person who has it, but also the people who are served by that person.³³

There is a Benedictine monastery in the United States, Christ in the Desert, which has found a new means of supporting itself. They create web sites and web pages, and creatively relate this to their charism when they say, "After all, we have been in the business of making pages for over 1500 years. . . ."

³³ Benedictine Internet Commission, "Introduction."

The Daughters of Charity Constitutions state, "Mass media (means of social communication) are utilized by the sisters to acquire a better understanding of the world's problems in terms of their service of the poor. They use them with moderation and responsibility."³⁴ This is another invitation to rethink what fidelity to a charism means for a new age and its new tools.

At this point I would also like to address two further issues. The first is the cost of technology in relation to the vow of poverty. The Benedictines have indicated that they see the cost in terms of simply using the appropriate tools of the day. This technology is but the latest manifestation of this issue. The same issues arose with the use of typewriters, telephones, faxes, automobiles, short wave radios, etc. Today we no longer see these as luxuries in ministry, but rather essential in the various phases of our service of those who are poor.

However, I think the issue of poverty quite legitimately arises when one lavishes oneself with the deluxe model of any of the above tools of modern life, or when they are multiplied needlessly and serve as objects to be acquired. It is one thing to use a jeep in one's ministry, but quite another thing to use a large luxury automobile.

The second issue is of the use made of these tools. Any of the above tools, even if they are not the deluxe, can be abused. Rather than a tool in the service of our ministry and way of life, the telephone, automobile and indeed, any technology can be used inappropriately. The issue is not the particular technology, but the use made, of which abuse can result in enslavement by consumeristic and secular values.

However, because some abuse telephones, automobiles, etc. we would hardly think of saying no one can use these tools in the service of those who are poor. Not to use the tools of the day risks a kind of technological fundamentalism that deprives those who are poor of the most effective service we can offer them.

Although cyberspace can be a tool of isolation, it has also been shown to be a tool of promoting community. A colleague of mine is preparing a doctoral dissertation illustrating how the sisters of her community who live far from the main cluster of community houses have kept close ties with the main body of sisters through using e-mail.

It might also be wise to point out that the price of simple computers has dropped dramatically. In western countries computers are showing up in the homes of the poor as parents realize that their chil-

³⁴ *Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity*, 2.9 and 2.22.

dren are at a disadvantage if they do not have computers at home. Even in mission countries satellite and wireless communication are coming sooner than most people realize.

Do all Daughters of Charity need to become specialists in technology?

No! Although, the Vincentian Family should play a key role in networking information technology specialists and poverty workers. Typically, they need not become information technology specialists themselves, but they should speak for the poor in a language that can be heard. However, this should not rule out some becoming specially trained, just as we have people trained as lawyers, engineers and doctors. Their training equips them for the work of the mission, just as Marguerite's medical training with Dr. Levesque made her a better instrument.

Concluding prayer

A kaleidoscopic view of possibilities such as this necessarily lacks detail and nuance. But this initial, broad survey means to encourage thinking about the internet not as a toy of the wealthy, but as an important and necessary tool in the service of the poor.

Does it seem strange now to imagine Vincent saying to those who walk in the footsteps of Marguerite Naseau: "Certainly, certainly, my daughters, "put out into the deep", use the marvelous tools of technology to seek what Louise, Marguerite and I sought -- to serve the poor."

Perhaps there is another level of meaning when your Constitutions quote Mother Suzanne Guillemin, writing over 30 years ago on 2 February 1968, "In their corporal service they strive to humanize technical methods in order to make of them the instrument of the tenderness of Christ."³⁵

In each age, the Spirit has shown us how to use the technology of the time to broaden and deepen the reign of God among us. Jeremiah writes: "Your young shall dream dreams and your old see visions." In the Easter Vigil we hear the words of the prophet, "Can't you see I am doing something new?"

Marguerite was doing something new. *Caritas Christi urget nos!* Do we have the vision and the creative fidelity to respond to these new needs of persons who are poor?

³⁵ *Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity*, 2.9.



Spirit into Infinity by Maureen Beitman, D.C.

Meant to symbolize the spirit of Louise and Elizabeth,
which continues on into infinity, that spirals and recreates for each generation anew.
Our thanks to Sr. Beitman for contributing.

Courtesy of the artist