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## Vincentian Education: A Call to Mission

BY

DONALD J. HARRINGTON, C.M.\*

Over thirty years ago the Vatican Council called religious communities to return to their roots, to recapture the original charism of their founders. We gather today in Emmitsburg, thirty years after the close of the Vatican Council, to continue precisely that process. We come together as those who are called to the mission, to the ministry of education. But even more, we gather as followers of Vincent de Paul who labor in education. And we do so to explore what value, what challenges the Vincentian charism adds to our work of education.

When I was first asked, almost two years ago, to offer this address today, I accepted the invitation as a challenge—a personal challenge for me to reflect ever more deeply on that which has been my ministry.

Anyone who is experienced as an educator knows well that the privilege of serving in education is indeed a sacred trust. Year after year the lives of countless people, usually young people, are affected and changed by their experience of education. Educators can provide the challenge and the environment for others to reach their potential and to use their God-given gifts. Educators can help others to mature, to develop personally and to appreciate the wonders of our world and of our God. Educators can provide others with the opportunity to better their lives and to better their world. And educators can give young people every reason to hope for and to strive for a better tomorrow. Such possibilities challenge us to attain the highest standards and to seek excellence in all that we do. Yes, education is a sacred trust, and it is a great honor and privilege for us to be educators. And yet, my friends, that is not where I will place my emphasis in this morning's discussion. We can be the best educators in our cities or in our nation and still not be faithful to our mission as Vincentian educators. And so, this morning, we again accept the call of the

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Second Vatican Council and seek to return to our roots and to flame into fire that special charism of Vincent de Paul which hopefully smolders within each of us.

In that spirit, my friends, I begin with a story. Several years ago on a rather typical, cold winter day in western New York, an alumnus of both Saint John's University and Niagara University met me on the Niagara campus to drive to a meeting in downtown Niagara Falls. As we drove down the main street of the city, thoroughly engrossed in conversation, suddenly the alumnus, without explanation, pulled into the curb and got out of the car. He had spied an elderly, obviously poor, gentleman lying in the street between the curb and a bus. People were stepping over this man in order to get to and from the bus. The alumnus, very quietly and very kindly, gave the man the assistance he needed. A short while later, back in the car continuing to our appointment, I commented that relatively few people in similar situations would stop to assist with such genuine concern, and I asked why he had done so. His response was a simple one. He said, "I'm a Vincentian product. I was trained by the Vincentians in high school, in college and in law school. It's just part of me."

That very simple story, my friends, captures why we have gathered here in Emmitsburg this weekend. That man, a product of Vincentian education, clearly is someone of whom Vincent de Paul would be proud. We come together this weekend to explore together how, through our efforts, we can educate others to similar values, for that is the mission to which we are called.

My own experience of Vincentian education has clearly been limited to the level of higher education. The assumptions, however, which underlie all Vincentian education, I believe, are the same. Very simply, Vincentian education must be rooted in the vibrant and dynamic spirituality which characterized our founder as well as in his great love for the poor. This dual focus calls us to our mission. I will develop these two assumptions separately and then address their implications for Vincentian education.

Vincent de Paul was clearly an individual who, by his very life, defied easy labeling or stereotyping. His approach to life and to mission was not based upon an elaborate theoretic or predetermined system, but rather his writings and his teachings proclaim a dynamic view of spirituality and of reality. He ever sought the voice of God in the people and in the events around him day after day. To seek to know God's will was his imperative—words which echo throughout

his conferences and letters. He could be moved to new projects, dramatically or slowly, always in response to those signs which indicated God calling him in new and different ways. One reads in Vincent a conviction that we can never totally grasp God and must day after day and week after week attune ourselves to the voice of God all around us. For example, Vincent waited thirty-three years before finally distributing the Common Rules to his Vincentian confreres, obviously convinced that through the experience of those years God would lead the community to change and to alteration. And he was most open to such changes. We can analyze what Vincent did and we can say that certain qualities characterized his work but there is no evidence of an elaborate Vincentian theoretic.

I strongly believe that Vincent would be the last one to say that we must always do our work—be it education or other ministries—in a set established way regardless of circumstances or needs. Sister Louise Sullivan in her work on the core values of Vincentian education, identified flexibility as a characteristic of Vincentian education.<sup>1</sup> That flexibility, I believe, is founded here—in the ongoing experience of God. For Vincent experiencing God in life and responding to the needs, the culture, and the challenges around him were his system. Such a focus, my friends, presumed a deep personal relationship with God in an interior life which was clearly primary in all that Vincent said and did. Using his own words, “we must begin by establishing the Kingdom of God in ourselves and only then in others.”<sup>2</sup> And again, “It is necessary to tend to our interior life; if we fail to do that we miss everything.”<sup>3</sup> And this interior life was nourished by action. As André Dodin points out in his book *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, there is no doubt that “Vincent proclaimed the radical priority of action.”<sup>4</sup> Through action we come to know our God. In Vincent’s own words as quoted by Dodin “we have to sanctify our occupations by seeking God in them and by doing them to find God in them rather than to get them done.”<sup>5</sup> In the analysis of Dodin only this intention of going beyond the visible in our actions gives value to action. Very simply, in summary, the interior life gave meaning to action and

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<sup>1</sup>Louise Sullivan, D.C., “The Core Values of Vincentian Education,” *Vincentian Heritage* 16, no. 2 (1995): 149-79.

<sup>2</sup>Cited in André Dodin, C.M., *Vincent de Paul and Charity* (New York: New City Press, 1993), 54.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

action inextricably nourished the interior life. And so Vincent called his sons and his daughters to a deep interior life, a strong relationship with God which gave meaning to all action and he also called them to find that God and to strengthen that relationship with God in their action. And the action we discuss today is education. To paraphrase Vincent's words—we have to sanctify our work of education by seeking God in it and by doing it to find God in it rather than to get it done. This is a stance towards education and towards life.

The second assumption is that of Vincent's great love for the poor—which we know well. Although his quest for his God resulted in great openness to all whom he met and to what was occurring in his society, he nonetheless never allowed himself to be distracted from the poor. His dealings with royalty and with aristocrats always brought him back to the poor. As our superior general Father Robert Maloney states in his work, *The Way of Vincent de Paul*,

Vincent makes a clear explicit choice. The vision he offers is not one of Christ as teacher nor as healer nor as perfect adorer of the Father, nor as perfect image of the divinity, but as the evangelizer of the poor. Vincent's disciples are called to enter into the following of Christ in the very terms with which, in Luke's gospel, Jesus opens his public ministry—"the spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord."<sup>6</sup>

Father Maloney bases this conclusion upon Vincent's own words as stated in his conference on the end of the Congregation. "To make God known to the poor, to announce Jesus Christ to them, to tell them that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and that it is for the poor—oh, how great that is . . . So sublime is it to preach the gospel to the poor that it is above all the office of the son of God."<sup>7</sup> Christ, the evangelizer of the poor, is the Christ we are called to follow and to preach. Even as educators, therefore, we follow Christ the evangelizer of the poor,

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<sup>6</sup>Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *The Way of Vincent de Paul* (New York: New City Press, 1992), 23.

<sup>7</sup>Conference to the Priests of the Mission, 6 December 1658, in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 12: 80, as cited in Maloney, *The Way of Vincent de Paul*, 23.

not Christ the teacher. The evangelization of the poor must permeate all that we do—even as educators.

I begin the discussion of implications with yet another story. In January of 1995, as part of the 125th anniversary celebration of Saint John's University, Father Maloney spent two days on our Queens campus. In a meeting with approximately forty of our students, Father Maloney spoke of the values of Vincent de Paul and of our desire to share those values with our students. In response to his comments, a girl of Jamaican descent related to Father Maloney her own experience of Saint John's. She stated that she had been in the United States for approximately five years and that throughout those five years Saint John's University was the only place in which she had felt comfortable. Here, she indicated, she felt respected and she felt cared for. Everywhere else she added, she felt "foreign." I relate this story because of my own personal conviction that our call to mission as Vincentian educators, founded in the assumptions presented above, will result in a certain environment for learning firmly rooted in our charism. Such an environment is nourished by Vincent's dynamic spirituality and by his special concern for the poor and begets certain implications for the mission of Vincentian education. I now turn to those implications as I have experienced them.

(1) I refer again to Vincent's words highlighted earlier—"we have to sanctify our occupations by seeking God in them and by doing them to find God in them rather than to get them done."<sup>8</sup> Seeking God and finding God—the context of our work is Vincentian education. If we are seeking God, we must be attuned to others—for it is in others that we will find God. We are called as Vincentian educators to foster an environment in which we labor with the deepest respect for all whom we encounter—for in them we will find God. This experience rests at the center of Vincent's spirituality. As Vincentian educators, we too then will seek and find God in those around us—our students, our colleagues, in our very work of education. Our institutions and we ourselves will be transformed by such a quest and marked by such respect for all. We will seek and we will find our God in our work—and our respect will proclaim our vibrant quest.

(2) Vincentian educators are called to foster an environment in which it is clear that we also find God in the world around us—as did Vincent. Yes, to be truly Vincentian, Vincentian education must also

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<sup>8</sup>Dodin, *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, 55.

be immersed in the culture of its day. I have already indicated that Vincent de Paul defies stereotyping. If one were to try to characterize him, however, I believe a word such as existentialist might well come closest to capturing his approach to understanding reality. His was—most probably unknowingly—a philosophy of experience. He understood life, others, and God through his every day experience. Each and every action and situation appears to have helped him to understand more fully who he was and what he was called to do. He did not find himself or God solely in the quiet of a monastery but rather in the streets of Paris. And he urged his daughters and sons to do the same. He called us to a deep interior life and to a life of prayer—but that life was nourished by action and by the culture, the challenges of his day.

As Vincentian educators, therefore, we must understand the culture, the times which are ours. We must understand, for example, the “culture of death” recently spoken of by Pope John Paul II and in understanding it we will be able to educate others to life. We must understand the wonders of technological advances and the dehumanizing potential of those advances as we adjust to a rapidly changing world. We must understand the deterioration of family and of family values as we seek to foster such values among those entrusted to our care. Very simply, if we hope to educate, we must first understand our times as Vincent did his own and only then will we be empowered to educate the youngest of our primary school students or the oldest of our doctoral students to move beyond the challenges of our time and to hear the gospel. We must be persons of our time if we are to be educators of our time. This is the mission to which we are called as Vincentians and Daughters of Charity. We must study and research and read and discuss so that we may be able to do so. Vincentian education must, therefore, also be immersed in the culture of our day, ever open to new ways of finding and experiencing God but never accepting that culture.

(3) Vincentian educators will, by their lives and by their work, loudly proclaim their love of God. There is no doubt, my friends, that Vincent’s actions were founded firmly upon his love for God. He pursued his God in all he did. While immersed in the culture of our day, we must not find our meaning in it. Our interior life, our relationship with our God, must animate and focus our actions as we find God all around us. If our Vincentian spirituality is dynamic, nourished by action, and rooted in our personal relationship with God, this will be clear to our students. If we are followers of Vincent, we will with great

comfort speak of the wonders of our God to first graders, to high school students, to college and graduate students. We will proudly display religious symbols or religious garb. We will clearly be people who are so rooted in our relationship with God that our actions will help others to know God better. Indeed, we will be revealers of God. I pause briefly for yet another story. Approximately ten years ago, when I was president of Niagara University, a young girl who was a student at the university came to my office. She was clearly upset and related to me what she believed to be the unfair treatment she had received from a religious on campus. At the end of her story, she looked at me with tears in her eyes and said very simply, "Father, I cannot help but wonder what kind of a God this person believes in." My friends, whether that young woman was justified in being upset or not, she was most accurate in her insight about religious life. If we are truly Vincentian, all will know the answer to the question of what type of a God we believe in. Vincent's life and words proclaimed the wonders of his God and God's love. We can be truly Vincentian educators only if our lives loudly proclaim our love of God.

(4) Vincentian educators and their institutions will be marked by their special concern for the poor, as Vincent was. We will seek out the poor to educate them and to provide them the opportunity to better their lot. They will be our special concern and, like Vincent, we will never allow ourselves to be distracted from them. Also like Vincent, we will never turn anyone away—rich or poor—but even in educating the rich we will preach Christ the evangelizer of the poor—for he is our model as Vincentians and Daughters. Christ the evangelizer of the poor is why we stand in classrooms or sit in administrative offices. And Christ the evangelizer of the poor animates all we do. Those whom we educate, if we are truly Vincentian educators, will know Christ the evangelizer of the poor when they graduate from our schools and our programs. And like the gentleman from Niagara Falls whom I spoke of earlier, Christ the evangelizer of the poor will be most familiar to those who experience Vincentian education. And what does it mean to know Christ the evangelizer of the poor? I quote Father Maloney in his recent book *He Hears The Cry Of The Poor*:

May I invite You to enter into Saint Vincent's world? I speak, of course, not of the world of the seventeenth century, but rather the world where the following of Christ as the evangelizer of the poor is everything. In that world,



values that have great importance in other 'worlds'—wealth, power, sexual fulfillment, popularity, self-determination—occupy a very different position. For Christ, the evangelizer of the poor, they are all relativized—they pale in light of the kingdom of God. Saint Vincent calls us not merely to study about this Christ, but to enter into his mind, his vision, his sentiments, his heart. For Saint Vincent this Christ, the evangelizer of the poor, is the center of the universe. He reveals to Vincent how to relate to God and his providence, how to serve the poor, how to live daily in communion with others, how to pray.<sup>9</sup>

Concern for the poor will mark all that we do. And our students and graduates will share that concern. They will know Christ the evangelizer of the poor.

(5) Like Vincent, we as Vincentian educators will enlist others to work at our sides with the same vision and the same motivation. We will need collaborators—even more in the future than in the past. If they too are to share our vision as Vincentian educators they must also share our spirituality and our special concern for the poor. We must therefore accept as our responsibility the spiritual formation of our collaborators and invite them to share in Vincentian spirituality. We must introduce them to Christ the evangelizer of the poor—if they are to preach that Christ with us. Quite honestly, this challenge is most striking to me as the president of a Vincentian university. Do we do enough at Saint John's to share Vincentian spirituality with our collaborators? I answer a definite no—far from it. The challenge is nonetheless genuine. Again I quote from Father Maloney in his presentation when I was installed as president of Saint John's University:

Let the Vincentian mission here at Saint John's be a collaborative effort. Let it mobilize the efforts not just of the members of the Congregation of the Mission, but of all the lay administrators, faculty members and staff who labor in this great university. Let them feel a part of this mission. Let Saint John's be a true educational community, filled with the spirit of Vincent de Paul. If there was

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<sup>9</sup>Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *He Hears the Cry of the Poor* (New York: New City Press, 1995), 81.

anything Vincent de Paul knew how to do, it was to draw everyone into his captivating vision of life. At his one side was the queen of France, Anne; at his other side was a peasant girl who did not know how to read or write, Marguerite Naseau. He energized rich and poor, men and women of every rank in society, because he shared his vision with them. Can everyone here at Saint John's be made to feel a part of the Vincentian mission?<sup>10</sup>

Very simply, my friends, my answer to Father Maloney's question is yes. Everyone who shares in Vincentian education can be made to be part of the mission—but only if our collaborators share our vision, are rooted in Vincentian spirituality and have come to know Christ the evangelizer of the poor. And we can facilitate that process.

(6) As Vincentian educators we will clearly be persons of the Church. Why do I say that? Very simply, Vincent de Paul was a man of the Church, a man, who in his quest for God also looked to the Church, its leaders, and its teaching. All that Vincent did, especially his quest for God, took place in an ecclesial context. Vincent had no difficulty in disagreeing privately with Church leaders of his day. He wrote honestly and openly to bishops in the dioceses where his confreres labored of his concerns and even of his disagreements. But Vincent was also clear in urging his sons and daughters to walk with the bishops. In the Common Rules which he gave to his confreres he states clearly: "In the first place we should faithfully and sincerely reverence and obey our Holy Father the Pope. We should also humbly and consistently obey the most reverend bishops of the dioceses where the congregation has houses."<sup>11</sup> In the *Constitutions* of the Congregation of the Mission, even today, it is explicitly stated that by reason of the vow of obedience "we should obey the bishops in whose dioceses the congregation is established . . . following the mind and spirit of St. Vincent."<sup>12</sup> As Vincentian educators, therefore, my friends, we must recognize that the context of our labors is clearly the broader context of the Church. Though difficult at times, if our institutions or our teaching stand apart from that of the Church, we are not faithful to the

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<sup>10</sup>Robert P. Maloney, C.M., Address at the presidential inauguration, Saint John's University, 5 October 1989 (unpublished).

<sup>11</sup>*Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, chapter 5: 1

<sup>12</sup>*Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission*, chapter 3, par. 38, § 2.

call and mission of Vincent. We must be men and women of the Church and our students must experience us as such. We must embrace our heritage in its entirety. And that is not always easy.

My friends, these implications are presented for reflection, not as a comprehensive statement but rather as the reflections of an individual who has sought to labor in Vincentian education for twenty-three years. Throughout those twenty-three years I have frequently encountered questions from within our double family and from beyond of why Vincentians and Daughters of Charity would be involved in education. Permit me to address this very simply and briefly this morning. It is clear to me that Vincent and Louise both placed great importance upon the work of education. You know better than I of the involvement of the early Daughters of Charity in the "little schools." We know that Vincent de Paul looked upon the education of the clergy as a principal means of improving the lot of the poor. We know of Mother Seton's conviction that education was a primary means of bringing people to know and to serve God. And we know that upon Vincent's death his confreres found among his few possessions the parchments of the degrees he received from two of France's universities which he had preserved privately until the end of his life. My friends, if we truly wish to walk the path of Vincent, to better the lot of the poor, and indeed to address the systemic problems of our society, we will be open to the most effective means of changing society and individual lives. What better and more effective means could there be than education? Education in primary and secondary schools, education in colleges and universities significantly affects and changes the lives of our students. Many studies have strongly affirmed the success and impact of Catholic education. Pope John Paul II, in speaking to the Vincentians at our general assembly in 1986, called the Vincentians to a very clear mission, and I quote: "Priests and brothers of the mission search out more than ever with boldness, humility and skill the causes of poverty and encourage short and long-term solutions—acceptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so, you will work for the credibility of the gospel and of the Church."<sup>13</sup> Where can this aspect of the Vincentian mission be better carried out than in education? Catholic education—indeed Vincentian education—is greatly needed. Vincent and Louise and Elizabeth Ann all responded to this need; so should we.

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<sup>13</sup>Address of John Paul II to the delegates at the general assembly of 1986.

I return once again to my opening comments. The work of education is indeed a sacred trust. We seek, as Vincentians and Daughters of Charity, to educate young people never to pass by when a poor person is lying on the street, never to foster or allow an environment in which individuals feel foreign or uncomfortable, never to be satisfied with societal injustice. Thus, we seek to follow Christ, the evangelizer of the poor. We can succeed in this task only if our lives are animated by a truly Vincentian spirituality and by a special concern for the poor. Then that vision of Vincent and Louise and of Elizabeth Seton will animate all that we do in the work of education.

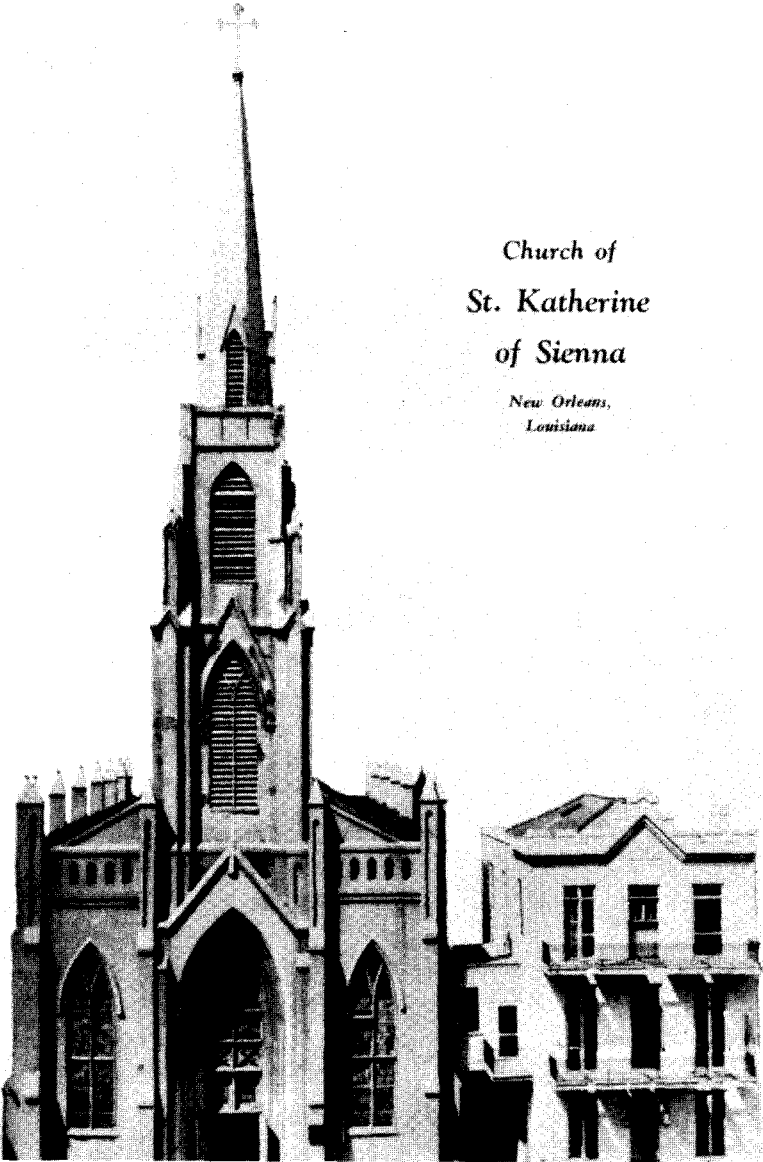
The soon-to-be beatified Frederick Ozanam, founder of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, in a letter written in 1838, spoke of the "earthly immortality" which is accorded to saints and observed that some saints live forever, not just in heaven but also on earth in the person of their followers. "That is why the Augustines, the Benedicts, the Brunos, the Francises, who are sleeping 15, 12, 8 and 6 centuries in the grave, do not fail to possess their spiritual posterity. They are living representatives amid the ruins of the past. The star of Vincent de Paul, risen much later on the horizon, is not destined, surely, to accomplish a shorter career. Let us work in this light: let us honor Our Father and this patron so worthy of love and we shall live long."<sup>14</sup> Indeed these words of Ozanam call us as Vincent's sons and daughters to allow Vincent to live on in our works and in our lives. This is the mission to which we are called as Vincentian educators. With the blessings of Vincent, of Louise, and of Elizabeth Ann we shall succeed.

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<sup>14</sup>*Frederick Ozanam a Life in Letters*, Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M., ed. (Saint Louis: Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Council of the United States, 1986), 143.

*Church of  
St. Katherine  
of Sienna*

*New Orleans,  
Louisiana*



Saint Katherine's Church, New Orleans, Louisiana