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Vincentian Pragmatism: Toward a Method for Systemic Change

BY

SCOTT KELLEY, PH.D.

When Pope John Paul II addressed the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in 1986, he encouraged the Assembly to “search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short and long term solutions; adaptable and effective concrete solutions.” “By doing so,” he continued, “you will work for the credibility of the Gospel and of the Church.”¹ More than twenty five years later, the Pope’s remarks are perhaps even more relevant as a growing body of evidence indicates that the human family may soon face or has begun to face the profound challenge of living beyond the Earth’s carrying capacity. These ecological limits will increasingly become a source of division and strife, directly challenging the Church’s vision of solidarity.

The Pope’s comments offer some important context for the Vincentian Family’s focus on systemic change. Their work on systemic change includes a variety of excellent case studies and a number of strategies culled from years of collective wisdom.² The focus here is not intended to replace or critique the excellent work already done, but rather to focus on an important area that is often overlooked: epistemology. Vincent’s life, and centuries of Vincentian experience working on behalf of the poor, provides great wisdom for human understanding, and for addressing today’s challenges. Many contemporary scholars in the field of sustainable development argue that innovative solutions which alleviate poverty can only emerge when individuals are able to transcend the limited mental models inherited from cultures, worldviews, and systems of belief that are unable or unwilling to address the causes of poverty and unsustainable economic growth. In short, the Vincentian mission demands that we inhabit a new worldview — a new way of understanding — that is equipped to hear the cry of the poor.

Pope John Paul II’s remarks are much more than a reminder to honor Vincent de Paul as an inspiring symbol of charity; they are a plea to foster the kind of systemic change that addresses the pressing challenges facing

¹ “Discours du Pape Jean-Paul II,” *Vincentiana* 30:5-6 (November-December 1986), 417. Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/115>

² See, for example, the Systemic Change page on the Vincentian Family website Famvin: http://www.famvin.org/wiki/Systemic_Change (accessed 12 July 2012).

those living in poverty. The hope for this kind of systemic change demands that we engage in systems thinking. As such, it is important to see Vincent's way of proceeding — what might be called *Vincentian Pragmatism* — as an integrated and holistic way of knowing that is capable of systemic change.

Systemic change that effectively alleviates poverty demands that we respond to what is sometimes called “the” Vincentian question, *what must be done?*³ The question rightly highlights the pragmatic orientation of the Vincentian mission as an action-oriented, service focused, results driven commitment to improve the lives of those living in poverty. Vincent himself even saw a “pragmatic” orientation in Christ, who began by doing before teaching.⁴ However, it is a significant mistake to assume that Vincentian Pragmatism operates exclusively on the level of strategy, action, or implementation. Vincentian Pragmatism must also inform the way we engage, identify, explore, interpret, and decide in response to the complex systems that exacerbate poverty. It must unite action and contemplation, affective love and effective love, in a way that flows from and leads to action.⁵ Put simply, Vincentian Pragmatism must integrate *all* dimensions of authentic subjectivity to put them in service to the poor.

Beyond Catholic Social Action

Popularized by Fr. Joseph Cardijn and the Belgian Young Christian Worker movement in the late nineteenth century, the “See-Judge-Act” method of social action has philosophical and anthropological roots in the Catholic tradition going back to at least Saint Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, perhaps even earlier. Mirroring the Thomistic treatment of Prudence as “right reason applied to action,”⁶ Cardijn's See-Judge-Act method has become a

³ Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Ph.D., “‘Our good will and honest efforts.’ Vincentian Perspectives on Poverty Reduction Efforts,” *Vincentian Heritage* 28:2 (2008), 69-77. Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol28/iss2/5>. For a discussion of the “Vincentian Question,” see, Udovic, “The Vincentian Question,” Vincentian Identity Podcasts, 20 April 2007, DePaul University, Office of Mission and Values, <http://mission.depaul.edu/AboutUs/podcasts/Pages/LetsTalk.aspx>.

⁴ In “The Purpose and Nature of the Congregation” of the *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, Vincent writes “We read in Sacred Scripture that Our Lord Jesus Christ... did not begin by teaching; He began by doing.” See Document 117a, “Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission,” 17 May 1658, *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-13a & 13b (New York: New City Press, 1985-2009), 13a:431. Available online at http://via.library.depaul.edu/coste_en/ (accessed 16 July 2012). Hereafter, *CCD*.

⁵ Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *Go! On the Missionary Spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul* (Salamanca, Spain: CEME, 2000), 160-161; 176. Hereafter, *Missionary Spirituality*.

⁶ Catholic Encyclopedia. See, Summa II-II q 47, Article 8, “Whether command is the chief act of prudence?” Online at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3047.htm#article8> (accessed 12 July 2012).

widely cited, popular method for social engagement. It may even have been influenced by the social thought of Frédéric Ozanam.⁷ The method of Catholic Social Action provides a solid starting point for Vincentian Pragmatism, but is incomplete and can even be problematic if not examined more closely. Without explicitly differentiating the level of experience from the level of understanding as two distinctly different levels of consciousness, the See-Judge-Act method might overlook a crucial dimension of effective praxis. The theological anthropology of Bernard Lonergan and the more fully developed practice of Pragmatic Inquiry are necessary to establish an epistemology, a way of knowing, capable of discovering sustainable solutions to poverty.

An adequate response to the Vincentian question operating on the level of responsible action (“what must be done?”) also requires well-reasoned responses to a number of related questions: What is going wrong? What is going on? Who or what do I see or not see? One cannot find solutions to realities one does not see as problematic; one cannot understand a reality one does not perceive; one cannot respond to questions one does not ask. For this reason, the “see” of Catholic Social Action rightly asks us to be *attentive* to the realities we do, or do not, perceive. However, knowing is not at all like looking.⁸

There is much more implied in “seeing” than simply taking a look around. Scripture frequently notes this distinction between acts of perception and acts of understanding:

- “Now hear this, O foolish and senseless people, Who have eyes but do not see; Who have ears but do not hear” (Jeremiah 5:21);
- “Son of man, you live in the midst of the rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear” (Ezekiel 12:2);
- “...so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand” (Mark 4:12);
- “Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?” (Mk 8:18, NIV);
- “...blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear” (Matthew 13:16 all from NIV).

⁷ For more, see <http://www.olle-laprune.net/philosopher-of-the-see-judge-act> (accessed 12 July 2012).

⁸ See “intellectual conversion” in Bernard J. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (University of Toronto Press, 1990), 238. Hereafter, *Method*.

We must be very careful, therefore, not to conflate the level of understanding to the level of experience alone: the “seeing” of Catholic Social Action is much more than a singular, momentary, or passing glance.

Vincentian Pragmatism develops the three focal areas of Catholic Social Action into five areas of intentional practice, modeled after Pragmatic Inquiry®: begin attentively, explore openly, interpret imaginatively, decide responsibly, and act courageously.⁹ As a structure of intentional practice, Pragmatic Inquiry® has been well-tested in many business schools, corporations, and non-profits as a way to challenge assumptions, think systemically, clarify values, identify appropriate strategy, and develop a focused plan for effective intervention in complex systems. Rooted in the experience of strategy development within the business community, the action-oriented philosophy of American Pragmatism, and the moral framework of Catholic social thought, Vincentian Pragmatism is a viable method of intentional practice that is able to seek out the causes of poverty and develop adaptable, effective, and concrete solutions.

Vincentian Pragmatism

Begin Attentively

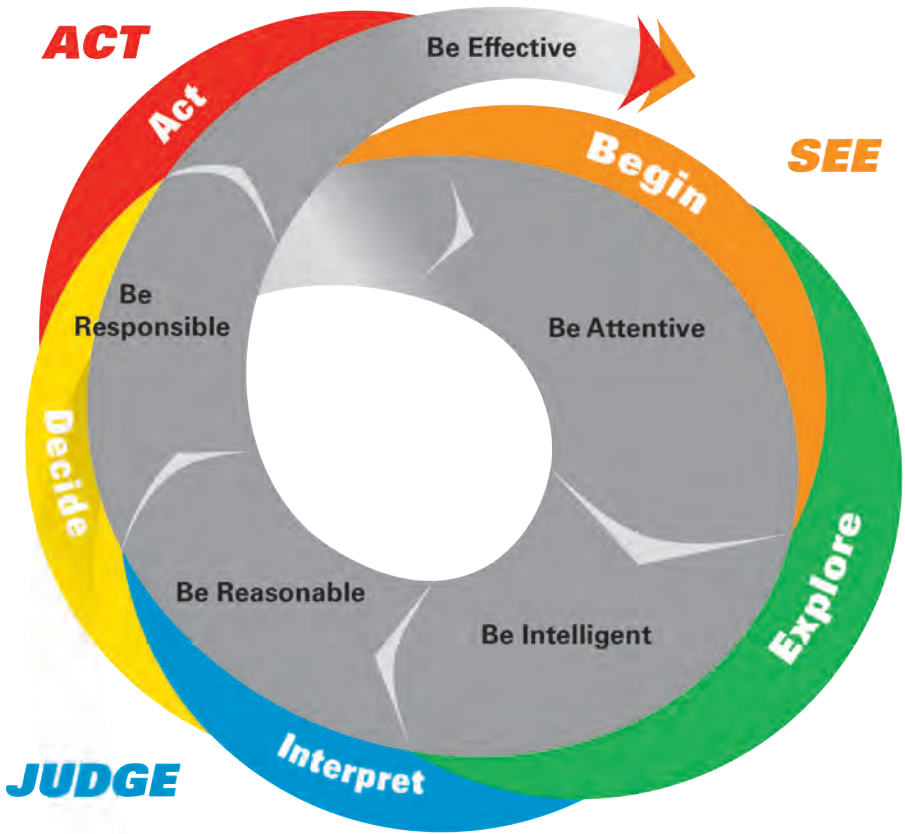
Effective solutions do not emerge spontaneously or randomly. They are the fruit of a continuum of thought and practice, forming a kind of arc. Each search for effective solutions — whether short term or long term — includes a beginning point, a starting point, or a moment of origin, even if this moment is not immediately obvious on first reflection. As such, stories of origin are very important for clarifying meaning and for identifying an arc of inquiry and practice (both for individuals and for communities). Vincent himself offers at least three narrative accounts of the origin of the Congregation of the Mission, but his encounter with the dying peasant of Gannes best captures the Vincentian ethic of solidarity.¹⁰

Encountering the Other. Encountering the Other-in-poverty is frequently considered a kind of beginning in the Vincentian charism. As the older Vincent recounted the origins of his “little company,” he referred to the first sermon of the mission given at Foleville, on 25 January 1617, as a beginning. The sermon, however, was not an isolated incident but rather

⁹ These five areas of practice come from the method of Pragmatic Inquiry®, see <http://pragmaticinquiry.org>.

For more see F. Byron Nahser, *Journeys to Oxford: Nine Pragmatic Inquiries into the Practice of Values in Business and Education*, 1st ed. (Global Scholarly Publications, 2009); and *Learning to Read the Signs: Reclaiming Pragmatism in Business* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997).

¹⁰ See Luigi Mezzadri, C.M., and José María Román, C.M., *The Vincentians: A General History of the Congregation of the Mission*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Cummings (New York: New City Press, 2009), 10. Hereafter, *The Vincentians*.



A visual representation of Vincentian Pragmatism

a response to a prior experience when Vincent had been summoned to the bedside of a dying peasant to hear his final confession. Through this encounter experience, Vincent and Madame de Gondi had discovered the Other who lived in the damning reality of poverty, corporally and spiritually. Reflecting on the experience, Madame de Gondi asked Vincent “what have we just heard?”¹¹ As Vincent tells this story of origin, it becomes clear how central listening was to the experience — a theme that continues to shape Vincentian spirituality today.¹² In this way, members of the Vincentian family embark on a journey of solidarity with the poor by listening attentively. Vincent’s encounter experience revealed a core challenge that he would spend the rest of his life addressing, how best to serve the poor country people. This particular encounter with the peasant of Gannes, and many subsequent to it, became a decisive factor in Vincent’s life such that they transformed the way he saw and engaged the lived reality around him.¹³

Worded differently, Vincent’s encounter with the dying peasant of Gannes shaped his horizon, his sphere of knowledge and interest, in an absolute and definitive way.¹⁴ It fashioned a worldview he would inhabit the rest of his life. It is important not to overly sentimentalize these experiences, lest we obfuscate the very real impact that can occur through the ordinary experience of listening, particularly to the poor.

Conscientization. Liberation theologians use the term conscientization to describe the growing awareness that emerges from solidarity with those living in poverty.¹⁵ The experience of Nobel Prize winning economist Muhammad Yunus offers a helpful illustration of this discovery process. Born in Bangladesh but trained as an economist in the United States, Yunus grew tired of teaching “grand economic theory” amidst one of Bangladesh’s

¹¹ Conference 2, “The Mission Preached in Folleville in 1617,” CCD, 11:2-3.

¹² See “Listening as the Foundation for Spirituality” in Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *He Hears the Cry of the Poor* (New York: New City Press, 1995), available at http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian_ebooks/2. Hereafter, *He Hears*.

¹³ For more on Vincent’s mission-centered horizon, see Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *The Way of Vincent de Paul* (New York: New City Press, 1992), 21. Hereafter, *The Way; He Hears*, 113; Mezzadri and Román, *The Vincentians*, 10.

¹⁴ The term *horizon* has a technical meaning in Lonergan’s epistemology, too complex to adequately describe here. In general terms, horizon is a sphere of knowledge and interest. Using the metaphor of sight, Lonergan argues that all horizons are bounded in some way: “[a]s our field of vision, so too the scope of our knowledge, and the range of our interests are bounded.” Horizons are bounded by one’s standpoint, historical period, social background and milieu, education, and personal development. See Lonergan, *Method*, 235-236.

¹⁵ The term conscientization is an English translation of the Portuguese *conscientização* meaning “critical consciousness,” a social concept developed by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 20th Anniversary Edition, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (Continuum Publishing Company, 1993). Through dialogue and relationship with the poor, one develops a new social consciousness.



Mural, original in former Vincentian seminary chapel, Dax, France.
 Vincent hearing the confession at Gannes.

An angel holds the dying peasant's soul as the devil exits.

Courtesy of St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive, as collected by John E. Rybolt, C.M.

worst famines: “[i]nstead of traditional book learning,” he writes, “I wanted to teach my university students how to understand the life of one single poor person.”¹⁶ He grew tired of looking at problems from a bird’s eye view, feeling he was becoming too arrogant, too distant, too abstract. Instead, Yunus opted for “the worm’s eye view.” Through personal and direct conversations with forty-two peasant women of Jobra, Yunus discovered the extent to which they were excluded from the formal banking system because they were illiterate and had no formal collateral to secure a loan. They were, in his words, the “banking untouchables.” Yunus would not have understood the exclusive nature of the formal banking system, let alone imagined the great potential of micro-saving and micro-lending, if not for his encounter with the poor women of Jobra. The banking industry had long assumed that formal collateral was the only way to secure debt, an assumption which had become settled banking wisdom. Yunus discovered otherwise.

The mission-centered horizon. Listening to the Other-in-poverty can become a lifelong commitment, as it did for Vincent. When it does, it establishes what might be described as a mission-centered horizon shaped, in part, by the felt understanding that emerges from encounter experiences with the poor. Such experiences may lead to an intentional, life-long commitment that becomes the dominant symbolic operator of one’s horizon just as the missionary Christ of Luke’s gospel gradually became the dominant symbolic

¹⁶ Muhammad Yunus, *Banker to the Poor: Micro-Lending and the Battle against World Poverty* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), ix.

operator of Vincent's horizon. In a Conference dated 17 May 1658, Vincent explained that confreres should conform their lives to Christ who was "sent by his Father to preach the Gospel to the poor [*Pauperibus evangelizare misit me*]."¹⁷ Although Vincent never claimed that the reference to Luke 4:18 was an official motto of the Congregation of the Mission, it was certainly an organizing principle in the fabric of his life and thought. Years after his death, Confreres eventually adopted the phrase as the official motto of the Congregation of the Mission, which continues to be a normative description of the Vincentian mission.¹⁸

It is important to note that Vincent's distinctive view of Christ does not appear to be the result of a singular dramatic moment, but rather the gradual development of a unique Christology over time, especially when compared to his contemporaries in the French School of Spirituality. Where Pierre de Bérulle emphasized the nature of Christ as the Incarnate Word, Vincent emphasized the mission of Christ sent to bring good news to the poor. Vincent gradually came to understand Christ as the Other present within the poor and one sent to work for the liberation of the poor — both beliefs having a significant impact on his own vocation as priest, and eventually becoming "the Rule of the Mission."¹⁹ This missionary Christology became the dominant symbolic operator of Vincent's horizon, functioning as a catalyst of discovery, innovation, and inventiveness.

Vincent's mission-centered horizon is the ground of the Vincentian *heuristic*. From the Greek "to discover," the term heuristic describes a method or process of discovery. Scientific method, for example, is a well developed heuristic that makes possible the insights of the scientist and of the scientific community. While scientists may dispute a particular insight or set of insights based on the relevant data, they do not dispute the scientific method as a common heuristic. Likewise, the felt understanding that comes from an experience of solidarity can initiate a dynamic of ongoing discovery. Vincent's vision of the poor as "Lord and master" is not a cultural residue of the pious, theological eccentricities of his time. Rather, it is a theological description of a dramatic shift in Vincent's consciousness, one which transcended the cultural bias regarding the poor operative in seventeenth-century France.²⁰ His capacity to transcend the cultural bias of his time was not given, innate,

¹⁷ [He has sent me to bring good news to the poor] from Conference 180, "Observance of the Rules," 17 May 1658, *CCD*, 12:3.

¹⁸ John E. Rybolt, C.M., "The Emblem and Motto of the Congregation of the Mission," *Vincentian Heritage* 22:2 (2001), 139-140.

¹⁹ Maloney, *The Way*, 24-26.

²⁰ Edward R. Udovic, C.M., "Caritas Christi Urget Nos": The Urgent Challenges of Charity in Seventeenth Century France," *Vincentian Heritage* 12:2 (1991), 101.

or magical; rather, it was an intentional commitment to grow in authenticity, shaped by countless encounters with the Other-in-poverty.

Vincent's mission-centered horizon focused his sphere of attention, deepened his understanding, and clarified his sense of responsibility: "let's devote ourselves with renewed love to serve persons who are poor, and even to seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned."²¹ Because the process of establishing a mission-centered horizon is incremental and ongoing, significant moments can easily be overlooked or dismissed without consistent self-reflection. Taking frequent notice of one's experience through consistent reflection, particularly the dynamic movements of interiority, provides the subjective content that, over time, makes apparent the subtle, interior process of conversion.²² As we carefully attend to encounter experiences, we may begin to discern a number of related questions for further exploration: "What is really going on here? Why are things this way? Doesn't anybody care? Why isn't anybody doing anything? What is being done? What must be done?" Noting how the dynamism of inquiry naturally unfolds provides integrity of thought, a core condition for effective praxis.

Self-Understanding, Reflection and Prayer. Personal, ongoing reflection is necessary to establish and reaffirm the mission-centered horizon, the ground of Vincentian Pragmatism. One must actively cultivate and commit to a mission-centered horizon if one hopes to understand the complex realities of poverty or find sustainable solutions to address it. As Vincent observes, "[g]ive me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything."²³ Although he borrowed freely from many of the significant spiritual figures of his time, Vincent preferred affective prayer and contemplation that led to practical resolutions as a privileged form. Not only did prayer foster authenticity in his way of being, it also provided the subjective foundations requisite for intellectual discovery and effective praxis. The habit of prayer and critical self-reflection discloses to us our own deeply held biases which might inhibit further understanding. As Mark Twain famously quipped: "what gets us into trouble is not what we don't know, it's what we know for sure that just ain't so."²⁴ Critical self-reflection, therefore, is an important tool for us to discover how we have internalized the cultural biases that create poverty.

Heightened self-awareness also discloses a very important spiritual insight necessary for doing the work that Vincent did: our own poverty.

²¹ Conference 164, "Love for the Poor," January 1657, *CCD*, 11:349.

²² Theodore Wiesner, "Experiencing God in the Poor," *Spiritual Life* 33 (Winter 1987): 213–221.

²³ Maloney, *He Hears*, 78.

²⁴ This quote has been attributed to Mark Twain, but the origin is dubious. See <http://www.quotiki.com/quote.aspx?id=8988> (accessed 15 September 2008).

Although Vincent's constant self-effacement is partly a convention of his spiritual milieu, it offers particular wisdom for today's culture.²⁵ The Vincentian virtues (simplicity, humility, mortification, meekness, and zeal) all point to a central spiritual insight common in the Christian tradition: we operate out of our own limitedness. As we grow in the awareness of our own limitedness, we begin to create the conditions to establish an I / Thou relationship with those living in poverty rather than an I / It relationship.²⁶ This is a necessary condition for solidarity. When we re-establish an I / Thou relationship with "the poor," they are no longer viewed as recipients of our benevolence, ancillary characters in our utopic visions, passive agents of our grand economic plans, or helpless victims in a cosmic drama. In solidarity, they are rightly restored as subjects, as the Other who lives in conditions that frustrate the process of integral human development. "The poor," therefore, are re-imagined as the Other-in-poverty.

Becoming aware of our own poverty serves two very important, subjective functions. One, we recognize our utter dependence on others to fully understand or realize the good we envision. Not only does this help us see complex interdependent systems where no single actor inhabits the center, but this insight also reminds us that we exist, imagine, and act in a community of people gathered together for the sake of the mission. We are inherently and radically social beings, not isolated experts acting alone. In addition, awareness of our own poverty encourages us to suspend, alter, or dismiss the grand solutions of our imagination in deference to the lived wisdom that comes from authentic subjectivity. Aware of our own poverties — conceptual and ethical — we begin to favor *insights* over concepts, *wisdom* over ideology. The lived reality of poverty, and any potential solution, is a complex phenomenon that transcends our limited mental models. We must approach the subject of poverty, and the Other-in-poverty, with great humility. By being attentive to our own interiority, we are better able to be attentive to the world around us.

Explore Openly

The "see" of Catholic Social Action is much more than just taking a look around, as I have argued above. But "seeing" is limited in a second sense if it does not explicitly refer to the level of intelligent understanding. The premature leap from "seeing" to "judging" is a decidedly problematic omission when it comes to epistemology and effective praxis. We cannot

²⁵ See Barbara B. Diefendorf, "From Penitence to Charity: The Practice of Piety in Counter-Reformation Paris," *Vincentian Heritage* 14:1 (1993), 37-56.

²⁶ Martin Buber, *I And Thou*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (Touchstone, 1971).

find effective or sustainable solutions to poverty if we rush to action without accurately understanding the complex conditions, contexts, cultures, stakeholder networks, economies, and ecosystems that create and exacerbate poverty. Although we may venture boldly into a specific course of action before we have a firm grasp of what is going on, we must constantly reevaluate our actions in light of new insights. We must learn to be as familiar with the cold world of data as we are with the warmth of direct encounter. On the level of intelligent understanding, therefore, Vincentian Pragmatism must be rooted in the ongoing process of discovery operating in complex systems.

Metanoia. Often translated as “repent,” *metanoia* is a Gospel term commonly used in Christian traditions to describe the dramatic, emotionally charged experience of a sudden or momentary turning away from a sinful past.²⁷ Often times, the dramatic religious conversion is modeled after the experience of Saint Paul. In contrast to this common interpretation, Peter Senge argues that *metanoia* is better understood as a shift of *mind* that happens gradually over time as a result of learning.²⁸ *Metanoia* is an ongoing process of intellectual discovery where one is constantly testing, challenging, and discarding one’s assumptions based on the accumulation of new evidence. Intelligence, therefore, does not mean knowing all the facts there are to be known about a given subject, but rather constantly seeking out and discovering new insights while disregarding incomplete assumptions that no longer account for the data.

We easily succumb to the bias of conceptualism when our concepts become fixed and rigid and fail to account for new data, especially when the data appears to be contradictory. Such ongoing discovery demands simplicity: we must plainly disclose and submit our assumptions to the scrutiny and judgment of others. Vincent understood this well, often encouraging confreres to give “a straightforward opinion about things in the way we honestly see them, without needless reservations,” and to do things “without double-dealing or manipulation.”²⁹ Simplicity, therefore, is an indispensable condition of the Vincentian heuristic. It takes great insight, courage, and humility to submit one’s assumptions to the critical evaluation of others. It takes even more courage to admit when deeply held assumptions

²⁷ See for example the following translation of Mark 1:15: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” και λέγων ὅτι πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ: μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεῦετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ. From [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metanoia_\(theology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metanoia_(theology)) [accessed 12 July 2012].

²⁸ Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*, Revised edition (Crown Business, 2006), 13. He argues that the phrase *meta* (beyond) + *nous* (mind) is an apt term for learning and discovery.

²⁹ Document 117a, “Common Rules,” CCD, 13a:430.

“just ain’t so.” One of the great intellectual dangers of the twenty-first century, the information era, is to think that our understanding is complete, that we inherently have all the relevant data. At the same time, we are compelled to respond rapidly to the pressing challenges that face us. It is within this tension that Vincent encourages others to practice *festina lente*, the centuries old adage to “make haste slowly.”³⁰

Systems Thinking. Ongoing discovery operates within the complex systems that constitute life in the twenty-first century. As systems thinkers, we must carefully examine the personal, organizational, economic, socio-cultural, religious, and environmental dimensions that constitute the micro, mezzo, and macro systems we hope to change.³¹ On the one hand, therefore, we must learn to *analyze* a given reality by dividing a coherent and integrated whole into component parts, looking for patterns of cause and effect, stocks and flows. On the other hand, however, we must *synthesize* a given reality by envisioning the larger systems within which it is embedded.³²

Although systems thinking is a contemporary term, it highlights a holistic and integrated model of knowing that has been a foundational characteristic of the Catholic moral imagination for centuries, as evidenced by great medieval thinkers such as Albert the Great, Peter Lombard, and Thomas Aquinas. Each demonstrated a remarkable capacity to analyze *and* integrate, viewing the Great Chain of Being as a coherent system. Despite any number of post-modern critics who are deeply skeptical of a classical worldview, there is real value in holding up Thomas Aquinas as a Doctor of the Church. The *Summa Theologica* is a great model of systems thinking — not so much for the fixed cosmology Thomas envisioned or for any singular insight, but moreso because of his notable capacity for ongoing inquiry, analysis, and integration.³³ It is the Thomistic *eros of mind* that we ought to emulate, daring to ask questions and to envision responses that are simultaneously critical, holistic, and integrated.

Vincent demonstrated facility as a systems thinker both by training and by practice. By training, Vincent’s baccalaureate degree in theology gave him permission to explicate and teach publicly the second book of the Sentences of Peter Lombard: “On the Creation and Formation of Things

³⁰ Letter 1890, “To Étienne Blatiron, In Rome,” 9 July 1655, CCD, 5:400.

³¹ Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008), Kindle edition, Locations 2041-2112; Learning to Read, stakeholder networks.

³² *Ibid.*, Locations 146-149.

³³ For more on Thomism as an integrating vision, see “The Future of Thomism” in Elizabeth A. Morelli, and Mark D. Morelli, eds., *The Lonergan Reader*, 1st ed. (University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1997).

Corporal and Spiritual and Many Other Things Pertinent to This.”³⁴ Like the *Summa Theologica*, the second book of the Sentences is a sweeping, imaginative survey of creation and the role of humanity within it. Vincent was formed in an educational milieu that encouraged such bold systems thinking. Beyond Vincent’s theological formation, however, he can also be considered a systems thinker through his acumen in navigating the complex systems of seventeenth-century France: a network of intricate political, legal, economic, royal, and ecclesial ecosystems. In this complex environment, Vincent demonstrated an extraordinary talent for securing resources necessary for sustaining a diverse range of activities over a long period of time. Although he never wrote a theological treatise like the *Sentences* or the *Summa*, his capacity to engage multiple stakeholder perspectives presupposes a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of life in seventeenth-century France.

Interpret Imaginatively

Vincentian Pragmatism does not merely seek insights *about* poverty, it seeks effective responses to it. As such, our consciousness must move beyond a level of understanding to a level of interpretation or judgment. We must move from an accurate description of the way things are to a vision of the ways things ought to be, of what needs to change. Moral imagination, therefore, asks us to move beyond the world *as we know it* to the world *as we make it*. What we make we first intend, which is why we imagine, plan, investigate possibilities, weigh pros and cons. As such, we live in a world mediated by meaning.³⁵ Such realms and acts of meaning are largely shaped by language, and the language we inherit contains mental models, structures, frames, categories, concepts, rules, orientations, and biases that shape the way we encounter the world.³⁶ In short, metaphors matter.

Kingdom of God. Perhaps the most important metaphor operative in Vincent’s consciousness was the Kingdom of God. In “Chapter II Gospel Teaching” of the *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, Vincent observes “Christ said: Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things which you need will be given you as well.” The passage he references comes from Matthew 6:33 and, in the larger context of the themes found in chapter 6, it is quite profound. Jesus warns his listeners

³⁴ Bernard Pujo, *Vincent de Paul: The Trailblazer* (University of Notre Dame, 2003), 21; see also, Peter Lombard, *The Second Book of Sentences*, English trans. (The Franciscan Archive, 2007-2010), at: <http://www.franciscan-archive.org/lombardus/II-Sent.html>.

³⁵ *Loneragan Reader*, 389.

³⁶ See, for example, Patricia H. Werhane, “Mental Models, Moral Imagination and System Thinking in the Age of Globalization,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 78 (17 March 2007): 463-474.

not to store up vulnerable treasures on earth (19), not to serve two masters (24), and not to worry about meeting basic needs (25). Rather, his followers are to seek the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things will be given to you as well. The message of this section of Matthew's Gospel has tremendous implications for alleviating poverty: we meet our own needs — material, financial, social, and spiritual — by seeking the Kingdom of God, and God's justice, first and foremost. By doing so, we create the conditions for a community that is free of poverty in all of its forms. As such, justice is a *necessary condition* for meeting the needs of present and future generations, since Creation itself is marked by abundance (26, 28). This vision serves as a contrasting optic to the "worldly wisdom" that will always let us down.³⁷

Evangelizare Pauperibus. Vincent sought to build the Kingdom of God by adopting Jesus' missionary spirit. The Vincentian family has a very broad view of Jesus' evangelizing activity, which includes serving the poor as human beings, both spiritually and corporally.³⁸ Vincent did not see the poor through a reductionist lens that focused exclusively on one dimension of personhood. Rather, he saw the Other-in-poverty as full human subjects. Put in more contemporary terms, poverty is a form of capability deprivation that precludes, inhibits, or truncates integral human development.³⁹ Through his works, words, and relationships, Vincent sought to liberate the poor from the spiritual and material oppression that was largely caused by patterns of exclusion from the systems necessary for cultivating human flourishing.⁴⁰ Finding effective, concrete solutions to alleviate poverty presupposes the ability to clearly define and articulate the meaning(s) of poverty in ways that sharpen one's analysis of reality and clarifies courses of responsible action. If poverty is merely a lack of income, then solutions are fairly straightforward. If poverty encompasses much more than income, however, then solutions are not so obvious.

Defining or Describing Poverty. The way we measure and talk about poverty provides an important illustration of the point. In the international community, global poverty is frequently defined as living on less than \$2 per day. However, many scholars and development economists do not find

³⁷ Document 117a, "Common Rules," CCD, 13a:433.

³⁸ Maloney, *Way of Vincent*, 24-25; and *Missionary Spirituality*, 39.

³⁹ For more on the meaning(s) of integral human development, see "A User's Guide to Integral Human Development," CRS Technical Resources, available at <http://www.crsprogramquality.org/publications/2009/2/23/a-users-guide-to-integral-human-development.html>; for more on poverty as capability deprivation, see Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, reprint (Anchor, 2000).

⁴⁰ Maloney, *Missionary Spirituality*, 130; and *The Way*, 24.

daily income to be an accurate or useful depiction of poverty.⁴¹ Since the cost of living differs greatly from region to region, the World Bank created the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) exchange rate as a way to translate experience from one circumstance to another. The PPP is commonly based on surveys of the costs of a given group of goods necessary for survival, often called the market basket approach. While the PPP adjustment is helpful for a broad, sweeping overview of the global economy, it was never designed to measure poverty per se and can be quite deceptive. While it is true that a greater portion of income is spent on meeting basic needs at lower income levels, it does not give a clear indicator of the multitude of stressors that poverty exacerbates, including disease, illiteracy, gender discrimination, violence, state failure, and environmental degradation to name a few.⁴²



Vincentian Holy card, translated: “Father of the poor. The one who gives to the poor gives to the Lord, and the Lord will repay his gift.”

Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

⁴¹ “On the Poverty Line: Has ‘a dollar a day’ had its day?”, *The Economist*, 22 May 2008, at: http://www.economist.com/finance/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11409401 (accessed 8 July 2008).

⁴² Angus Deaton, “Measuring Poverty,” *Understanding Poverty*, A. Banerjee, R. Bénabou, D. Mookherjee, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3-15.

The point is not to replace one universal measurement with another, but rather to acknowledge that all terms, concepts, and measurements pertaining to poverty are only small windows into the complex phenomenon of capability deprivation.

Providence. The theological concept of providence helped Vincent find meaning in his efforts to alleviate poverty, particularly when they evolved slowly, differently than what he had anticipated, or even failed completely. The notion of providence formed Vincent as a tireless and faithful advocate for the poor: "We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of providence, and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ."⁴³ Providence made Vincent patient and timely: "The works of God have their moment; His Providence brings them about at that time and neither sooner nor later.... Let us wait patiently but let us act, and, so to speak, let us make haste slowly."⁴⁴ Providence also made Vincent resilient: "Trust firmly in God's guidance and encourage your people to have this trust in the present disturbances; the storm will abate, and the calm will be greater and more pleasing than ever."⁴⁵ Although most have long since abandoned Vincent's classical cosmology, there has been a renewed effort to recover the spiritual wisdom of providence in a way that is consistent with an emergent, historical, personalist worldview. Providence "revisited" means inhabiting a realm of meaning that is marked by personalism, hope for the future, and prudent strategy.⁴⁶ In the great battle of ideas and systems of meaning, a Vincentian worldview offers a contrasting optic to those that are overly technical and impersonal, nihilistic in their orientation, or ideologically exclusive. The notion of providence shaped Vincent as an attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible actor in systems often marked by pious eccentricities, grave economic injustice, and disturbing patterns of social exclusion.

Symbolic Operators. The world mediated by meaning is much more than discursive reason operating by the rigors of logic. Much of the realm of meaning, to the contrary, is greatly shaped by images, icons, and rituals that transcend our ordinary, every day language. As such, they could be described as pre-linguistic.⁴⁷ It is vitally important to discern the influence of symbols operative in acts of interpretation and judgment. We must critically evaluate the dominant symbolic operators of the cultures we inhabit to adopt only

⁴³ Letter 1078, "To Jean Barreau, Consul of France, In Algiers," 4 December 1648, *CCD*, 3:384.

⁴⁴ Letter 1890, "To Étienne Blatiron," 9 July 1655, *CCD*, 5:400.

⁴⁵ Letter 1942, "To Charles Ozenne, Superior, In Krakow," 15 October 1655, *CCD*, 5:454.

⁴⁶ See "Providence revisited" in Maloney, *He Hears*, 52-72.

⁴⁷ For more on this subject, read Louis Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Liturgical Press, 1995), 592 pp.

those that shape a world we wish to inhabit. Vincent's vision of the Kingdom of God was much bigger than that of the French monarchy and just as real. In a more contemporary context, the notions of the "American dream," the "free market," or "socialism" are no more or less real than Vincent's or the Vincentian family's notion of the Kingdom of God. They are all communal visions of a just society shaping the world mediated by meaning.⁴⁸ If we do not critically evaluate the symbolic operators or the systems of meaning of the cultures we inhabit, we will be swept away in the currents of a river toward a destination we did not choose. What we make we must first intend.

Decide Responsibly

Beyond the level of interpretation, Vincentian Pragmatism also operates on the level of responsible decision-making, which is largely about identifying and employing effective strategy. The term pragmatism usually connotes this level of intentionality, but prudent strategy only emerges when one is attentive, intelligent, and imaginative.

Strategy. Responsible decisions are largely about strategy. In its original Greek usage, the term *strategos* described the role, art, or skill of employing military force to overcome opposition with the ultimate aim of creating a unified system of global governance. Separating the term from its ancient military usage, contemporary management scholars define strategy as "a pattern or plan that integrates an organization's [or an individual's] major goals... into a cohesive whole," helping to allocate limited resources to maximize effectiveness. In this definition, strategy functions as perspective, pattern, position, or plan that can either be deliberate (i.e. explicit and intentional) or emergent (i.e. gradually evolving and adapting over time).⁴⁹ Strategy serves a number of important functions for individuals and organizations: it establishes a set of organizing principles or symbolic operators that animate and inspire; it identifies major goals through a plan of action; it clarifies how best to use limited resources; it identifies particular strengths unique to each individual or organization; and it helps clarify appropriate responses to dynamic circumstances. Each of these elements of strategy is worth closer examination, especially as a way of understanding Vincent's extraordinary gifts as a manager of limited resources.

Strategy-as-Perspective. Vincent's mission-centered horizon was the basis of his strategy. This mission-centered horizon provided focus, clarity,

⁴⁸ For more on dimensions of meaning, see "Chapter 3: Meaning" in Lonergan, *Method*.

⁴⁹ See Henry Mintzberg, "The Strategy Concept I: Five Ps For Strategy," *California Management Review* 30:1 (Fall 1987), 11-24; Henry Mintzberg, James Quinn, and Sumantra Ghoshal, *The Strategy Process*, 2nd Edition (Pearson Education Limited, 2003), 1056 pp.

and orientation to his life, creating a heuristic for ongoing discovery and innovation. This perspective also formed the ethos of the organizations he directly or indirectly founded, including the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Sisters of Charity, and many others. Although Vincent may never have imagined the extent to which others would adopt his mission-centered horizon, it has inspired a worldwide network of organizations that numbers among the largest in the Roman Catholic Church. On one level, Vincent's greatest historical legacy for alleviating poverty was his ability to gather people together for the sake of the mission. So perhaps the most significant lesson concerning strategies for systemic change is to remember how important it is to invite and inspire others to inhabit Vincent's mission-centered horizon.

Strategy-as-Pattern. Careful and critical reflection on effective solutions often reveals patterns that may not have been anticipated at the outset. Such patterns emerge from the lived experience of those who are doing the work, attentive to the ongoing challenges they face. Strategy-as-Pattern is the art of discerning what works. Unlike many other religious orders that had already established their rules before they asked for formal recognition, Vincent asked Pope Urban VIII if he could write the rules for his confreres after they had the lived experience of what worked or did not work. As Vincent explained:

It is now about thirty-three years since our Congregation was founded, but I have not had our Rules printed for you before now. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, I wanted to take our Savior as a model. He put things into practice before He made them part of His teaching. Secondly, delaying their printing has avoided many problems which most certainly would have arisen if these Rules or Constitutions had been published too soon.... It has also made it possible for the Congregation gradually and smoothly to get used to living the Rules before having them in print. You will not find anything in them which you have not been doing for a long time, and I must say how pleased I am that you do live by them and that they have enabled you all to help one another.⁵⁰

The delay in drafting the Rules is not simply an indication of

⁵⁰ As cited in John E. Rybolt, C.M., "The Primitive Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission," *Vincentiana* 52:3 (2008), 1.

Vincent's acumen for operating in complex ecclesial systems; it reveals deep respect for the wisdom that comes from lived experience. In this sense, Vincent was very much aligned with the philosophy of the Pragmatists, seeking to identify patterns emerging from reflection on experience. Unlike the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola that were penned from a solitary religious experience, the Rules of the Congregation of the Mission emerged from the careful reflection of communal experience. The very foundation of the Congregation of the Mission is rooted in an intense respect for the wisdom that comes from solidarity with the poor and with each other. Strategy-as-pattern seeks to identify and uncover those insights that emerge from communal experience.

Strategy-as-Position. For months Vincent was reluctant to take over the administration and management of the vast Priory of Saint-Lazare, despite the requests of Adrian Le Bon. Although he had received some very attractive offers to take over the aged property, Adrian Le Bon believed the Priory of Saint-Lazare would be a very useful resource for the recently established Congregation of the Mission. After much discernment, and the encouragement of his mentor André Duval, Vincent eventually relented, signing the contract on 7 January 1632. The Priory of Saint-Lazare had begun as a benefice to serve lepers centuries before, but due to a drastic decrease of those suffering from the disease it had lost much of its *raison d'être*. Adrian Le Bon and Vincent de Paul came to agree that the mission to serve poor country people "infected with the leprosy of sin" was a compelling development of the Priory's original intents and purposes.⁵¹

Vincent's decision to accept the management of Saint-Lazare proved to be an important moment in the early history of the Congregation of the Mission. The contractual agreement to take over the Priory was a natural partnership that developed between two people who had a clear, but not rigid, sense of purpose. This clarity of purpose *positioned* the newly founded Congregation of the Mission relative to other organizations that would have eagerly taken responsibility for this sizeable asset. Adrian Le Bon not only admired Vincent's clarity of vision, but agreed that his was a compelling investment for the expansive resources of Saint-Lazare. From the perspective of management theory, an organization's strategy-as-position helps managers carefully discern beneficial opportunities from counterproductive distractions that can overextend or spread an organization's resources too thin. The prudent manager must discriminate beneficial investments from those that will divert attention from the organization's core purposes and core competencies.

⁵¹ For a history of the union of the Priory of Saint-Lazare with the Congregation of the Mission, see: Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, 3 Vols. (New York: New City Press, 1987), 1:160-176.

Strategy-as-Plan. Good planning and effective organization is perhaps the most common understanding of strategy, as Vincent's experience in Châtillon-les-Dombes illustrates.⁵² Having heard of a family in desperate need, Vincent gave a moving homily encouraging parishioners to help. When Vincent later visited the family himself, he discovered they had received more food than they could possibly use. He realized food would go to waste and that the family would soon find itself back in the same situation. Vincent discovered that the community did not lack resources; it lacked organization and efficiency. In response, he called a meeting and created a plan to provide a more efficient distribution of resources. The Confraternities of Charity were the first institutional expression of the Vincentian charism.

Strategy-as-plan is a very important dimension of effectiveness, especially when people, organizations, and investments work at cross-purposes. Take, for example, the experience of CARE in 2007. CARE, one of the world's largest charities, refused to accept \$45 million in American food aid to be sent to Kenya because they found that it had suppressed local markets, creating a cycle of dependency.⁵³ Kenyan farmers could simply not compete with the influx of food aid as it stunted the development of their local markets, a practice made possible by the heavily subsidized agricultural practices in the United States. While good intentions are very important, they are not sufficient. Strategy-as-plan helps to reduce counterproductive feedback loops (e.g. in CARE's case, more dire circumstances led to increased donations which led to more food aid that further suppressed local production capacity). Good strategy helps to establish or reinforce *positive* feedback loops.

Whether as perspective, position, or plan, good strategy must not be evaluated outside of a careful analysis of complex, dynamic systems. Whatever their form, good strategies are effective insofar as they act upon leverage points "where actions and changes in structures can lead to significant, enduring improvements."⁵⁴ While there are a number of leverage points in a given system, choosing the right one is a function of discerning what will have greater impact in relation to the limited resources that are currently or likely to be available. A good leverage point could mean the accurate collection and dissemination of data, changing the dynamics of

⁵² Although recounted in a variety of texts, I prefer this particular resource as it demonstrates how the Châtillon experience illustrates strategy-as-plan: http://famvin.org/wiki/Systemic_Change_-_Vincentian_Study_Guides.

⁵³ Cecilia Dugger, "CARE Turns Down Federal Funds for Food Aid," *The New York Times*, 16 August 2007, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/16/world/africa/16food.html> (accessed 24 January 2009).

⁵⁴ Senge, *Fifth Discipline*, 114.

feedback loops, altering rule-making and governance structures, enabling self-organization within or between communities, re-establishing the goals of a system, or revising the governing paradigms that shape how people view the system in its entirety.⁵⁵ Good strategy must be seen as a dynamic response to a particular need at a given time. Because complex systems are constantly changing, it is very important to view strategy as an evolving and adaptive process. When a particular course of action begins to diverge from the mission-centered horizon, or fails to responsibly address the needs of the Other-in-poverty, the best course of action may be to completely withdraw and allocate resources elsewhere.⁵⁶ The mission-centered horizon demands constant renewal.

Act Courageously

Identifying a good strategy is not the same as the effective implementation of it. Implementation demands a great deal of courage — the courage to seek out and adapt to data that may disrupt current habits and patterns, the courage to persuade, the courage to put into action despite significant challenges. Vincent often encouraged others to continue in their work, regardless of challenges. In a letter to Brother Pierre Leclerc, Vincent wrote “you should be no more discouraged with suffering some aversion than travelers are with difficulties or sailors with storms.”⁵⁷ In addition to courage, effective implementation also demands a keen understanding of feedback loops, a strong desire for ongoing improvement, and effective communication skills to enlist the support of others. Courage comes from commitment, commitment from clarity, and clarity from accurate information.

Feedback loops. At the level of tactics, adaptation is a core management virtue. As circumstances and conditions on the ground change, it is imperative that poverty-alleviating solutions are able to adapt accordingly. In the field of systems thinking, feedback loops function as a causal connection or flow of information between a particular system and various dynamic forces that act upon it.⁵⁸ Different types of feedback loops contain different forms of information useful for detecting change. To continue with the example of Muhammad Yunus and the women of Jobra, bankers in the formal banking

⁵⁵ Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, Kindle Locations 2112-2117.

⁵⁶ The Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission state this explicitly in 1:163, “We are gradually to withdraw from those apostolic works which, after due reflection, no longer seem to correspond to the vocation of the Congregation at the present time,” as quoted in Miguel Pérez Flores, *The Way of Saint Vincent Is Our Way* (Cape Girardeau, MO.: Eastern Province, Congregation of the Mission, 1995).

⁵⁷ Letter 2168, “To Brother Pierre Leclerc, In Agen,” 12 November 1656, CCD, 6:144.

⁵⁸ Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, Kindle Locations 340-341.

system were unable to identify the reinforcing, virtuous feedback loops operative among these small groups of women. When a small group of borrowers formed a self-group, individual borrowers began to make more prudent business decisions with the capital. If the borrower was unable to repay her debt according to the pre-defined repayment schedule, the schedule was adjusted according to her unique circumstances. The self-help group was both aware of and responsive to the borrower's circumstances and had the autonomy to adapt to them. Because the borrower was part of and accountable to a small group, she had every incentive to repay the loan. Social collateral, then, is a kind of positive, direct feedback loop not possible in a formal banking system where clients are often anonymous.

Ongoing improvement. A second management virtue for effective implementation is the capacity for ongoing improvement. It is very rare that a product, insight, or successful program is established all at once on the first try. Innovation demands that we revise, adapt, and re-evaluate on a frequent basis. Not only does this habit make us accountable to the people we serve, it also draws our attention to the wisdom that comes from experience. Because Vincent had a firm belief in Providence and the necessity of the missionary virtues, he possessed a healthy detachment concerning tactics. He was able to abandon what did not work or develop what did. He never confused effectiveness or ineffectiveness at the tactical level with his firm commitment to mission. As he said, "My wish is that God may grant us great indifference with regard to duties.... how sure we would then be of doing His Holy Will, which is our sole aspiration, and how much peace and contentment we would enjoy."⁵⁹

Persuasion. Because we work together in community, we must develop the communication skills necessary to implement strategy. When we are able to refine and communicate stories, especially stories of purpose, we are more likely to enlist the support of others. Stories of meaning, especially stories of origin, provide a common sense of purpose — a common telos. Vincent was able to win support from many circles of society because he so clearly lived and spoke about the mission-centered horizon. Such clarity of purpose inspires both the individual and the community. As such, storytelling is a very important tool for Vincentian Pragmatism.

Conclusion

I have argued that Vincentian Pragmatism is a coherent, integrating method for systemic change comprised of five areas of intentional practice: begin attentively, explore openly, interpret imaginatively, decide

⁵⁹ Letter 1158, "To Louis Rivet, Superior, In Saintes," 8 December 1649, CCD, 3:510.

responsibly, and act courageously. These five areas of practice are an important development of the See-Judge-Act method of Catholic social action, especially considering the complex global realities of the twenty-first century. Vincentian Pragmatism is a heuristic that will help foster the discovery of sustainable solutions to poverty. It is a way of proceeding that captures Vincent's profound capacity to be attentive to the poor, intelligent in understanding, imaginative in interpretation of circumstances and events, responsible in decision-making, and courageous in actions.

Just as Vincent did in the seventeenth century, members of the Vincentian family today can work for the credibility of the Gospel and the Church by searching out "with boldness, humility and skill" the causes of poverty while discovering effective and sustainable solutions to it. By sharing Vincent's mission-centered horizon, and having a pragmatic orientation within it, members of the Vincentian family can continue to build sustainable communities in the twenty-first century.