

Meditation on “Evangelii Gaudium”



Bishop Jorge García Isaza, C.M.

Bishop-Emeritus, Diocese of Tierradentro – Colombia

There is no doubt that *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father, published at the conclusion of the Year of Faith, should lead the whole Church, but especially the Vincentian Family, to a state of permanent reflection on our personal behavior and our activities together. This reflection should be done in light of the doctrine presented in this document.

The Holy Father begins the fourth chapter of his message with the words: “*The kerygma has a clear social content: at the very heart of the gospel is life in community and engagement with others*” (EG, 177). Those words lead me to reflect on our beloved Vincentian Family and on our poor brothers and sisters to whom the Lord sends us.

The awareness of the fact that Jesus leads us to discover the other as our brother and sister should also lead us to experience the reality that the Teacher has “captivated” us. We in turn, as disciples of Christ, must also come to experience in the depth of our being the reality that our brothers and sisters have “captivated” us. I believe that this is a process, which we must engage in with tenacity and humility and much prayer. One does not suddenly come to such an awareness, rather such an awareness is the result of the dynamics of faith in Jesus Christ.

I also believe that coming to this awareness has two dimensions: the first dimension is related to those to whom God has joined us as a result of our charismatic vocation as members of the Vincentian Family. This is the foundation of our life together as a family and is the absolute condition for the effectiveness of the mission because as Jesus said: “*This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*” (Jn. 13:35).

The second dimension refers to those to whom the Lord sends us and with whom we ought to establish a special bond. We are not

"the benefactors" and they are not "the beneficiaries"; we are not the ones "who have" and they are not the ones "who have not". They and we are brothers and sisters and therefore we have to make the effort so that they experience us as such. The Holy Father states: "*How dangerous harmful this is, for it makes us lose our amazement, our excitement and our zeal for living the gospel of fraternity and justice*" (EG, 179).

This leads me to believe that our life together as members of the Vincentian Family must be carefully cultivated. It is not enough to say repeatedly that we are brothers and sisters. We have to express that same reality in our actions. It is not enough to be proud of belonging to a worldwide family, but we must also accept the responsibility of being a brother or sister to others. Vincent de Paul expressed this reality in the Rule that he gave to the Missionaries: "*Love, like that between brothers, should always be present among us, as well as the bond of holiness, and these should be safeguarded in every possible way*" (Common Rules VIII: 2).

In this era of communication, people gather in large cities where organizations and services have been established to provide for their well-being. Yet at the same time, in these same cities, we also discover a most disconcerting paradox: each day these men and women live in greater isolation. Families live together under the same roof, but when one member has to communicate with another member, they do not speak face to face, but will telephone, text, or send an e-mail.

I believe that the various branches of our Vincentian Family have to question themselves, because without even being aware of it we can begin to live our life in an individualistic manner. We can become like those families that have relatives, but never take the time to get to know them. "May the Holy Spirit who possesses infinite love that is proper to a divine person" (POPE JOHN PAUL II, General Audience, April 24, 1991) help us to find those paths that will enable our life together as a family to become that prophetic sign of which Jesus speaks: "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:22).

Everything the Holy Father stated in his Apostolic Exhortation has made me think that today, like yesterday and tomorrow, we have to learn to live the fine print of the Gospel message. Our love of God can only be expressed by our love for our brothers and sisters. We will never achieve success in our mission on behalf of the poor unless we learn how to live together as a community of brothers and sisters, as a family. Therefore, I believe members of the Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, and each branch of the Vincentian Family should reflect on this reality. Such reflection must become an everyday

task that enables us to know one another, to understand one another, to help one another and to love one another.

Ministry on behalf of the poor and the activities that this ministry demands of us can become a pretext to isolate ourselves from the Community and the Family. It can become “an escapism” that numbs our conscience to the reality that we are all aware of, namely, that the sign of an authentic disciple of Jesus is love.

The Holy Father, however, not only invites us to reflect but also invites us “to share” the processes by which we serve the poor. Therefore, we need to be convinced that the works we do are not “our works” but rather the works of God, and that the paths that we travel are the paths of God. The best way to become convinced of that is to allow the Holy Spirit to work through the community. Thus, the best way to guarantee success to our ministry is in sharing with other members and branches of the Family, seeking their enlightenment, and affirming their initiatives. How many times in the history of the Vincentian Family has a work failed because others did not esteem the person who initiated the work or others envied such an initiative.

The Holy Father presents another element to us when he states, “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor” (EG, 187). In the development of his presentation, the Pope highlights the doctrine of solidarity. Although he tells us that the word has become “worn out”, he nevertheless speaks about “participation” and focuses his thoughts on the unequal distribution of the material goods of this world and the cries of the numerous poor people who have nothing, alongside the small minority of rich people who seem to have everything.

Reflecting on the concept of solidarity and participation as related to both the small and the large projects undertaken by the members of the Vincentian Family throughout the world, it seems to me that while we often say that such projects reveal our option on behalf of those who are poor, perhaps we need to take time to listen to what the beneficiaries of these projects think, to allow them to explain to us the criteria they use in making judgments. Perhaps we need to allow the beneficiaries to teach us. As Pope Francis tells us, “We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them... we are called to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (EG, 198).

How many times, with the best intentions, have we interpreted events and decided what we believe the poor need, want, or hope for? How many times have we done their thinking and then formulated pastoral plans according to our way of thinking? Yet, perhaps the anguish and the needs of the poor were quite different. In our ministry, the poor have to feel at home and feel that they are free to offer their

opinion. As Pope Francis states, “Only based on this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation. Only this will ensure that in every Christian community the poor feel at home” (EG, 199).

To evangelize is to make the Kingdom of God present in our world: this is our task. The Gospel and the Kingdom of God are the same. Jesus has told us: “You always have the poor with you” (Jn. 12:8). But in today’s changing world, the poor are distinct from those of Jesus’ time, and even from the time of Vincent de Paul. Nevertheless, the vocation of the Vincentian Family continues to be one of service on behalf of those who are poor. Therefore, we need to understand the situation of the poor, we need to allow the poor to teach us, and we need to allow the poor to speak for themselves. Indeed, we need to present the poor with the reality of God’s kingdom, one that is grounded on love. In this way, after the poor have been evangelized, they, in turn, will become evangelizers.

Translated from Spanish by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.