



*To the Reverend Tomaž Mavrič
Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*

As the Congregation of the Mission prepares to commemorate the fourth centenary of its foundation, I offer affectionate good wishes to you, to the priests and brothers of the Congregation, and to all the members of the great Vincentian family. I pray that this significant anniversary will be an occasion of great joy and renewed fidelity to the vision of missionary discipleship, grounded in the imitation of Christ's preferential love for the poor.

The beginnings of your Congregation are to be found in Saint Vincent de Paul's profound personal experience of the "fire of love" that burned in the heart of the incarnate Son of God and led him to identify with the poor and the outcast (*Conference 207 on charity*, 30 May 1659). Distressed by the lack of pastoral care in the French countryside, he determined at the beginning of 1617 to organize missions aimed at providing basic catechetical instruction and encouraging a return to the sacraments. It was a dream that he was to bring to fruit some eight years later, with the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission on 17 April 1625. In the first seven years of its existence, the priests and brothers of the Congregation gave 140 missions. Between 1632 and 1660, the motherhouse in Paris was responsible for another 550 missions. From 1635 on, as community houses began to be established outside Paris, hundreds of other missions were launched. This remarkable expansion testifies to the religious and missionary fruitfulness of Saint Vincent's priestly zeal and his lifelong thirst to convert hearts and minds to Christ.

In his outreach to the poor, Vincent quickly realized that works of charity need to be well organized on the local level. Women were the first to rise to this challenge. In 1617, in the parish at Châtillon, he established the first of the "Confraternities of Charity" which continue today as the International Association of Charities or the Ladies of Charity. In 1633, he and Saint Louise de Marillac co-founded a revolutionary type of women's community, the "Daughters of Charity". Until that time, communities of nuns were required to live in a cloister. The Daughters of Charity were instead sent out into the streets of Paris to serve the sick and the poor. This innovation was to bear rich fruit in a veritable explosion of women's religious congregations devoted to apostolic works in subsequent centuries.

Beginning in 1628, in response to an appeal from the Bishop of Beauvais, the Congregation of the Mission also began to assist in the formation of the clergy. This work, so necessary for the reform and renewal of the Church in seventeenth-

century France, grew and flourished. By the time of his death, twenty seminaries had been founded and 12,000 young men had participated in retreats in preparation for ordination to the priesthood. Saint Vincent was convinced of the importance of this “lofty, sublime ministry”, which was to become a hallmark of the Congregation (*Conference on the purpose of the Congregation*, 6 December 1658). In the Common Rules, he states clearly that, by the very nature of the Congregation, this work is “almost equal” to that of preaching missions (*Common Rules*, XI, 12).

On this anniversary, it is fitting to reflect on the legacy of spirituality, apostolic zeal and pastoral care that Saint Vincent de Paul bequeathed to the universal Church. The list of those who absorbed Vincentian spirituality and lived it heroically over the years is long and embraces every continent. A few names will suffice: Saint John Gabriel Perboyre, Saint Francis Regis Clet, Saint Justin de Jacobis, Saint Louise de Marillac, Saint Jeanne Antide Thouret, Saint Catherine Labouré, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and many others, including most recently Ján Havlik, beatified on 31 August 2024 in Slovakia.

Today too, in the footsteps of Saint Vincent, his family continues to initiate works of charity, begin new missions, and help in the formation of the clergy and laity. More than 100 branches of priests, brothers, sisters, lay women and men now constitute the Vincentian family. The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, founded in 1833 by Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, has become an outstanding force for good in the service of the poor, with hundreds of thousands of members worldwide.

The Congregation of the Mission is presently experiencing new signs of growth. Its younger provinces, especially in Asia and Africa, where vocations to the Congregation are flourishing, have responded to the call to begin missions in other countries. The Congregation also continues to undertake new creative works among those in need. I think for example of the Vincentian Family Homeless Alliance, an international initiative to provide affordable housing for the homeless, inspired by the example of Vincent de Paul, who began his work with the homeless in 1643 by building thirteen houses in Paris for the poor. This initiative aims to begin symbolically by building, in all the countries where Vincentians serve, thirteen houses for the homeless, and has now surpassed its initial goal of housing 10,000 people.

Four centuries after the establishment of the Congregation of the Mission, there can be no doubt that the charism of Saint Vincent de Paul continues to enrich the Church through the varied apostolates and good works of the entire Vincentian family. It is my hope that the centenary celebrations will highlight the importance of Saint Vincent's vision of service to Christ in the poor for the renewal of the Church of our time in missionary discipleship and outreach to the needy and the abandoned in the many peripheries of our world and the fringes of a shallow, throwaway culture. I am convinced that the example of Saint Vincent can especially inspire the young, who in their enthusiasm, generosity and concern for building a better world, are called to be bold and courageous witnesses of the Gospel among their contemporaries and wherever

they find themselves (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* [25 March 2019], 178).

With great affection, then, I assure the priests and brothers of the Congregation

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of the Mission of my particular closeness in prayer during the coming anniversary year. I pray that, inspired by the vision of their Founder, they may continue to shape their lives and work in accordance with the exhortation to humility and zeal in the apostolate that he addressed to the first members of the Congregation: “Come, let us devote ourselves with renewed love to serve persons who are poor, and even to seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned. Let us acknowledge before God that they are our lords and masters, and that we are unworthy of rendering them our little services” (*Conference 164 on love for the poor*, January 1657).

Commending all the members of the Vincentian family to the maternal intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, I send my blessing as a pledge of abiding joy and peace in the Lord. And I ask you, please, also to remember me in your prayers.

Franciscus

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 11 December 2024

