



Systemic Change is Vincentian Evangelization

James Claffey

Vincentian NGO Representative to the UN, New York

claffey44@gmail.com

Abstract:

The 2022 General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission emphasizes promoting Systemic Change (SC) as a key evangelization method, building on the 2016 mandate to prepare SC advocates. Systemic Change, while not replacing traditional charity, aims to empower those in poverty by addressing root causes rather than mere symptoms, promoting justice alongside charity. SC is a deeply spiritual approach rooted in Gospel values, recognizing the special place of the poor in God's love and the necessity of justice for true charity. It involves seeing through the eyes of the poor, making Gospel judgments, and taking strategic action to alter unjust systems. Advocacy is crucial, helping the poor find their voice and participate in decision-making. The SC initiative, now under the Vincentian Family Office, seeks to educate and engage members and collaborators, fostering hope and systemic change. This transformative approach changes both the systems of injustice and the perspectives of those working within the ministry.

La Asamblea General de 2022 de la Congregación de la Misión hace hincapié en la promoción del Cambio Sistemico (CS) como método clave de evangelización, basándose en el mandato de 2016 de preparar defensores del CS. El Cambio Sistemico, aunque no sustituye a la caridad tradicional, tiene como objetivo empoderar a las personas en situación de pobreza abordando las causas profundas en lugar de los meros síntomas, promoviendo la justicia junto con la caridad. El CS es un enfoque profundamente espiritual arraigado en los valores del Evangelio, que reconoce el lugar especial de los pobres en el amor de Dios y la necesidad de justicia para la verdadera caridad. Implica ver a través de los ojos de los pobres, emitir juicios evangélicos y emprender acciones estratégicas para modificar los sistemas injustos. La incidencia política es crucial para ayudar a los pobres a encontrar su voz y participar en la toma de decisiones. La iniciativa SC, ahora bajo la Oficina de la Familia Vicenciana, busca educar y comprometer a miembros y colaboradores, fomentando la esperanza y el cambio sistemico. Este enfoque transformador cambia tanto los sistemas de injusticia como las perspectivas de quienes trabajan en el ministerio.

L'Assemblée générale 2022 de la Congrégation de la Mission met l'accent sur la promotion du Changement Systémique (CS) comme méthode clé d'évangélisation, en s'appuyant sur le mandat de 2016 pour préparer les défenseurs du CS. Le Changement Systémique, sans remplacer la charité traditionnelle, vise à renforcer les capacités des personnes en situation de pauvreté en s'attaquant aux causes profondes plutôt qu'aux simples symptômes, en promouvant la justice parallèlement à la charité. Le changement systémique est une approche profondément spirituelle ancrée dans les valeurs de l'Évangile, qui reconnaît la place particulière des pauvres dans l'amour de Dieu et la nécessité de la justice pour une véritable charité. Elle implique de voir avec les yeux des pauvres, de porter des jugements évangéliques et de prendre des mesures stratégiques pour modifier les systèmes injustes. Le plaidoyer est crucial, car il aide les pauvres à trouver leur voix et à participer à la prise de décision. L'initiative du CS, qui relève maintenant du Bureau de la Famille Vincentienne, cherche à éduquer et à engager les membres et les collaborateurs, en encourageant l'espoir et le changement systémique. Cette approche transformatrice change à la fois les systèmes d'injustice et les perspectives de ceux qui travaillent au sein du ministère.

Keywords: Systemic Change, Vincentian Family, Charity, Evangelization.



“To promote Systemic Change as our specific method of evangelizing” reads one of the Priorities of the 2022 General Assembly.

This powerful statement builds beautifully on one of the Lines of Action from the previous General Assembly (2016) *“to prepare agents of Systemic Change who will live it and promote it, especially among our own, as well as among the laity and the clergy.”*

So, the concept and practice of Systemic Change is Vincentian. The Congregation of the Mission has adopted this method, it has embraced this ministerial approach, and mandates its practice. But what is Systemic Change (SC) and how well do we know it?

What SC is Not

- SC is not a replacement for the charity Vincentians are well known for, the outstanding legacy of work for poor people begun by Saints Vincent and Louise;
- SC is not mere sociology or social work;
- SC is not political partisanship.

The Vincentian Family views SC as a process going beyond helping people living in poverty with their immediate basic needs by enabling them to identify the root causes of their poverty and to create strategies and advocate to change the structures keeping them poor. In order, as Pope Francis says, “to be poor no longer.”

Now humankind will never fully eradicate world poverty, even though the United Nation’s 2030 Agenda calls for “no poverty” as its first sustainable development goal. But eliminating widespread abject poverty, so that everyone’s basic human needs are met, is certainly within the grasp of peoples and nations were they to change their social and economic policies in order to seek the common good, leaving no one behind (United Nations mantra).

What SC Means

In that broad context, for Vincentians, SC is a new charity, a non-partisan political charity, one that brings the search for justice more fully into our awareness and activity. Charity and justice, the two sides of the same coin in the words of Blessed Frederick Ozanam, an outstanding Vincentian and perhaps the finest model for Catholic laity.

SC is a deeply spiritual process, firmly rooted in the Gospel, because this method:

- Takes seriously that Jesus came that **all** might have life, and life in abundance, with no one left behind;
- Flows from a conviction that God’s love is for everyone, but that poor people have a special place in that love;
- Insists that what we do with those in most need, we really do to Him;
- Accepts that when we leave God at prayer for God present in the needy person at our door, we have lived our spirituality.

Vincentians believe, therefore, that SC is the best charity, one that believes deeply in the capacity of people in poverty to change unjust systems, that indeed they are the only ones capable of creating permanent positive change. So, we “go the poor” (again Blessed Frederic, echoing St. Vincent), we listen, we learn, we accompany.

SC is the pastoral process that combines best with the well-known See-Judge-Act approach, “serving” the poor by seeing reality through their eyes, not ours, making Gospel

judgements on that reality, and then helping to change it by concerted strategic action together.

SC differentiates itself most clearly from other practices by its unwavering focus on getting at the root causes—never the symptoms alone—of poverty and injustice. Root causes must be changed. Systems must change.

Advocacy plays a big role in this effort. Although we like to think of ourselves as voice for the voiceless, we know that the best advocacy is to help poor people have their own voice on the issues and their own place at the decision-making table. We know youth must be included—the future is theirs and they have much to say about what their future should look like.

What this might mean for us

Following many years as a standing Vincentian Family “commission”, The SC initiative is now included in the mandate of the Vincentian Family Office. How might we help the Office grow this initiative in ways faithful to the General Assembly mandates and favorable to the people in poverty we are privileged to serve? Here are some suggestions:

1. First every member of the CM and its collaborators should seek to understand SC more fully. Of the many sources available for this, a few are readily available:
 - The online toolkit @ famvin.org/toolkit which includes *Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change, A Manual for Systemic Change* and the many texts and power/point presentations in several languages used in workshops around the world. Everything is down-loadable
 - Special editions of *Vincentiana* dedicated to SC;
2. Include SC, its basic notion and thrust, in educational efforts with the people we serve, as well as in the basis formation of its seminarians;
3. Invite the Vincentian Family Office to provide regional and international workshops on SC so that people in poverty grasp a sense of renewed hope that their destiny need not be hunger and misery, that poverty is made by humans and their unjust policy decisions, and therefore can be changed by human efforts to create a better world.

In closing, it is worth noting that SC not only changes systems and structures, it first changes us, our thinking and even our understanding of ministry, our goals and priorities. It is all part of the conversion process: we are ourselves converted in the process of working with—and not for—people in poverty to foster lasting positive change.

Evangelizing through a Systemic Change approach offers hope and provides a path and a process to create a better world that leaves no one behind.

References

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