



## Vincentian Charism and Spirituality in an Indian Context

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### *Abstract*

This paper explores the relevance of Vincentian Charism and Spirituality in the Indian context, particularly as the Congregation celebrates 400 years of its mission. Rooted in evangelization and service to the poor, Vincentian spirituality must adapt to changing social, political, and religious landscapes. The study examines how Spanish Vincentians initially served Dalits and Tribals in Orissa and how contemporary mission work must shift from conversion to social engagement. Charism emerges in historical contexts, as seen in St. Vincent de Paul's response to poverty and Mother Teresa's call to serve the poorest. Grounded in faith and personal experience, Vincentian charism evolves with time. In today's globalized world, the paper calls for a renewed understanding of mission and spirituality, ensuring that the Congregation remains relevant by addressing current challenges while staying faithful to its core mission of serving the poor.

Cet article explore la pertinence du charisme et de la spiritualité vincentiens dans le contexte indien, en particulier au moment où la Congrégation célèbre les 400 ans de sa mission. Enracinée dans l'évangélisation et le service aux pauvres, la spiritualité vincentienne doit s'adapter aux paysages sociaux, politiques et religieux changeants. L'étude examine comment les Vincentiens espagnols ont initialement servi les Dalits et les Tribus dans l'Orissa et comment le travail missionnaire contemporain doit passer de la conversion à l'engagement social. Le charisme émerge dans des contextes historiques, comme en témoignent la réponse de Saint Vincent de Paul à la pauvreté et l'appel de Mère Teresa à servir les plus pauvres. Fondé sur la foi et l'expérience personnelle, le charisme vincentien évolue avec le temps. Dans le monde globalisé d'aujourd'hui, le document appelle à une compréhension renouvelée de la mission et de la spiritualité, afin de s'assurer que la Congrégation reste pertinente en relevant les défis actuels tout en restant fidèle à sa mission principale de servir les pauvres.

Este estudio explora la relevancia del carisma y la espiritualidad vicencianas en el contexto indio, especialmente ahora que la Congregación celebra 400 años de su misión. Arraigada en la evangelización y el servicio a los pobres, la espiritualidad vicenciana debe adaptarse a los cambiantes panoramas sociales, políticos y religiosos. El estudio examina cómo los vicencianos españoles sirvieron inicialmente a los dalits y tribales en Orissa y cómo la labor misionera contemporánea debe pasar de la conversión al compromiso social. El carisma surge en contextos históricos, como se ve en la respuesta de San Vicente de Paúl a la pobreza y en el llamado de la Madre Teresa a servir a los más pobres. Basado en la fe y la experiencia personal, el carisma vicenciano evoluciona con el tiempo. En el mundo globalizado de hoy, el documento pide una comprensión renovada de la misión y la espiritualidad, asegurando que la Congregación siga siendo relevante al abordar los desafíos actuales sin dejar de ser fiel a su misión principal de servir a los pobres.

**Keywords:** Vincentian, Charism, Spirituality, India



## Introduction

The Topic “Vincentian Charism and Spirituality” has been widely discussed and frequently reflected upon in our congregation in writings, seminars, and conferences. I have come across a number of articles in our journal, “Vincentiana”. To reflect on the same topic in this particular context is more relevant and apt when celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> of our Vincentian Charism. The charism and spirituality which our Holy Founder St. Vincent gave to us is particularly relevant and applicable today. What we need is interpretation of the Vincentian Charism and Spirituality applied to the contemporary context. The charism is the mission, and spirituality is the foundation on which it is built, so both the mission and spirituality are intrinsically connected, not separable. Without the spirituality, the mission will not survive, and without mission, spirituality does not survive. For our congregation, these two pillars are the foundation on which the congregation is built. Both the mission and spirituality must be connected to the context. Otherwise, they become irrelevant. The particular context plays a pivotal role in keeping both the charism and spirituality relevant and meaningful. These are the two axes on which the congregation revolves making it both dynamic and relevant.

In this article, I am trying to interpret and to find the meaning of the Vincentian Charism and spirituality in an Indian context. The Indian context is complex and complicated because of its vastness in geography and the pluralistic context in terms of religion, language and culture. In 1922, the Spanish Vincentians came to Orissa and learned the language, culture, and food habits of the people. They were very much rooted in the place where they ministered. They were well connected to the context in terms of carrying the charism of our congregation, i.e. evangelization of the poor. They really went to the poor, less fortunate, and the neglected ones of society. The main recipient of the good news of Jesus were the Dalits and Tribals, the “so called” outcastes of the society. They converted those people and worked for their social, economic, and educational development. They were very much confined to the particular region and particular people for various reasons. Now, however, the congregation is spread across India, catering to the needs of various linguistic, cultural, and social groups. Now the situation is changed not only because of moving to different regions, but also as a result of political, social and cultural changes. We can no longer do conversion in India as in the past, but rather we need to reinterpret and understand the Charism and spirituality in today’s context. Now mission must be more inclusive and must not aim at converting people. When it is contextualized, the evangelization of the poor, which is the charism of our congregation, can be well connected with the people in India, and a new understanding and a new mission emerges. As James Kroeger contends: “The evangelization process needs constant nuancing so that it will effectively reach people in the concrete situations of their lives.”<sup>1</sup> As far as spirituality is concerned, the Spanish missionaries adapted to a spirituality which would connect themselves with the poor. Their spirituality was reflected in their life style, i.e. a simple life, and in their approach towards the poor and the downtrodden. In today’s context, especially, because of the impact of the economy, globalization, liberalization, and digitalization, the understanding of spirituality has changed and, obviously, so has lifestyle.

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Kroeger, “New Evangelization Today Exploring Key Themes and Asian Links”

In this changing scenario, how do we understand the charism and spirituality of our congregation? What would be our mission and how does the congregation grow by making itself relevant to the people of India.

### **Charism emerges in a Historical situation**

If we read the history of any religious congregation and charism, its birth or origin has a historical background which would be the main factor for its emergence which played a pivotal role in triggering its founders to begin a new mission. It is further strengthened and given a final shape with the founders' experience of God and their response to Him leading them to action (mission). All the call narratives in the Old Testament, where the individuals were called for a particular mission, were firmly rooted in the concrete life situations of the people with whom the called had a connection. In the case of Moses, his call was rooted in the situation of the Israelites. Similarly, the calls of Gideon, Samuel, and the prophets, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah too, all were called in particular, historical situations where they had to act for the sake of the people. The call, mission, and the life situation of people are interwoven; we cannot separate them. When we study the history of the congregations founded by holy men and women, the founders and foundresses started new missions because of certain historical situations inspired by God to revive the Church and people. So, the founders and foundresses established the congregation because of the historical situation in which they lived. When there was a spiritual dearth, congregations were founded for contemplative life, demonstrating the need for spiritual revival for the church and for the faithful. John Futrell puts it this way: "A specific charism is given at certain moments in the history of the Church to a person whose manner of reading the multi-dimensional gospel portrayal of the life of Jesus brings him to focus on some particular aspect of Jesus' life, leading him to follow Jesus and to serve others for his love in a particular way"<sup>2</sup>. The charism of the founder is a particular call to follow the footsteps of Jesus, based on one of the portraits of him. For example, Jesus is portrayed in the gospels in various ways, such as a teacher, healer, spiritual leader, and evangelizer of the poor. Futrell continues: "The mode of receiving the charism is shaped, then, by the person's historical and cultural conditioning, as well as by his temperament, human gifts and limitations; all of which the founder recognizes as the effects of God's active love in history"<sup>3</sup>. Besides the historical context, God's involvement in history in choosing persons and giving a particular charism or mission is another important aspect in the emergence of charism.

The above points mentioned with regard to charism are clearly exemplified in the life of St. Vincent who was also inspired to carry out a mission (Charism), God's special call to him in his historical context. A charism rooted in the experience of Chatillon: Vincent was convinced of the fact that our Charism flowed from the experience of Chatillon. On February 13, 1646, Vincent spoke about this in a conference that he gave to the sisters (CCD; IX, p.192). When the founders of the congregation see the realities of their time, such as poverty, spiritual dearth, or lack of spiritual guidance for the youth, their hearts were touched by those realities and led them to carry out a special mission

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<sup>2</sup> John Carroll Futrell, "Discovering the Founder's Charism"

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

which becomes their charism. As John Prager states: “The charism is mystery as it unfolds in history. It continually becomes incarnated in specific cultures and situations”<sup>4</sup>. Founders could receive such charism, because they were able to see the reality with an open mind, and from their faith perspective in the context of their call. When Mother Teresa saw poverty, misery, and the undignified way of life of the poor and downtrodden, she felt compelled to take up a new mission. According to Gezim Alzion, “The epiphanic moment she experiences on 10 September 1946, known as her “second call” within a call’ and the ‘inspiration day- as a result of which decides to serve the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta”.<sup>5</sup> Mother Teresa had a similar experience to that of St. Vincent. With regard to her special vocation, Mother Teresa was primarily responding to the new mission offered her by Jesus in her new charism as a missionary of charity. On September 10, 1946, Mother Teresa travelled to her annual retreat to Darjeeling, in the north-east of India. During her journey by train, she had a decisive mystical encounter with Christ. Jesus was calling her to satiate his thirst by serving Him in the poorest of the poor. Mother Teresa describes this call as follows:

“I was very happy and to go out in the streets to serve the poorest of the poor. It was in that train, I heard the call to give up all and follow Him into the slums - to serve Him in the poorest of the poor... I knew it was His will and that I had to follow Him. There was no doubt that it was going to be His work”.<sup>6</sup> The life experience of Mother Teresa, and her call for a new mission was directly connected to the life-situation of the people. Seeing the poor people in the slums of Calcutta, she could not resist the call of God to a new mission.

St. Vincent and other founders who saw the situation of the people were grounded in reality and took seriously the life- situation of the people. The charism or mission was the result of their response to the situation of the people. Their eyes were not heavenward, looking up to heaven all the time, but rather looking downward on the people’s situation in this world. Their spirituality was from the world to heaven. St. Vincent was a down to earth man. The Charism which St. Vincent gave to the congregation is based on the historical, political, and social context in which he lived which he believed would be relevant and appropriate for the future as well. What we need to do is reinterpret his Charism in today’s context, specifically in the context in which we live.

### **God-Experience-response-action (Mission)**

The founders experienced reality in their lives, internalized and reflected upon the situation, which compelled them to respond to the situation as they had God-conscience which had been formed in the context of their call. Their experiences touched their hearts. They were disturbed by those realities of poverty, lack of spiritual guidance, and lack of faith among the people. The prophets too had similar experience. In other words, the founders of the congregations had an experience similar to the Prophets of the Old Testament. Seeing the realities of injustice, crimes against the poor and downtrodden,

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<sup>4</sup> John P. Prager, CM, “The Revitalization of Vincentian Spirituality”

<sup>5</sup> Gezim Alzion, “The Emergence of Mother Teresa as a Religious Visionary and the Initial Resistance to Her Charism: A sociological and Public Theology Perspective”

<sup>6</sup> Bryan Lobo, “Mother Teresa: Self-Kenotic sanctity for Evangelization A Christian-Hindu Reflection”

their God-conscience awoke their soul and forced them to respond to the reality they perceived by giving messages of God with warning and punishment. Like the prophets, who responded to their particular situation, the founders of the congregation also interiorized. and, as a result of their interiorization, they responded to the situation and took up a special mission. It is primarily through an act of God that they received their special mission. As Futrell states: “If the charism has any real being at all today, it is because the holy spirit is still operative by his presence and power within certain persons, calling them to service of the people of God and of the world to which he originally called the founder through this gifted vision and dynamism”<sup>7</sup>. It is through the working of the Spirit that they who are open are enabled to respond. The Spirit impels them to do. St. Vincent, who responded to the situation of the poor families who were starving to death, captured completely the consequences of accepting the gift of the Spirit. “The spirit guided him to new way of following Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor, in new realities”.<sup>8</sup>

When Vincent spoke to the sisters, he said, “When I was told that in an isolated house a quarter of a league away everyone was ill. None of them was able to help the others, and they were all in indescribable need. That touched me to the heart. During the sermon, I made sure to commend them zealously to the congregation, and God, touching the hearts of those who heard me, moved them with compassion for those poor afflicted people” (CCD:IX:192). This charism which emerged from a particular historical situation is grounded in the call. In other words, the call is intrinsically connected with charism, and both are inseparable. St. Paul in his letter to Romans says, “the charism and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom:11:29). As Peter Stuart contends: “Charism is a gift that embodies a call to exercise that gift to help build up the body of Christ. To have discerned that a particular gift is meant for us is to have heard a call of the spirit; we then have the choice of responding to the call or turning away from it in that mysterious interaction between God’s grace and human freedom”<sup>9</sup>. St. Vincent, who had a deep faith and a strong God-conscience, felt compelled to respond to the Spirit of God and so to take up a special mission through which he participated in the mission of Christ. It was a personal experience of God in a particular situation which led him to take up his mission. The founders of the congregations who developed a new charism in the church, as Loan Le describes it had a “wholly personal and inward experience, that is, the person experiences God’s power filling him and he feels that he is being seized by the spirit and urged to place his living strength under the power of the spirit. It is an experience of faith, for an enthusiasm that comes from the spirit must needs be one that is grounded in faith”<sup>10</sup>. The foundation for the working of the Spirit and the emergence of charism in the case of the founders is faith and calling. Both resulted from their God-experience which is the necessary catalyst for any founder to receive a special charism. St. Vincent also had this God-experience, but it was not a sudden occurrence as in the case of Saints Francis and Ignatius but rather a gradual unfolding of God-experience in the events that took place in his life.

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<sup>7</sup> John Carroll Futrell, “Discovering the Founder’s Charism”

<sup>8</sup> John P. Prager, CM, “The Revitalization of Vincentian Spirituality”

<sup>9</sup> Peter Stuart, “Charism in the Light of Scripture”

<sup>10</sup> Loan Le, “A Reflection on the Charism of Religious Life”

St. Vincent, though he had a wavering of the call, also had a strong faith beginning with his childhood. We know from his life history that he had a great devotion to our Lady and to the Eucharist. Though Vincent accepted the call for a frivolous and a monetary reason, the events that unfolded in his life helped him to grow in his vocation. When the Chatallion incident took place, St. Vincent strengthened his call and enabled him to find his way and respond to his call. God showed him the way through the Chatallion event. After this, he moved from unclear vision to clear vision, from his weakness to strength, from indecisiveness to decisiveness.

## Vincentian Charism and Spirituality

Vincent opened his mind and heart to the hard realities of his time, the suffering, the hunger and the poverty of the poor. John Prager puts it this way: “Vincent comes to open his life to the poor and discovers the charism, he begins to have a new experience of Jesus. It is no longer Jesus imposing a vocation from outside. It is the poor Jesus whom he discovers amidst the marginalized”<sup>11</sup>. The parable of the last judgement was deeply ingrained in Vincent’s mind enabling him to find Jesus in the poor, the needy, and the hungry. He comes to see that following Christ among the poor is the road to liberation, a liberation from his own greed for money and power. He could liberate himself fully by loving Jesus in the poor. After realizing the importance of loving the poor, he could say that the “poor are our masters”. Prager states it this way: “God has saved him from a life closed up in selfishness. St. Vincent returns to the Gospels in order to understand his experience of Jesus. The following of Jesus teaches him new ways to relate with Jesus and with the poor, which will shape his spirituality”<sup>12</sup>. Vincent’s spirituality is based on the gospel, which portrays the poor as the favorable ones of Jesus. His spirituality is the spirituality of Jesus, whose God’s conscience leads him to love the poor, and to show compassion to the poor, and to touch the lives of the poor through his deeds.

Emilio Villanueva states: “The gifts of spiritual wisdom and apostolic orientation that religious received from their founders and foundress are often referred to as charisms: a word coming from Greek related to grace, graciousness, and the graced responsibilities given to individuals and to communities”<sup>13</sup>. Charism is a special gift given to the founders of the congregations to serve the church and the faithful in a more effective and fruitful way. That charism continues to survive and grow through the members of the congregation. Charism and spirituality are interwoven and inseparable. Charism is the outcome of the type of spirituality one has. In other words, charism is the external act of the internalization of spirituality. Spirituality has to do with our relationships with God and others and involves encounters which lead to spiritual growth and transcendence. Spirituality is born in the charism as a way to live the gift of the Spirit. So, Vincentian spirituality always has to be joined to the charism. Villanueva clarifies this by stating “The Charism is not a concept. Rather, it is an experience of the spirit. It is the gift of the Holy spirit calling us to follow Jesus in a particular way”<sup>14</sup>. He continues: “The charism

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<sup>11</sup> John P. Prager, CM, “The Revitalization of Vincentian Spirituality”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Emilio Melchor Villanueva, CM, “Inculturation of the Vincentian Charism in Latin America”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

of the founders is spoken of as a gift and experience of the Holy Spirit to their persons, so that they could enlighten their institutes and so that the gift could be transmitted to their followers to guard, live, deepen and develop in order that each institute would be “characterized” by the living out of the charism. Therefore, the charism, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, 1) is personal to the Founder; 2) can be collective and participated in by the Founder’s disciples; and 3) is always for the good of the Church and people”<sup>15</sup>.

### **Evangelization of the Poor- as Charism of the congregation**

Charism is the result of the Holy Spirit that St. Vincent de Paul received, which impelled him to take up mission which was initiated at Chattalion and to carry forward that mission in the future. “Evangelization of the poor” is the motto chosen by St. Vincent for the mission of our Congregation. According to James Koreger, “The word “evangelization” is not found in the New Testament; however, *euaggelion* meaning “gospel” or “good news” occurs 72 times, 54 of which are in the Pauline corpus.”<sup>16</sup> *Euaggelion* is the good news of truth (Gal. 2:5,14), of hope (Col. 1:23), of peace (Eph. 6:15), of immortality (II Tim. 1:10), of the risen Christ (I Cor. 15:lff; II Tim. 2:8), and of salvation (Eph. 1:13). St. Vincent embracing the portrait of Jesus as the Evangelizer of the poor wanted to announce good news to the poor of his time. Rolando Gutierrez puts it this way: “Evangelization is an integral part of the Vincentian Charism. A clear and expressed preference for the apostolate among the poor, or what is the same, a convinced and convincing option for the evangelization of the poor”<sup>17</sup>. Vincent chose as the motto for the congregation of the Mission, “The Lord has sent me to bring Good News to the poor” (Lk. 4:18). Gutierrez concludes: “We need to understand and live the Vincentian Charism in such a way we clothe ourselves anew in the spirit of Jesus”<sup>18</sup>. “To bring good news to the poor” is widely acknowledged as a short-hand summary of Jesus’ mission in Luke. After reading the Isaiah’s prophecy of the coming of a spirit-filled messiah (4:18-19), Jesus declares, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21), in effect announcing that God’s promise of salvation is at hand. Thus, according to Luke, salvation occurs not simply on the Cross but in the ministry of Jesus: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” (7:22). “Salvation, then, is the coming of God’s reign or kingdom of justice which brings relief to those on the margins (the poor, captive, sick, oppressed), who lack a share in the well-being willed by God”<sup>19</sup>.

Christian interpretation of this pericope (Lk. 4:16-30) has shown a tendency to spiritualize the references to the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed, taking them to mean, for example, the spiritually poor, those sick with sin, and so on. Although this spiritualization is an understandable attempt on the part of Christians “haves” to appropriate the text meaningfully for their own lives, it bypasses its original meaning, thereby evading its challenges for Christian life with respect to economic realities. It is the consensus of critical scholarship that the text has in view social and material

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<sup>15</sup> Emilio Melchor Villanueva, CM

<sup>16</sup> James H. Koreger, “New Evangelization Today exploring Key Themes and Asian Links”

<sup>17</sup> Rolando Gutierrez, CM, “Two Genes of the Four-Hundred-Year-old Charism”

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Calef, “The Bible, the Economy, and the poor”

conditions; thus, people who suffer from material want and deprivation, captives to heavy debt, the physically sick, those vulnerable to exploitation and oppression. “In Luke, as elsewhere in the Bible, the poor are those who, lacking land, power, and social status, are vulnerable to exploitation and thus live on the margins. It is precisely those on the margins who count and are included in the divine economy of salvation, and it is to the margins of the economy that Jesus the prophet turns his attention throughout the remainder of the Lukan narrative”.<sup>20</sup>

### **Charism – In Indian Context-Mission**

The Indian context is vast, complex, and complicated because it has more cultural, linguistic, and social differences. Each state has its own language in addition to language subgroups resulting in more than a hundred languages, and of course, there are cultural differences too. Moreover, there are different religions. The majority of people identify with Hinduism followed by Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism and other tribal religions which are considered as minorities. Religious pluralism is part of the Indian context. As far as the economy is concerned, the wealth of the country is in the hands of a few people. The vast majority of the people are reeling under poverty. Though there is some economic progress in the country, the rich and upper middle-class have benefited more. After the technological development, there was a positive economic change but mainly in the urban sector for those who received. For those who live in rural villages, economic development is still far away. In this context, our charism of Evangelization of the poor is more relevant and apt. but the question is how we are going to do it. The Spanish Vincentian missionaries who came to India, particularly to Odissa, did a commendable job in evangelizing the poor, by going to the remote villages to the less fortunate, the neglected and the so called socially outcaste people, namely Dalits and Tribals. Not only did they convert them, but they also worked to uplift them. In order to do evangelization, they learned the local language and adapted themselves to the culture of the people, particularly the food habits of the local people. That is the real missionary spirit. The evangelization which was done by the pioneers in terms of conversion is simply not possible in today’s context because of the policy of the government which is trying to implement Hindu nationalism. As a part of that policy, they have introduced anti-conversion bills in some Indian states. Religious intolerance is also spreading quickly in India in contrast to India’s previous reputation for religious tolerance. In this context, our charism for the evangelization of the poor is to be interpreted not in terms of conversion, but in terms of committing oneself to the poor and downtrodden by working towards their development, social, economic and cultural. By doing this kind of work, we show to them who Christ is and what Christ would do for them.

### **Contextual Evangelization**

In the Indian context, evangelization must take a new path, a new way of doing the mission. As mentioned earlier, conversion is no longer possible in this pluralistic context. The congregation must identify the oppressed, less fortunate, the marginalized,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



and those who are on the fringes of society, specifically the outcaste, the Dalits and Tribals, for its mission. The charism of the congregation should be primarily aimed at the poor and downtrodden. In the evangelization process, the Charism of our congregation invites us to show solidarity and to show concern for the poor, the oppressed, and outcaste of society who are politically, socially, and economically oppressed. We need to show our empathetic feeling toward them which will lead us to commit ourselves to them and to their liberation. As Nwaigbo Ferdinand states: “Pope Paul VI issued *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, he linked liberation and evangelization to integral human development. In this view, evangelization is about liberation of humanity from all forms of oppressive structures and about respect of people’s cultures”<sup>21</sup>. Pope Paul VI might have been speaking in the context of the situation in the developing countries of Asia and Africa. The charism of our congregation in the Indian context must aim at the integral development of those people who are under the oppression of political, social, and economic systems of the country. In this context, evangelization functions to eliminate poverty, illiteracy, and social evils caused by injustice, abuse of human rights, and degradation of the environment. At the high point of evangelization, it functions to promote human cultures, rights, and dignity of the human person.

Today, in the Indian context, where there is a change in the policy of the government, there is also a change in the mindset of certain people. Though the Indian constitution allows religious freedom, it is impossible to do any conversion. Mother Teresa was well aware of this situation, so she never did any conversion while carrying out her mission. What she did was through her works, she led the people to experience God in their lives and brought God closer to their hearts. She said the following regarding conversion:

“What we are all trying to do by our work, by serving the people, is to come closer to God. If in coming face to face with God, we accept Him in our lives, then we are converting. We become a better Hindu, a better Muslim, a better Catholic, a better whatever we are, and then by being better we come closer and closer to Him. If we accept Him fully in our lives, then that is conversion”<sup>22</sup>.

Similarly, the charism of our congregation, i.e. evangelization of the poor, is to be understood in terms of integral human development, where there is justice, equality, peace, and harmony. Evangelization of the poor means to work for the development of the poor and the oppressed. Evangelization and human development are inseparable. John Paul II consistently emphasizes Church social teaching and involvement. “He notes that there are many places “where action on behalf of integral development and human liberation from all forms of oppression are most urgently needed” (*Redemptoris Missio* 58). The pope affirms: “Authentic human development must be rooted in an ever-deeper evangelization” (*Redemptoris Missio* 58). As a force for liberation and development, the Church focuses on the human person, realizing that “*Man is the principal agent of development*” (*Redemptoris Missio* 58). Francis, our present pope, appreciates the need to view evangelization holistically as he speaks about “the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization” (EG 176). Evangelization, “the task of the Church” (EG 111), needs to address the entire human family “with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses” (EG 183). “Francis quotes Paul VI,

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<sup>21</sup> Nwaigbo Ferdinand, “Integral Human Development and the New Evangelization”

<sup>22</sup> Bryan Lobo, “Mother Teresa: Self Kenotic Sanctity for Evangelization A Christian-Hindu Reflection”

noting that “evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man’s concrete life, both personal and social”; it is directed to “all men and the whole man”.<sup>23</sup>

In the first step of the evangelization of the poor in India, we need to have an inclusive approach. We need to include everyone, regardless of religion, language and region. As Cardinal Quevedo puts it: “To evangelize is “to bring the Good News into all areas of humanity, and through its impact, to transform that humanity from within, making it new”<sup>24</sup>. This inclusive approach is the first step in carrying out our mission. And in the second step, we work for the integral development of the people, both material and spiritual. Working for justice and liberation of the people is also part of the integral development of the people. Through this evangelizing process, we present Jesus to all people, regardless of their religion affiliation, showing special love for the poor and the oppressed of India. The participants of the Asian Synod stressed “the need to evangelize in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of Asian peoples, and they suggested images of Jesus which would be intelligible to Asian minds and cultures and, at the same time, faithful to Sacred Scripture and Tradition”.<sup>25</sup> As the Asian synod pointed out, through the Vincentian Charism, we reveal the Jesus who loves the poor and downtrodden specifically in an Indian context, the Jesus who is with the poor and expresses his solidarity with them, and who works for their liberation.

The Vincentian Charism which is expressed in the motto of “Evangelization of the Poor”, demands that Vincentians commit to opt for the poor and the oppressed in the Indian context. This is not just an invitation, but rather a demand, an obligation. In the Indian situation, where the poor and the oppressed are in such vast numbers, more than 60% of the population, the outcasts who experience both oppression and poverty, the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed are the favorable ones of God. Jesus’ mission was for such people in the gospel. In following the footsteps of Jesus, St. Vincent also took up the same mission. The Indian situation is not far from the realities of St. Vincent’s time. The Vincentian Charism impels us to make an option for the poor. As Gustavo Gutierrez states: “The option involves a commitment that implies leaving the road one is on, as the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches, and entering the world of the other, of the “insignificant” person, of the one excluded from dominant social sectors, communities, viewpoints, and ideas”<sup>26</sup>. The deepest meaning of the commitment to the poor is the encounter with Christ. Echoing Mathew’s pericope of the last judgement, we recognize in the face of the poor “the suffering features of the face of Christ the Lord who questions and implores us”<sup>27</sup>. Gutierrez puts it this way: “The preferential option for the poor plays an important role in theological reflection. As is stated in the classic formula, theology is faith seeking understanding. Given that faith “operates through charity” (Gal.5:6), theology is a reflection that tries to accompany a people in their suffering and joys, their commitments, frustrations and hopes, both in becoming aware of the social universe in which they live and, in their determination, to understand better their own

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<sup>23</sup> James H. Koreger, “New Evangelization Today exploring Key Themes and Asian Links”

<sup>24</sup> Orlando B. Cardinal Quevedo, O.M.L., “THE CALL, TO NEW EVANGELIZATION The Church in Asia in the Next 50 Year”

<sup>25</sup> James H. Kroeger

<sup>26</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, “The option for the poor arises from faith in Christ”,

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

cultural tradition. A theological language that neglects unjust suffering and does not loudly proclaim the right of every person to happiness remains shallow and betrays the God of whom it speaks, the God of the beatitudes.”<sup>28</sup>

God’s heart has a special place for the poor. Jesus was a poor man. He belonged to a poor family, lived and worked among the poor, and died as a poor person. The option for the poor is the option of Jesus. The poor must be the center of our mission<sup>29</sup>. “In Christ, God showed solidarity with an intrinsically poor humanity; Jesus spent much time with and was loved by outcasts whom he proclaimed children of God. The poor were the first recipients of the "good news." Solidarity with the poor, they discerned, forms the basis of the biblical ethic”<sup>30</sup>.

### **Liberation of the Poor and the oppressed as the mission in Indian Context**

The hermeneutical interpretation of the charism of the congregation, “Evangelization of the poor”, compels us to carry out the mission of liberation of the poor and the oppressed in India. In India, the poor and the oppressed continuously experience injustice, oppression, and exploitation from politically and socially affluent people. Evangelization of the poor is not simply concerned with the spiritual aspect, but also the material and physical aspect of liberation. As Jim Claffey states: “The concept of evangelizing the poor involves both theory and practice. In addition to getting the rhetoric right, one is presumed to effect some action, or program of action, in favor of the poor person”<sup>31</sup>.

It is to fight against injustice, inequality, and discrimination that plague the poor in Indian society. It is to stand with the poor who are struggling to survive in the midst of unjust structures. The Charism of our holy founder does not allow us to be mute spectators in the struggle for liberation of the poor and the oppressed. We need to participate in the liberation movement of the poor in India. Then the Vincentian Charism can be rooted in the Indian soil, and will become relevant and meaningful for people in India. Claffey puts it this way: “We go to the poor, we listen and learn, we accompany them and help them to find their voice and develop their own talents and strengths to address the root causes of the unjust situations in which they find themselves”<sup>32</sup>. Vincentians should not confine themselves within four walls, safeguarding themselves from any kind of danger and threat. On the contrary, we need to go out to the streets and become part of the struggles and suffering of the poor and work toward their liberation from the unjust structures that oppress them. In fact, there are examples of many religious priests and sisters already participating in the liberation movement of the poor in India.

In the Vincentian Charism, there is no separation between physical and spiritual help. Vincent de Paul’s humanistic vision was very clear. The suffering of the people, the injustices, and the cross challenged Vincent de Paul to forge a Samaritan Church,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Franklin Pilario, CM, “The Joy of the Gospel and the New Evangelization”

<sup>30</sup> Sherron Kay George, “From Liberation to Evangelization *New Latin American Hermeneutical Keys*”

<sup>31</sup> Jim Claffey, “Systemic change: Looking Back and Looking Forward-Promote systemic change as our specific Method of Evangelizing”

<sup>32</sup> Ibid..

organizing evangelization together with human promotion and authentic Christian liberation. Mizaël Poggioli puts it this way: “Vincent de Paul offered his service of charity to the poorest with the purpose of promoting their dignity. The process of evangelization must be holistic, promoting the Poor from the new life in Jesus Christ that transforms the person in such a way as to make him/her subject to his/her own integral development”.<sup>33</sup> In the Indian context, the meaning and interpretation of evangelization is that which leads the Vincentians to work toward the liberation and integral development of the poor and downtrodden. Only in this way does the Vincentian Charism and spirituality become relevant and meaningful in the Indian context.

## Conclusion

St. Vincent embodied a Charism which was very much rooted in the historical situation of his time. No doubt, as for all the religious congregations, the Charism originated in the particular concrete situation of people with whom the founder was connected. The Chattalion experience of St. Vincent gave birth to the Vincentian Charism. While the historical context is an external factor, the internal factor is the Christ-experience of St. Vincent which impelled him to find Jesus in the poor. As a result of that experience, Vincent could love the poor and show compassion toward them. His love for the poor did not end with mere words, but rather found expression in his concrete actions. This is the mission which he entrusted to the members of his congregation. The Vincentian charism has been carried out across the world in different cultures, languages, and in different social and political situations. Fundamentally, the Charism of Vincent remains the same, but it results in different expressions depending on the specific concrete situation. What we are challenged to do is to re-interpret the Charism based on each situation that we experience.

In this article, I tried to discover the meaning and relevance of the Vincentian Charism in a specifically Indian context. The Indian context is complex and complicated because of its vast geography and its linguistic and cultural diversity. However, there are common factors in all the regions which include poverty, injustice, and discrimination against the poor and downtrodden. In this context, the Vincentian charism is still particularly relevant and meaningful in India, as we, the Vincentians, work for the poor as the motto of our Congregation is to “Evangelize the poor”. In the Indian context, where pluralism is a dominant factor, the conversion of people is not deemed effective but rather working for the integral development of the poor and toward their liberation from unjust structures is the viable path forward to making the Vincentian charism alive and active in the concrete circumstances of the contemporary Indian context.

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