

SYSTEMIC CHANGE AND THE POOR
General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission
July 2, 2010

On Dec. 4, 1648, Vincent de Paul wrote to Jean Barreau, the French consul in Algiers¹: “There is no better way to assure our eternal happiness than to live and die in the service of the poor within the arms of providence and in real renunciation of ourselves by following Jesus Christ.” All of us here today believe deeply in those words. We’re sons of St. Vincent. With literally millions of others over the centuries, we have been stirred by his life, his words and his works, and, like him, we have given our lives to God in the service of those living in poverty.

But how do we serve the poor? Our Constitutions, article 18, tell us that Luke’s parable of the Good Samaritan dramatizes the principle that love of God is displayed in effective love of neighbor. But today we recognize more and more that effective love involves not just binding up the individual victim’s wounds and pouring oil on them, but also making sure that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is safe for all in the future.

Today Fr. Erminio and I have been asked to introduce a round-table discussion about “Systemic Change and the Poor.” It is a topic that all the branches of the worldwide Vincentian Family have been emphasizing over the last several years.

Let me introduce the theme of Systemic Change in three steps: 1) some background; 2) the notion of systemic change; and 3) the systemic change project chosen by the international leaders of the Vincentian Family to celebrate the 350th anniversary of the deaths of St. Vincent and St. Louise.

I. BACKGROUND

1. The naming of a Commission for Promoting Systemic Change and its mandate

In 2006, with the encouragement and support of a foundation, Fr. Greg Gay, the Superior General, named a Commission for Promoting Systemic Change and gave it the following mandate:

To help bring about systemic change through the apostolates of the members of the Vincentian Family, especially those ministering to the oppressed poor.

2. The members of the Commission

Fr. Norberto Carcellar, C.M.

Founder of the Homeless Peoples Federation of the Philippines (HPFP). His training in social development and microfinance has enabled him to focus on systemic change projects like the one at Payatas in Manila.

¹ SV, III, 392.

Sr. Ellen Flynn, D.C.

Until recently, Chief Executive of the Passage, a multi-faceted program for helping homeless people in central London.

Fr. Joseph Foley, C.M.

NGO representative of the Congregation of the Mission at the United Nations.

Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M.

Coordinator of Project Dream, a collaborative project of the Daughters of Charity and the Community of Sant'Egidio against AIDS in Africa, and now the Chairperson of the Vincentian Family Board for the Micro-Credit Project in Haiti.

Mrs. Patricia Nava (AIC)

Formerly the International President of AIC and formerly its representative for relationships with the international Vincentian Family.

Fr. Pedro Opeka, C.M.

Founder of Akamasoa (“Good Friends”), an extraordinary systemic change project which I will tell you about in a few minutes. Pedro was recently named a Knight of the Legion of Honor, the highest honor awarded by the French government.

Rev. Mr. Gene Smith (SSVP)

Formerly the national president of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States and the Executive Director of Seton Institute in Daly City, California.

3. The choice of Systemic Change as the theme for the Vincentian Family

Each year at their annual meeting, the international leaders of various branches of the Vincentian Family choose a common theme for reflection and action for the year ahead. The theme is then launched on September 27th, at the annual Family Day of Prayer.

In 2007 the leaders of the Family, gathered in Rome, invited the members of the Commission to make a presentation at their meeting. Afterwards the leaders chose “Systemic Change” as their focus for three to five years. Since then, all the branches have been working on this theme actively.

4. The goals of the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change

When Fr. Greg named the members of the Commission, he asked us:

- To study available material concerning Systemic Change
- To discuss our own involvement in Systemic Change
- To formulate a series of effective strategies (called “best practices” in some cultures) which would subsequently be shared with the members of the Vincentian Family

- To propose how the effective strategies might best be disseminated among the members of the Vincentian Family throughout the world.

5. The procedure we followed

To respond to its mandate, the Commission started to reflect about Systemic Change and about how to share the results of its work.

- At the beginning of the process, each of the members of the Commission wrote a story, based on his or her own experience, about a work in which Systemic Change has taken place.
- In each of the stories presented, we identified effective strategies that might be used in working toward Systemic Change in our projects among the poor.
- We saw that successful projects placed particular emphasis on self-help and on becoming self-sustaining, so that the poor themselves are active participants in the planning and realization of the projects.
- As we reflected, we stressed the spirituality that lies behind a Vincentian Family Systemic Change approach

6. What has been done so far

We have focused on different ways to communicate the work done by the commission:

- **A book.** Its title is *Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change*. It is now available in English, Spanish, French and Portuguese. It is currently being translated into Italian, Korean, and Vietnamese.
- **A Tool kit.** Besides the book, we wanted to give people tools for teaching others about systemic change. At first, we envisioned a box, containing documents, brochures, questionnaires, and DVDs with films and PowerPoint presentations, etc. But, finally, we wound up with a 2 gigabyte memory stick containing all those materials, so that those who receive it can modify the materials to fit their own culture. It was distributed for the first time in Mexico in 2009 and is available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.
- **The FAMVIN website.** For the last three years, the FAMVIN website has been publishing articles on systemic change regularly and has been gathering these in an encyclopedia (called a Wikipedia) as a resource for the members of the Family. It is an extraordinary collection of articles.
- **Start-up Grants.** A foundation has enabled us to offer \$100,000 each year for the last three years in start-up grants to the Daughters of Charity and to the lay branches of the Vincentian Family who design systemic change projects. With the help of the same foundation, the Congregation of the Mission offers a similar systemic change award.

- **6 continental workshops.** These workshops aim at training leaders, or “multiplying agents”, to give other workshops on systemic change. Four have already taken place. The schedule of these workshops is as follows:

- 1) Mexico – February 2009
- 2) Brazil – June 2009
- 3) Cameroon – July 2009
- 4) Bangkok – November 2009
- 5) USA – November 2010
- 6) Europe – dates to be fixed in 2011

That’s the background. In our book, *Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change*, we tell the stories of many systemic change projects that have transformed the lives of the poor. The contents of the book are as follows:

Prologue

1. Akamasoa, a Community of Good Friends
2. I Have a DREAM
3. Mission-Oriented Strategies
4. The Perfect Storm
5. AIC Madagascar, a Story of Systemic Change within an Association
6. Person-Oriented Strategies
7. The Story of the Passage
8. The Homeless Peoples’ Federation of the Philippines
9. Task-Oriented Strategies
10. The Clancy Nightshelter
11. The Mindoro Project in the Philippines
12. Strategies Directed toward Co-responsibility, Networking and Political Action
13. The Vincentian Mission at the United Nations

Epilogue

II. THE NOTION OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The basic idea

Today, those working among the poor speak more and more of the need for systemic change. In order to understand a systemic-change approach better, some analysis of the idea may be helpful.

Essentially, a system is a whole, a unified composite of things that work together. As a system's parts interact, they affect each other constantly, either for better or for worse.

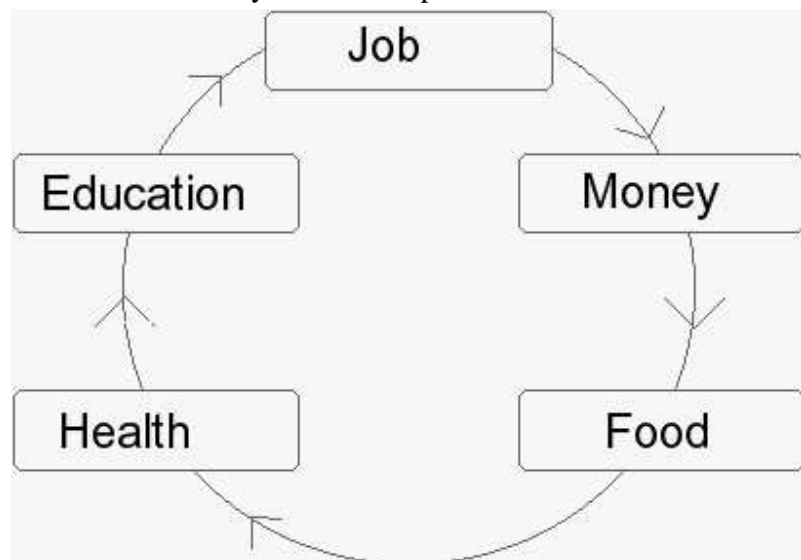
Today scientists focus continually on "systems". Astronomers view the universe as a system. If a star explodes, everything else in the universe feels the effect. Doctors view the body as a system. If my blood is diseased, it affects everything else. Economists and sociologists view society as a system. If the economic and social elements that make up society function together positively, people thrive; if one or several of those elements are functioning badly, the whole system begins to break down.

So, basically, systemic change thinking affirms that "everything is connected to everything else." Recognizing this, it becomes clear that, in order to change the situation of the poor, we must focus not only on one particular problem, like supplying them with food, important as that may be at times, but on the overall circumstances of their lives. Experience teaches that "quick fix" solutions, while temporarily helpful, prove inadequate in the long run.

An illustration of how systemic change works

Each of us lives within a socioeconomic system whose parts interact with each other. If the system is working well, it favors personal growth.

If not, it thwarts growth and accelerates decline. If, for example, I don't have a job, I don't earn money. If I don't earn money, I can't buy food for my family. If my son doesn't have sufficient food, he suffers malnutrition. If he suffers malnutrition, he can't study well. If he can't study well, he won't graduate from school. If he doesn't graduate from school, he may not get a job. If he doesn't have a job, he doesn't earn money. So the cycle begins again.



The challenge for a systems thinker is to know where and how to break the cycle. In Akamasoa, Fr. Pedro Opeka began by creating jobs. These, in turn, generated revenue. Gradually, people were able to buy food, build homes and send their children to school. Their lives improved dramatically. In other systemic change projects, the point of intervention is different. In San José de Ocoa, water was the key. Clean water brought improved health. Irrigation brought crops that provided nourishment and also revenue. Revenue led to better homes and sanitation. With the Homeless People's Federation of the Philippines, micro-credit was the key. It enabled people to buy land, build homes, and organize other projects like digging wells, creating a sewage system and opening shops.

Criteria of Systemic Change Projects

As is evident from what I have said, not every project involves systemic change. Many good projects address urgent, immediate needs, but do not go beyond that. Different from these, a systemic change project has, among others, the following characteristics:

1. Wide-ranging social impact on the life of the poor person

This is the most basic characteristic of systemic change: that is, that the project helps change the overall life-situation of those who benefit from it.

2. Sustainability

The project helps create the social structures that are needed for a *permanent* change in the lives of the poor, like employment, education, housing, the availability of clean water and sufficient food, ongoing local leadership, etc.

3. Replicability

The project can be adapted to solve similar problems in other places. The philosophy or spirituality that grounds the project, the strategies it employs and the techniques that it uses can be applied in a variety of circumstances. Concretely, this is demonstrated when the project actually spreads beyond its initial context and is put into effect successfully in settings other than the place where it began. For, example, the project of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in San José de Ocoa has been replicated in 120 villages.

4. Innovation

The project brings about social change by transforming traditional practice. Such change is often achieved through the implementation of a pattern-changing idea. To use a phrase often attributed to Albert Einstein, systemic-change thinking helps us "to learn to see the world anew".

Having looked at those systemic change projects, let me state an important, fundamental distinction. Immediate assistance to the poor and systemic change projects are:

- ❖ not either/or options
- ❖ but both/and imperatives

Sometimes immediate assistance to the poor is an urgent necessity that we cannot neglect. So, there are good works among the poor that are not systemic change projects. But still, it is imperative that we go beyond immediate necessities to long-range solutions.

II. THE PILOT MICRO-FINANCE PROJECT IN HAITI

Today, I want to say a word about the pilot micro-credit project that the Congregation of the Mission, along with the other branches of the Vincentian Family, has chosen to celebrate the 350th anniversary of the deaths of St. Louise and St. Vincent. Even before the tragic earthquake on Jan. 12th, the situation in Haiti was disastrous. Here is a quick picture of conditions in Haiti before the earthquake:

- 9.8 million people
- Poorest country in the western hemisphere
- 7th poorest country in the world
- 54% of the people live on one dollar a day; 80% live on two dollars a day
- 47% of the population is illiterate
- Unemployment is estimated at 60-70%
- Life expectancy is 52 for men and 56 for women
- In 1923, more than 60% of land was forested; in 2010, less than 2%

The center of our Vincentian Family project is a micro-credit website. The site is in three languages – English, French and Spanish – and provides an attractive, easy-to-use way for people throughout the world to help the poor of Haiti. It contains projects submitted by groups of people in Haiti. These projects are carefully screened by a Business Analyst and a Steering Committee and judged to be sustainable.

The main audience for the site is the worldwide Vincentian Family and the worldwide Haitian Diaspora. They, and anyone else, are able to make interest-free micro-loans and donations to projects in Haiti. They are also able to donate scholarships (e.g., \$50 a year to send a child to primary school, plus giving him books and a back-pack).

How can the confreres, a house, or the province get involved?

- ❖ Make micro-loans or donations as individuals
- ❖ Make micro-loans or donations as groups (the province, a house, a parish, a school, a class)
- ❖ Give micro-credit as a gift (e.g., for a birthday or for graduation)
- ❖ Offer a year-long scholarship, with food, for a primary school child
- ❖ Help in re-forestation (plant a tree)

If you lend on the site, you can follow your money as it comes back. Then you can re-lend it or take it out. You can lend as an individual or you can form a lending group (e.g., the province, a house, a parish, a school, a class, an office, a conference of the SSVP, etc.). You can

give micro-credit to others as a gift. For example, I gave my niece \$100 in micro-credit for her graduation. She loved it. She told me recently that the full \$100 of her loan has come back.

The site became fully functional on April 1st. Within a few weeks, we had provided 1000 scholarships to grammar school children in Haiti and fully funded 16 micro-credit projects.

What can we learn from this pilot project? Are there other similar collaborative projects through which we can help the poor significantly in Haiti and in other parts of the world?

As the General Assembly, you are the supreme authority in the Congregation of the Mission. As the supreme authority, what can you do during these three weeks together to move the worldwide Congregation to serve the poor more effectively?

On May 30, 1659, St. Vincent said this to the confreres: “Our vocation ... is to set people’s hearts on fire, to do what the Son of God did. He came to set the world on fire, to inflame it with his love”².

I urge you today to encourage the confreres of your provinces to be on fire to help the poor both in their immediate needs and in the promotion of systemic change.

Encourage them to have spiritual *fire* within. Fire brings light into the night. It warms us. It is the energizing center of homes. It prepares and gives taste to the food that we eat. In the chemical world, fire purifies and refines metals, like gold. It forges steel, making it strong. It molds pottery so that it becomes beautiful and lasting.

Vincent’s love for the poor was like a forest fire that quickly jumped from tree to tree, from town to town, from country to country, a fire that he has communicated to you, the leaders of the Congregation today. Like Vincent, be confident that the Lord loves us deeply in calling us to serve the poor. The Lord is sharing with us his own vocation and his own vision! Let the spirit of Christ, the Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor, dwell in your heart, as it dwelled in the hearts of Vincent and his companions. Let it set you and the confreres of your province on fire.

Empower the confreres to be creative in designing projects that will help the poor not just short-term, but long-term, systemic change projects that will be viable and sustainable. In these few minutes with you here today, I want to encourage you to be grateful and joyful that Christ has called you to this wonderful way of serving others, and I urge you to communicate the Lord’s presence, his joy, and his fire to your confreres and to the poor in your own countries.

² SV XII, 215.