

Homily by Fr. Gregory Gay, C.M.
350th Anniversary Celebration – August 22, 2010
St. Louis, MO

The readings today are familiar to us as they come from the Feast of St. Vincent DePaul who is the co-patron of the Archdiocese of St. Louis where I am happy to celebrate with you the 350th anniversary of the deaths of St. Vincent and St. Louise in this historic basilica where our family is featured so prominently in these beautiful mosaics.

These readings exemplify the spirituality of our founders: St. Vincent DePaul and St. Louise de Marillac. These readings moved their hearts and minds to action. They express *the motives, means, and mystery* of the great legacy we celebrate in this anniversary year. The legacy can be summed up in three words: *Mission of Charity*.

This is what Vincent and Louise and many who followed in their footsteps are about. We are on a mission of charity. I will say more about that later. But now I want to return to the readings and examine the motive, means, and mystery that we find in them.

In Isaiah (Isaiah 52:7-10) we find the *motive* of what we are about: proclaiming the Good News and announcing peace. Certainly Good News and peace can motivate us today as these are so sorely needed around the world and right here in the United States. As the Vincentian Family, we are conscious of our role in God's kingdom, our role of announcing with joy the Good News and of being peacemakers.

In the second reading (I Cor 1:26-1; 2:1-2) we find the *means*—how we go about being Good News. It begins by being clear who the principal actor in this drama of charity is: God! We are nothing more than humble servants. God's word here helps us to “get in line” or to situate ourselves in the proper order. It is true when Vincent teaches us to put the poor above all others. They are “our Lords and masters.” When we truly see the poor in that light, we learn to become servants, their servants. Once we achieve this level of Vincentian simplicity, God invites us to another deeper level—seeing and experiencing those who are poor as our friends. This parallels the relationship we have with God in which our Lord and Master becomes our friend. The means to this for us as a Vincentian family are the poor.

We now come to the *mystery* (Luke 4: 16-22a). When we announce the Good News as humble servants of the poor, what occurs is the mystery, the “results.” We are happy. We are blessed. We are happy for doing what we do. Through a series of opposites we achieve wholeness and holiness. Through struggle, pain, and sacrifice we find joy. Ultimately through death we find life--the mystery of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Let us return to our legacy, a *Mission of Charity*.

We are on a mission of charity not only for the poor, but with them and hopefully from our experience of their reality. St. Vincent and St. Louise have left us a wonderful legacy of missionaries “coming and going” in the service of those who are poor through the exercise of charity. Charity is an incarnational experience of God’s love. Characteristics of St. Vincent’s and St. Louise’s charity can be summed up in 3 Ps. *Their charity is personal, practical, and political.*

The first two are easy to understand. The third is less so because of a lack of faithfulness to our heritage and this legacy. It is difficult for us to understand charity as political.

Charity that is personal means one-on-one contact. We know the poor by name. They are not a statistic for us but real, live people whom we come to know and love.

Charity that is practical, concrete, and organized is a way of helping the poor. They are the characteristics that distinguish Vincent and Louise’s practice from the beginning, involving the poor themselves in the reconstruction of their lives with dignity worthy of God’s people.

Charity that is political challenges the structures and policies that oppress the poor. Vincent challenged the cardinal and king. War was the root cause of poverty in France in his day. War does the same thing today. This is a challenge for the Vincentian Family—taking up the challenge of understanding the causes of poverty, chief among them is war and the preparation for war. To meet this challenge as the Vincentian Family we have been promoting a contemporary way of living out our mission of charity. It is called systemic change.

Charity today and in the time of St. Vincent and St. Louise is the basis of action on behalf of justice and peace. These two, justice and peace, are integral to the process of systemic change. We see charity not as a hand-out but a hand-up since charity is helping the poor, with them and from their reality. A concrete example of this kind of charity is Zafen, for which we will collect funds today. Zafen is a Creole word meaning “our business.” Zafen is a micro-financing project in Haiti. Webpage: www.Zafen.org. I encourage you to support them.

We are on a mission of charity. Let’s celebrate and love the legacy.