



Rome, 29 November 2023

ADVENT LETTER

“MERCY”: THE WORD THAT SPEAKS TO ME THE MOST **Particular and general examination of conscience**

Dear members of the Vincentian Family Movement,

May the grace and peace of Jesus be always with us!

The doors to the Advent season will soon open, and a time of grace will again lie before us: a time to look into ourselves, to look heavenward day and night, to look to Jesus who will inspire us not just to prepare for the Christmas Season, but also to lay another strong foundation for our spiritual house. This will not be limited to a single part of the year, but involve a continuous building up of that house according to Jesus’s dream for each of us. It is oriented toward our common goal: to reach the house of the Father, to know the fullness of the Kingdom, to enjoy eternal life, to be with Jesus and all the billions of saints who are awaiting us in heaven forever!

There is a story of a king who liked to read. In his castle, he had many libraries of hundreds of meters in length filled with the new books that he constantly bought due to his extraordinarily curious mind. During his lifetime, he had read thousands of books.

However, the king got old and was afflicted by an incurable disease. The doctors told the king, “You have a maximum of six months to live.” Because the king so loved books, he gave an order to a team of one hundred persons to come to his many libraries to read the one thousand books he had not yet read and select one hundred, which he still hoped to be able to read.

After four months, the team of readers came to the king with a list of one hundred books, chosen from the original thousand. However, the king's health had deteriorated in the meantime, so he realized that he would not be able to read one hundred books in the remaining two months that the doctors gave him to live.

The king asked the team of readers to go back and make a new list, selecting now just ten from the one hundred books. The readers came back much faster this time. After a month they had selected ten books, which they brought to the king, but his health had taken another turn for the worse. The king had almost lost his sight; his ability to read was significantly impaired. He realized that he would not be able to read even ten books in the time that was left for him to live.

The king still had great hope that at least he would be able to read one book before he died. He asked the team of readers to choose a single book in two weeks' time. The team did their job and after two weeks came back to the already dying king.

The king had become totally blind, he was also almost deaf, weak, and sleeping many hours a day. At times, however, his mind was still quite fresh. He had enough strength to ask the team to go back and in one day to summarize that one book into just one word. The king felt it probably would be his last day of life.

The team, reading that single book together through the whole night, succeeded in returning with just one word that encompassed the thousand books they had read in the past months. The next morning, still quite early, the team came to the agonizing king, who was only intermittently lucid, and said, "My Lord, we had the grace to read so many books in these last months. As you asked us to do, we come before you today with a single word that embraces all that had been written in those many books, and the word is 'LOVE.'"

If we put ourselves to the task of reading the whole New Testament with the specific purpose of coming up with one word, by which we could express its core meaning, message, and content, probably "LOVE" would be the word most of us would name. Some, of course, may find another word that at a certain time of their life's pilgrimage speaks even more deeply than the word "LOVE." For me personally, if today I needed to choose one word that would embody the whole New Testament, that word would be "MERCY."

Since the time of Saint Vincent and upon his recommendation, both the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity have included the daily exercises of the particular examination and the general examination among the practices that energize their spiritual life. The founder would remind the Missionaries that these exercises promote self-knowledge and the continuous willingness to correct and perfect oneself with the help of God's grace, in order to uproot vices and put down the roots of virtues (*cf. Common Rules X, 9; Statute 19*).

The particular examination usually takes place around noon or before lunch. Before the kind gaze of God, the person briefly reviews the resolution from the morning meditation to enhance the desire and the determination to carry it out, asking for the necessary grace to do so. Addressing the Daughters of Charity, Saint Vincent explained the meaning of this exercise: “As for your examination of conscience before dinner, be faithful to that, Sisters. You know it’s to be made on the resolution taken at morning meditation, and to thank God if, by His grace, you’ve put it into practice, or to ask His forgiveness if, through negligence, you’ve failed to do so” (CCD IX, 36-37; conference 6, “Explanation of the Regulations,” 16 August 1641).

At night, before going to bed, in a climate of profound interior and exterior silence, each one must make the general examination, in the perspective of a life review, first of all to thank the Lord for the benefits received, as well as to beg his forgiveness, prepare for conversion, persevere in good, and avoid what is contrary to him. Thus, you fall asleep with a good thought and your heart in God. “After the evening examination of conscience, keep silence until after meditation the next day so that this recollection, which will appear exteriorly, may foster the conversation of your hearts with God. Keep it especially after the act of adoration you offer to God before going to bed and after having received His holy blessing” (CCD IX, 6-7; conference 1, “Explanation of the Regulations,” 31 July 1634).

Saint Vincent de Paul, the “Mystic of Charity,” very clearly encourages all of us, members of the Vincentian Family Movement, to take advantage of these wonderful tools called the particular examination of conscience and the general examination of conscience every day, in our desire for conversion that leads us to holiness.

The phrase “examination of conscience” can bring a negative reaction, as something that no longer has any meaning, or that I prefer to avoid rather than confront myself in the areas in which Jesus is calling me to improve. If we take it as a moment when Jesus, the strict judge, will embarrass us, pointing to our weaknesses, sins, failures, twice a day, day after day, it is not surprising that we might choose the road of avoiding any such confrontation.

In reality, it is the other way around. Jesus is eager to have the opportunity, during these two moments in the day where we pause in silence, to show us his love and mercy. These are moments when we can return to our daily reading of the Bible, especially the New Testament, and come up with “one word” that summarizes for us the whole message of the New Testament, be it “LOVE,” “MERCY,” or some other word that touches us deeply. In that perspective, we can rejoice a hundred times over for these opportunities that revive in our heart the desire to change, to convert, to strive for holiness.

Each Congregation, Lay Association, and individual that belong to the Vincentian Family Movement may have particular spiritual traditions. I would like to invite those Congregations that have had the spiritual practice of particular and general examination of conscience from their origins and whose members, for one reason or another, have almost totally left aside this practice in their spiritual journey, to revitalize or reinstate this gift in their

communities and in each one of their members. I thank those Congregations that have kept faithful to these two moments of grace every day for their testimony and example.

In the same way, I thank every single layperson, belonging to an Association or not, who uses these two silent moments with Jesus during the day, for their example and testimony. For those members of Congregations or laypersons for whom, until now, this has not been a part of their prayer life, I invite them to include in it these two daily moments of encounter with Jesus.

We stand before Jesus, who is “LOVE” and “MERCY.”

Advent gives us the opportunity to strengthen the foundations of our lives by revitalizing these two daily moments of grace, or to start making them, from this Advent on, a way toward seeing the face of Jesus clearly “here and now” and in its fullness for all eternity!

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Tomaž Mavrič, CM