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Vincentian Education: The Role of Compassion

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I am here at the invitation of my dear friend and colleague Father Patrick Griffin, whose appointment as head of the renowned Vincentian Center of St John's University brings with it additional prestige and recognition to the research faculties who produce important findings for all levels of Catholic education and for the perpetuation of a tradition long-associated with the University.

As I make the case for the continuation of 200 years of leadership by the Vincentian community in Catholic education and in the world at-large, we must remember that Bishop Loughlin presented the task of higher education for the poor of Brooklyn, to the Vincentians, not any other community or order.

At the outset, permit me to say that I am indebted to Father Harrington for informing me that Vincentians, for the past decade or two, have been focusing on "systemic change" – the desired outcome to be a revitalization of higher education. The response of Vincentians continues to display a unique presence in this sphere as they continue to influence education at all levels.

To an educator like me, this means a concerted attack on such affairs as the findings of a recent study which concluded that while black children have made some progress in reading and math, those at the bottom of scoring on standardized tests have been those who repeated this dismal outcome year after year. The result is a perennial lower class who are driven to hopelessness and despair. This is where all professionals who deal with the schools and homes must be imbued with Vincentian values, confronting

and defeating those dark archangels who are wont to lead us away from the truth and the light that Vincent and the Daughters of Charity followed as they ministered to the needs of an underclass persisting to this day.

It is sad to be reminded that even Thomas Jefferson, the author of "all men are created equal" believed that "negroes" could not be expected to think or contribute to the national good. Henry Louis Gates quoted Jefferson in his essay on "Proving Black History Matters":

Never could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture..... I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind.

Thus Jefferson denied that either nature or nurture might be cited and cultivated to do the job Vincentians have traditionally called to the attention of the Church and society.

So here at St. John's, where we have celebrated the Judeo-Christian heritage since 1870, the University has introduced strategies and supported efforts vital to eradicating specious allegations. To the extent the University continues to support its Vincentian foundations, remembers the vision that characterizes

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As part of the 2016 Founder's week at St. John's University Dean Emeritus, Dr. Jerrold Ross provided a glimpse into the integral part that compassion plays in a Vincentian University.

such education, increases its support of the Vincentian Center and the Institute for Catholic Studies, for example, to that extent it can call itself "Vincentian." Heightening relationships between each School or College of the University, there should be increased activity among them. Shortly before I left I sent an email to all full-time faculty asking how many of them would like to create such a University consortium. Thirty-seven faculty, drawn from every part of St. John's responded affirmatively, an unprecedented crossing of disciplines for a cause beyond their own academic self-interests. It suggested that Catholic schools, too, are struggling largely as they recognize insufficiently the latent power for good in the energies of their students.

Moreover, to affirm its dedication to a Vincentian Mission, the University and all of us must begin to recognize that the term so often used as one descriptor for Vincentian education, "service learning" is no longer enough. "Everybody's Doin' It", as Irving Berlin wrote in his ragtime song about a dance step popular for a while.

The word "service" is defined, partially, by Webster as a "contribution to the welfare of others." While no one would argue with incorporating the term "service learning" into its Mission, the term "compassion" should be the primary guide to a fuller Vincentian education. The description of "compassion" in Webster as a "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress with a desire to alleviate it..." is much richer and more vibrant in light of events that surround us today.

Compassion was one of the guiding principles of John XXIII and, certainly, of Francis. Francis' now famous response to a question about behavior, "Who am I to judge?", unleashed a force that gave hope to all humanity about many questions confronting us.

Before this, Pope John's encyclical *Mater et Magistra* states firmly that the state must intervene in matters of health care, education, and housing. It also calls upon wealthier nations to give assistance

to poorer nations with respect for local cultures and without the aim of imposing one's own culture or gaining political control.

What we have come to know as "nation change" was not in the minds or hearts of these sainted men.

Neither should we forget the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII who insisted that the Church speak out on social issues and promote social justice. "Jesus Christ calls the poor 'blessed'. He lovingly invites those in labor and grief to come to Him for solace and He displays the tenderest charity toward the lowly and oppressed."

Elwyn Brooks White's description of compassion also merits attention. "As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not so desolate. Hope is the thing that is left us in a bad time." So the redefinition of Vincentian education in its quest for systemic change should be one that guides us to Hope, the greatest reflection of human thought and feeling.

With such Hope brings responsibility for educating our society. Vincentian education, therefore, must be ideological and cultural, must stand for principle in the wake of attacks on cultures not only in the traditional context of societies around the world but of cultural and ethnic differences which constitute the richness of society here in the United States.

In an even broader context, Vincentian education must provide the foundation for policies and practices surrounding world issues – a compassionate understanding and, therefore, a call for action in the fields of disease, food and water for the destitute (think of Aleppo) – the largest movement of peoples in modern history, immigration, global warming and the future of our planet, and the direction in which philanthropy should take as our graduates emerge into the world. This gives us a sense of purpose, for "...we are all fragile when we don't know what our purpose is, when we haven't thrown ourselves with abandon

into a social role, when we haven't committed ourselves to certain people..." the idea first pronounced in an op-ed piece [David Brooks] in the New York Times.

In yet another illustration of an issue to which a compassionate Vincentian education should be concerned is that of refugees. The situation has been painfully illustrated by Scott Arbeiter, president of World Relief, who indicates that only 110,000 will be admitted to the U.S. in the next fiscal year. Turning thousands of others away, denying them a "place to call home", a place "to belong" reminds us of what we believe about Jesus, who was himself a refugee, who fled with his mother and father to Egypt and told us "to do for others as we would want done for us." In spite of the fact that the U.S. takes in less than half of one percent of the world's refugees, Arbeiter says, "Jihadists hate our compassion for refugees." In calling for Congress to do more he says we need to develop "a response that combines the best of our wisdom, compassion and courage."

Over and over again the world's leaders urge compassion as a way of defining ourselves. Particularly appropriate to Vincentian values in a new context of hope and charity, the time is now right to attract undergraduate and graduate students to the University because they know it exists here. As we have seen these past few years young people respond to this calling with enthusiasm and joy, joy in the well-being of all, re-creating and sustaining the message St. Vincent brought to the world in the 1600's.

Not only practice but scholarship into how compassion plays out in the 21st century should be the measure of success of the Vincentian charism, the "non plus ultra" of education for a democratic society. The University's role, above that of all other institutions, is to provide the rich research that backs this principle and that demonstrates the validity of our claims. As a faculty we need to demonstrate that graduate research rises above that which my doctoral advisor called "puerile issues" and focuses on what Vincentian contributions to the well-being of all are all about. I used to try to remind faculty

that a research question on the difference between reading scores of children in two first grade classes was not needed unless the causes and resolution of their reading problems were detailed and recognized in the body of the research paper or dissertation.

We should note, as well, that which Nicholas Kristof wrote, again, in the New York Times:

It is not just Christianity, of course, that is grappling with these questions. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the Union For Reform Judaism, said that he sees a desire for a social justice mission inspired and balanced by faith traditions. 'That's where I see our path,' Jacobs said. 'People have seen ritual for the religious community, and they haven't seen the courage and commitment to shaping a more just and compassionate world. If certain religious services were less about preening one's own virtue or pointing fingers at somebody else's iniquities and more about tackling human needs around us, this would be a better world – and surely Jesus would approve.

Beginning with Catholic education in pre-school and continuing through higher education, Vincentian education, now in its second century, should provide Hope, answer our dreams and refresh its reaction to a vibrant social context, so that people can understand its meaning beyond philosophical statements. It should be at once "uplifting and upsetting" as the new National Museum of African-American History and Culture has been described, creating a social order consistent with the needs of people for the next 200 years.