

A Letter from your Servant Leaders

Dear Vincentian Friends,

“We may all be together in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat.” I am not sure where I first came across this quip, but as the weeks pass, the truth of the metaphor becomes more apparent.

It is especially apparent that race is a major factor in the disparity of consequences for Americans during the current pandemic and the economic crisis it has created. The COVID-19 virus does not discriminate, but statistics tell a story of disproportionate health and economic impact. The pandemic has highlighted problems with many systems, including health care, criminal justice, employment, housing, education and the food-supply chain. Even before the killing of another black person by police, it was obvious that we in the United States have a problem with racism that infects each of these systems in ways that make racism itself systemic.

The need for systemic change has been a theme of the Vincentian Family for many years. We have made a difference in many lives--but poverty persists. Our focus on systemic change has given us a deeper understanding of the roots of the misery we seek to eliminate. As we have considered systemic change, the embedded issue of racism has been an uncomfortable factor to discuss.

We have not avoided the subject. At our annual assemblies, we have heard from speakers such as Fr. Clarence Williams, author of “Racial Sobriety,” and Fr. Bryan Massingale, author of “Racial Justice and the Catholic Church,” as well as Msgr. Ray East challenge us to be attentive to the issue. Our Multi-Cultural and Diversity Committee has written an excellent handbook and makes presentations at every one of our national meetings.

But this is not an issue that is solved by a few presentations. Light must regularly be focused on what can easily stay in the shadows. I have talked this week with the leadership of the African American Task Force and the Voice of the Poor Committee of our National Council and have encouraged them to create opportunities this month to advance our understanding of racism and our commitment to addressing the issue.

I am a progressive, white, male senior citizen who certainly does not want to be a racist. Still, I must admit that I do not understand many of the experiences of people of color. So I keep listening and reading. The Black Lives Matter movement was something I did not really understand. Of course black lives matter. The excellent film “13th” helped me understand the fear black men and their families have of the criminal-justice system. You can find this documentary on Netflix. I recommend you watch it.

Our Rule tells us that Vincentians journey together toward holiness by “transforming their concern into action and their compassion into practical and effective love.” What does that look like when the concerns are so overwhelming and we cannot meet together to put our concern into action? We can share our knowledge and experience with our Vincentian sisters and brothers to help make us all better at what we do.

A good starting point for our discussion would be the pastoral letter titled, [**“Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love - A Pastoral Letter Against Racism.”**](#) issued in 2018 by the bishops of the United States. The letter states, “Racism still profoundly affects our culture, and it has no place in the Christian heart. This evil causes great harm to its victims, and it

corrupts the souls of those who harbor racist or prejudicial thoughts. The persistence of the evil of racism is why we are writing this letter.” The letter’s study guides provide a very good mechanism for groups such as our conferences to share their knowledge and experience of the subject.

Vincentians are by their nature people who have compassion, want to promote justice and relieve suffering. We want to do something; we want to act. Fr. Henri Nouwen frequently wrote on the subject of compassion, and he observed, “Let us not underestimate how hard it is to be compassionate. Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely, and broken. But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it. ... And so we ignore our greatest gift, which is our ability to enter into solidarity with those who suffer.”

That is a profound insight for us in this time. We should not be too quick to try solving problems but rather be willing to listen and enter into solidarity with those who are suffering. Sr. Rosalie Rendu mentored our founders with the insight that “They will appreciate your kindness and your love more than all else you bring them.”

I know there are those who are trying to draw political lines as we face these challenges. Our members may be liberal, moderate or conservative, but we are all called to journey together. No matter what political leanings I encounter among my Vincentian friends, I never doubt their deep faith, their love for the poor, and their resourcefulness in making that love practical and effective.

Serviens in spe,



Ralph Middlecamp
SVdP National President