

Seeds of Hope

Stories of Systemic Change

Summary by
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This work of just under 200 pages in its English-language edition is, it seems, without precedent in Vincentian history. It has been produced by a body called The Vincentian Family's Commission for Promoting Systemic Change. This body was set up by a group of nine organisations collectively known as the 'Vincentian Family', which came together from the hundred and sixty or more associations, that can be called 'Vincentian' in one way or another; that is to say, the Commission was set up by heads of the nine associations and societies that have grouped themselves under this name; The International Association of Charity (AIC), the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity OF the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul, Marian Vincentian Youth, Association of the Miraculous Medal, the Missionary Cenacle Family (Trinitarians), and the Sisters of Charity Federation (USA). [In the Vincentian Family website of the 24.01.2009, it is stated that these groups 'among others' are members of the Vincentian Family: I have not been able to find an official list of members as of that date].

The Commission set up by the Vincentian Family to promote Systemic Change was established in 2006. It consists of seven members: Robert Maloney, CM, USA, Coordinator, (former Superior General of the Congregation of The Mission, CM), Norberto Carcellar, CM, Philippines, Ellen Flynn, DC, Britain, Joseph Foley, CM, USA, (NGO representative of the CM at the United Nations in New York), Patricia Nava, Mexico, (former President of AIC and new representative of the AIC for relations with the international Vincentian Family), Pedro Opeka, CM, Madagascar/Argentina and Rev. Mr. Gene Smith, USA, (former USA National President of the SSVP). The goal of the Commission is 'to help bring about systemic change through the works of the members of the Vincentian Family, especially through projects among people who are oppressed through poverty, (Seeds of Hope, P. 191). The Vincentian Family asked the Commission to study available material concerning systemic change, to discuss their own involvement in it, to formulate a list of effective strategies for helping people emerge from poverty, and to share that list with the members of the Vincentian Family. The present book, along with related workshops and seminars worldwide, represents one of these strategies.

All the members of the Commission have contributed to the fifteen Chapters of Seeds of Hope, including a Prologue and an Epilogue. Five of them, those dealing mainly with the notion of 'systemic change', are by Patricia Nava, three, including the Prologue and the Epilogue, are by Robert Maloney, two by Ellen Flynn, and one by each of the others, plus a specially invited author, Sister Malou Baaco, DC of the Philippines. Patricia Nava's chapters are mostly of worldwide application, while the others deal largely with particular projects in the Philippines, Madagascar, Mozambique and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Dominican republic, Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Editorial assistance was provided by Rev. James Keane, SJ, of the Jesuit magazine 'America'. As can be seen, a large proportion of the text (over a quarter) is by Patricia Nava, and it is to her that we owe what the work contributes to our understanding of what is meant by 'systemic change', which is the most original and perhaps controversial aspect of the work.

Nonetheless, the descriptions of the various projects that have been undertaken and carried forward in the name of 'systemic change' are both inspiring and challenging. They provide concrete evidence of what can be done, often in the face of great difficulty, and are well worthy to take their place among the many such projects that have been achieved under Vincentian auspices in the nearly 400 years since the first Vincentian Charity, The Ladies of Charity, was founded in 1617. As the Vincentian Family faces its future, an effort to distil its ideas and inspiration in an enduring way may be exactly what is needed. It is with this in mind that I offer the present study of the ideas of Patricia Nava and their relation to currently emerging aspects of catholic social teaching.

Robert Maloney also offers some general theoretical observations regarding systemic change in his Prologue. Thus, he considers that a 'systemic change project', involves a 'long-term social impact', that it is 'sustainable', that it is 'replicable' in various circumstances, that it has actually expanded from its original setting, and that it has brought about significant change by transforming traditional practice. Not everything new is necessarily a 'systemic change'. It is, he believes, characteristic of the stories, the accounts of projects given in 'Seeds of Hope' that they are durable and significant in these five ways. What this appears to mean is that it is only with the passage of time that a change can be recognized as really 'systemic'. What we shall be looking for in Patricia Nava's ideas is whether there are any short-term indicators that might help us to recognise a change as systemic.

Patricia Nava insists that her theoretical work is not abstract, but based on the projects described in the other sections of the work. As an initial comment on the projects the Commission was considering, she quotes a remark of Pope John Paul II in 1979, in which he stated that 'social thinking and social practice inspired by the Gospel must always be marked by a special sensitivity towards those who are in distress ...', and to 'the structural reasons that cause poverty' (P.43). Such sensitivity to people and intelligent awareness of the cause of their distress were seen by the Commission as indicators of change that promised to be genuinely systemic. Systemic change thus grows out of a certain quality of mind and heart. Yet it also involves certain 'strategies':

1. Mission-oriented strategies (focusing on direction and motivation)
2. People-oriented strategies (focusing on the people in poverty as the persons who are most capable of changing their own situations)
3. Task oriented strategies (focusing on organisation)
4. And strategies directed towards co-responsibility, networking and political action (focusing on participation and solidarity).

Patricia Nava then takes up each of these types of strategy in Chapters 3 (P. 44-48), 6 (P. 76-85), 9 (P.118-126) and 12 (P. 162 -169).

The significance of her dealing with them in different chapters is to emphasise that 'systemic change' involves a number of different things and operates at various levels. At each stage in 'systemic change' planning, it is important to remember at what stage you are. Initially, for instance, a great deal will involve focusing on how the individual 'servant of people in poverty' experiences his or her own motivation (does it contain a lot of anger or desire to exercise power?), and then it is necessary to move on to liking and respecting people who are experiencing poverty (strategy 2). But there are also other issues, connected with running an organization designed to help people in poverty, or help the people who are experiencing poverty help themselves improve their quality of life, e.g. a conference of the SSVP or a night-shelter, which cannot remain simply at the personal level, and finally there is the level at which planning deals with whole and perhaps massive organisations like the SSVP nationally or regionally, or the Vincentian Partnership. Serving the people who are experiencing poverty is quite a sophisticated undertaking – a fact that entails its own risks. The systemic change projects described in the remaining chapters of the book illustrate all this very well.

Mission-Oriented Strategies

As a basic principle for the mission-oriented strategy, Nava lays down that poverty is not to be regarded as just the inevitable result of circumstances. People experiencing poverty remain in poverty largely because of changeable circumstances. She quotes, Nelson Mandela, 'like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural', and before him Ozanam: "Charity is not sufficient. It treats the wounds but not the blows that cause them... Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is Justice's role to prevent the attacks" (p. 46).

A second principle for the mission-oriented strategy is to 'design projects, create strategies, policies and guidelines that flow from our Christian and Vincentian values and mission'. That is what determined the whole course of Vincent's life from when in his early thirties he 'committed himself to following Christ as the Evangeliser and servant of the poor' (P.47). Vincentian motivation combines prayer and action, and is essentially spiritual.

A third and final principle at the level of mission orientation is 'to evangelize, while maintaining a profound respect for the local culture, thus inculturating our Christian and Vincentian charism within that culture', which we may observe, relates not alone to various foreign cultures, but to the new cultures that succeeding generations develop for themselves. At this point it is clear that mission-orientated strategies are moving towards those that are people-orientated.

Person-oriented Strategies

Under this heading, Nava directs our attention to the people experiencing poverty as the persons who are most capable of changing their own situation.

'As members of the Vincentian Family, inspired by Christ the evangelizer and servant of the people experiencing poverty, we seek to be attentive to their needs and their hopes so that we may not only evangelize and serve them, but also be changed by our contact with them'.

Nava quotes St. Louise de Marillac on this point:

As for your conduct towards people experiencing poverty, may you never take the attitude of merely getting the task done. You must show them affection; serving them from the heart – inquiring of them what they need; speaking to them gently and compassionately; procuring necessary help for them without being too bothersome or too eager. (P.77)

Treating people with respect helps them to grow in respect. She quotes St. Vincent: 'Whenever I happened to speak abruptly to these convicts, I spoiled everything. But whenever I praised them for their acceptance and showed them compassion, they always listened to me and even turned to God.' (P. 78)

And later she remarks, 'Members of the Vincentian Family attempt to live and work in solidarity with people experiencing poverty rather than merely encourage others to share their superfluous wealth with them. A vital way of showing solidarity with people in poverty is to have a deep concern for the education of the young, which is deeply rooted in the Vincentian tradition. Equally vital is the development of servant-leaders, inspired by the example of St. Vincent de Paul.

She quotes Eduardo Marques:

'How to acquire the skills of a servant leader? The initial answer is that these skills cannot be acquired only through training, but must be accompanied by the leader's true desire to serve.' (P. 81).

Empowering others for leadership was not only something St. Vincent himself excelled in, but which has shown itself clearly in the AIC systemic-change type projects in Madagascar. 'Soon the first volunteers became multiplying agents, training others to be active in working towards social change even in the poorest communities of this budding network. Fr. Norberto Concelar from the Philippines notes that 'Searching for the means to emerge from poverty is a risky experience'. Servant leadership encourages the community to take such risks (P.83) which leads onto the more task-orientated strategy and ultimately to the political.

Task-oriented Strategies

Nava begins her examination of this level of strategy with the very first organisation established by Vincent de Paul, that of the Charity, at Chatillon-les Dombes in 1617, and the rule he composed for it. She sees this as illustrating the strategic principle of 'starting with a serious analysis of the local reality, flowing from concrete data, and tailoring all projects to that reality'.

At Chatillon Vincent discovered a rich vein of generosity among the local people, and a plentiful supply of volunteers to deliver that generosity to those in need, along with a willingness of those volunteers to be organised in such a way as to allow the most efficient distribution of assistance.

No doubt it was fortuitous that he found all three qualities together among the people of Chatillon, and what his success there shows is the importance of identifying the personnel and other resources for relieving local needs. Nava amplifies this principle of Vincent's with one drawn from Bl. Rosalie Rendu:

There are different kinds of charity, and the small help we give is only a palliative, for it is necessary to set up a more efficient and lasting charity, to study the attitudes and the level of instruction of people in poverty, obtaining work for them, with the result that they can escape their own condition of misery. (P.120)

People only escape from poverty when they have stable means for satisfying their basic human needs. Nava illustrates this from the examples of Pedro Opeka's projects in Madagascar, and the level of 'quality service' provided in the Passage in London. Finally, she illustrates the basic Vincentian principle of durability by ensuring a solid financial basis for projects, such as Fr. Maloney's DREAM project for HIV sufferers (Drug Resource Enhancement against AIDS and Malnutrition), concluding with the advice to 'be transparent, inviting participation in preparing budgets and in commenting on financial reports: maintain careful controls over money management' (P. 125)

Co-responsibility, networking and political action strategies

Nava points out that Vincent frequently intervened in political issues in order to help people experiencing poverty, that is he involved royalty, the nobility, the legal profession and church authorities in projects for the sake of the people in poverty, at a time when these people themselves were virtually powerless. The empowerment of the masses in many contemporary societies is something he could only have dreamed of, but even today, 'it is necessary to construct a shared vision with diverse stake-holders; communities which are disadvantaged, interested individuals, donors, churches, governments, unions, the media, international organizations and networks, etc'. In other words the sectionalising or cornering of the power to control welfare needs to be avoided in our democratic societies.

As Nava states, 'The fundamental model for the Vincentian mission is collaborative, involving teamwork, networking and shared goals'(P. 166). In which connection, it is perhaps appropriate to state that Vincentian exclusivism is no more acceptable than any other kind when it comes to the service of people experiencing poverty!

The words of Pedro Opeka with which she concludes lie at the heart of the Vincentian attitude:

When we explore the mystery of the covenant between God and humanity ... we live in joy and peace because we love deeply. To that end, we attempt to return continually to the source of the Good News and open our hearts to it. If we do that faithfully, then in the footsteps of Christ, we ourselves will be Good News. (P. 169).

The soul of systemic change

If there is a single idea that gives meaning to 'systemic change' at all its four levels, it must certainly be that which determined the course of Vincent's own life from his early thirties on: that of consecrating his entire self and all he possessed to God for the service of people oppressed by poverty. This idea determined the generosity with which he made particular donations, and it was what he used to motivate the Ladies of Charity to donate their jewellery for the work of the foundlings.

But it also determined the spirit of fraternity with which he spoke to the galley-slaves or regretted not doing so at times, and it equally controlled the spirit of servant-leadership in which he established the Charity at Chatillon-les-Dombes, and saw to the creation of networks of charity throughout war-torn France, involving everyone he could influence. Importantly, it is precisely this fundamental attitude of mind, heart and will that is most amenable to prayer and the sacramental life; it is why Vincent is not just an organisational genius but a saint. In a certain sense, the still centre of systemic change does not change at all, rather it is the living heart of a human being alive with the love of God. It feels very much like the core of Vincentian existence, or really, of all Christian and human existence. Systemic change means reaching the point of never having to change again.

Myles Rearden cm, January 2009

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