



# PROJECT 'SPECIAL REQUEST'

presentation at the MEGVIS-Meeting 2022

by Vincent de Paul Center Nederland

## Preface

Commissioned by VFEC (Vincentian Family Executive Committee), Vincent de Paul Center Nederland – a center for social spirituality – has carried out a study into updating Vincentian charism, especially for lay people.

The central question is: how can Vincentian charism be reinvented as an actual inspiration, so that it can remain – where still vital – and become – where necessary and possible – a factor of significance for today's world.

Today's (western) world is largely characterized by processes of individualization, economization and secularization. Rooted in christian worldviews, how can we find contemporary traces to reshape the Vincentian ideals of caring for each other and for the world?

Based on interviews with scientists and practitioners, we have formulated a number of results for this ongoing update. The results are being further developed in specific projects.

In this document you will find the presentation as we gave at the MEGVIS-Meeting 2022 in Untermarchtal, Germany. The presentation consists of three parts: our way to project 'Special Request' (1), the question, method and results of the project (2) and finally some concrete suggestions on how to bring the results into practice (3).

Finally, we sincerely would like to thank our sponsors for the opportunity they have given us to delve into these so important questions and so to find new vincentian ways to contribute to a healthy, social and just world.

July 2022  
Vincent de Paul Center Nederland  
working group 'Special Request'

Jos Roemer, project leader  
Henrike van Riel  
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Jozef Tettero  
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# Part 1

Our way to 'Special Request'

by Marieke van de Ven

## PART 1 – OUR WAY TO ‘SPECIAL REQUEST’



### Vincent de Paul Center Nederland and a ‘Special Request’

## MEGVIS - 2022

### 1. Introduction

Good morning. Welcome to this presentation. It is an honour for us to be able to introduce our center and our project 'Special Request'.

But first, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Marieke van de Ven, I am affiliated with the Vincent de Paul Center in the Netherlands and I was a member of the project group 'Special Request'.

As you have already noticed: the German language is not my native speech, but I will try to be understandable for you.



**Marieke**  
our way to ‘Special Request’



**Jos**  
making the charism understandable



**Tjeu**  
disturbed balance

### 2. Structure of the presentation

Our presentation consists of three parts. First, I will tell you briefly about our center and next about the path that led us to the project 'Special Request'.

Afterwards Jos will report about the project 'Special Request' and its results.

Finally, Tjeu will speak about the vision that carries the project and about concrete forms of our way of working.

Between the presentations we would like to talk to each other: what are your thoughts, what are your experiences?

## 2011 - Vincent in Nijmegen

studyhouse CM will be sold

starting something new....?



### 3. About our center

When Tjeu van Knippenberg, a Vincentian, heard in 2011 that the Vincentius a Paulo study house in our city of Nijmegen was to be sold, he strongly wished that *'the voice of Vincent de Paul would continue to sound in the city. It would be an impoverishment when the name of this great social inspirer would disappear out of town'*. In this desire lies the beginning of the Vincent de Paul Center.

Here you can see our logo. Its shape is the outline of St. Lazare in Paris, the lively center of the first Vincentian movement.

## 2013 – First activity

meeting Vincent – his time, his life, his work



### 4. First Activity – course 'Meeting Vincent'

Since we, apart from Tjeu, knew little or nothing about Vincent de Paul, our first activity was a Vincent course 'Meeting Vincent'. Five sessions about Vincent de Paul - his time, his life and his work.

This first activity has taught us much about the political, social and ecclesiastical history of France in the seventeenth century and about Vincent's particular approach, his own response to the vital questions of his time. That was a good start.

So far about us. Then now about our way to the Special Request.

## 2014 – Châtillon sur Chalaronne

1617 – Vincent in Châtillon a room on the 2nd floor



### 5. Châtillon sur Chalaronne

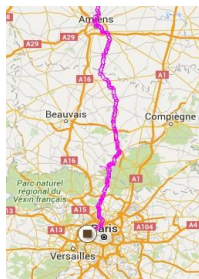
In the Vincent course we learned about the places where Vincent lived and worked. One of the places was Châtillon sur Chalaronne, near Lyon, France. It is the city where Vincent lived and worked for a few months in 1617. Here the social pillar of his missionary program originated: the call to serve the poor.

On the first picture you can see the city gate that already existed in Vincent's time. On the second picture on the left you can see the church Saint André where Vincent preached. Straight ahead you can see the tall building where Vincent rented a room on the second floor. This is now a house of the Filles de la Charité. Our 'Special Request' begins in this house.

This house, although renovated, is impressive for someone who is looking for Vincent de Paul. With a circle of motivated women in town, Vincent founded the very first social group. In this house, in this room, in December 1617. During my visit, the hospitable sister said: *in 2017 it will be 400 years; then we will celebrate this great event.* So, that would be in 3 years. That seemed to me an important fact.

## 1617 – 400 Years Vincent – 2017

a plan



2016 – presenting the plan



### 6. Designing a plan....

Back in the Netherlands, I asked my colleague Margriet if we could develop a plan for the upcoming 400th anniversary. She thought that was a cool idea. Many options were examined. Our final plan was a journey in France, from Amiens to Paris, with activities along the way and a joint final activity in Paris. A journey to commemorate, to celebrate and to explore new avenues.

#### ..... and presenting the plan

It is 2016. Coincidentally, the former superior general of the Vincentians, fr. Gregory Gay, comes to visit The Netherlands. Shortly before that, he had invited the Vincentian movement on the internet to come up with proposals for the coming anniversary year. We had our journey.... so .... In short, in May we met fr. Gregory Gay in the house of the Vincentians in Panningen and presented him and the others our journey-plan. Here you can see my colleague Margriet speaking

## Meeting & Talking

meeting Joe Agostino cm  
Oktober 2016



talking in Rome  
Oktober 2017



### 7. Meeting & Talking.....

One thing led to another. I soon received an email from Joe Agostino, international coordinator of the Vincentian Family, that he did receive our journey-plan from Fr. Gregory Gay and that he could come to The Netherlands coming October. He proposed to meet one another and discuss the plans. Of course, this was big surprise that we gladly accepted. On this photo you can see Joe's arrival at Schiphol Airport with Hetty, another colleague.

It didn't turn out to become our original journey-plan but something much bigger. In October 2017, a major international Vincentian gathering was organised in Rome to mark the 400th anniversary. Very impressive. Here you can see Tjeu and his colleague Peter giving their lecture 'Inspiring and Serving'.

## and Celebrating - Rome 2017



### 8. .... and Celebrating

The anniversary celebration on Saturday on St. Peter's Square in Rome was quite impressive. Maybe some of you were there too. The international encounters, the Gen Verde music, the bright sun, the meeting with the Pope, the yellow scarves, the atmosphere... unforgettable for me.

## 2018 - A Special Request

**Van:** Joseph Agostino <agostinojv@gmail.com>  
**Verzonden:** zondag 21 januari 2018 20:19  
**Aan:** Marieke van de Ven <mariekevandeven@vincentdepaulcenter.nl>  
**Onderwerp:** A special request

Dear Marieke

May the grace and peace of the risen Lord be always with you!

(.....)

I am writing to you with a very special request.....as well as with a proposal.

(.....)

One of our major topics was to discuss the implications of the VF Symposium in Rome last October. And, the Committee made many important decisions about how to carry this forward for the Family.

One of them includes the Vincent de Paul Center in the Netherlands.

### 9. A Special Request

After the anniversary celebration in Rome, Joe and his team spoke at home in Philadelphia about how they could make the results of Rome fruitful. A little later we received an email. From Joe Agostino. The Vincentian Family Executive Committee wanted to submit a special request to us. This was truly a Special Request. Here you can see the email with the special request. Surprised and honoured, we gave this name to the project.

This was our way to a very special request. From Nijmegen in The Netherlands, via Châtillon in France, via Rome in Italy, Via Philadelphia in the United States back to Nijmegen in The Netherlands.

Next, Jos will tell you about the content of the request, our approach and the results of the study.

But first I do suggest that we will share some of our thoughts and experiences based on a few questions.

### Questions to share

What do you think are the major issues of our time?

What inspires you about the Vincentian charism?

What are important characteristics for you?

### 10. Questions

What do you think are the major issues of our time?

What inspires you about the Vincentian charism?

What are important characteristics of the charism for you?

## Part 2

Making the Vincentian Charism understandable

by Jos Roemer

## PART 2 – MAKING THE VINCENTIAN CHARISM UNDERSTANDABLE



### Making the Vincentian Charism understandable

In search for the foundation of the Vincentian tradition

The Vincent de Paul Center Netherlands has been asked a question. It's not an easy question. It seems to be a question that touches on the foundation of the Vincentian tradition and that also represents a great challenge for people who live in a secularized society and have been deprived of religious language.



### The inquiry

- Investigation
- With a group of theologians
- From different countries
- How can the Vincentian charisma be made comprehensible again?

The question was: Can we, as employees of the Center, together with a group of theologians from different countries, investigate how the Vincentian charism can be made understandable again?

## The background

- Congregations lose members
- The Vincentian family is increasingly becoming a movement of lay people
- In the West: Secularization

The background to this request was threefold:  
1<sup>st</sup>. The congregations that have passed on this charism so far are losing members.



2<sup>nd</sup>. The Vincentian family is increasingly becoming a movement of lay people who are less familiar with the religious language.

3<sup>rd</sup>. In the West, this is reinforced by the context of the secularization of society.

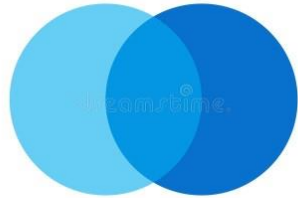
## How did we proceed?

- Conversations with theologians and other experts
- Conversations with lay people who are active within the Vincentian family
- Can we discover common ground?

We have discussed this problem primarily with theologians and other scientists and experts. As a result, our view of the situation has become sharper. Afterwards we listened to those lay people who are active within the Vincentian family and live and work in a secularized society. How do they articulate their commitment? Can we discover a common ground on which we find ourselves? Which aspects of the charisma do we share with each other, which aspects are we still missing? In 2020 and 2021, we spoke to seven lay volunteers who are active in Vincentius associations in the Netherlands. We talked to them about their work, the importance of their work and their motivation. These conversations revealed eight characteristics of the motivation of these volunteers. These qualities are largely common to the volunteers we spoke to'.

 <p>Common ground</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "We pick up the splinters"</li> <li>2. "We want to see the face of the poor"</li> <li>3. "I'm here for you"</li> <li>4. Strengthening the self-esteem of the poor</li> </ol>	<p>1<sup>st</sup>. There are many state or private programs that are intended for the poor. Nevertheless, there are many who can make little or no use of it or not in time. The volunteers of the Vincentius associations offer concrete and quick help for those who run the risk of falling by the wayside. "We are picking up the splinters that the over-organized affluent society is dropping."</p> <p>2<sup>nd</sup>. The help that is offered is tailor-made help. "We want to see the face of the poor. What does this person need?"</p> <p>3<sup>rd</sup>. Helping is entering into a relationship, it is a person-to-person interaction.</p> <p>4<sup>th</sup>. The aid is also aimed at strengthening the self-esteem of the poor.</p>
 <p>Common ground</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Helping is a long-term commitment</li> <li>6. Personal faith is the foundation</li> <li>7. Together with others</li> <li>8. The name 'Vincentius' is meaningful</li> </ol>	<p>5<sup>th</sup>. Participation in the Vincentius Association is a long-term commitment. It says something about the identity of the volunteer.</p> <p>6<sup>th</sup>. The volunteer's personal faith and the values taught from home form the basis of the commitment to the poor.</p> <p>7<sup>th</sup>. Helping is best done in an organized context, together with others.</p> <p>8<sup>th</sup>. The name "Vincentius" is meaningful for the volunteers.</p>

Caritas and  
Missio



The similarities in the commitment of these lay volunteers and of the religiously motivated members of Vincentian congregations are probably quickly noticeable. It is about "doing the right thing for the people", working on "charity", in good care. Good care is offered out of a personal motivation that is less religiously experienced and expressed. However, the volunteers we spoke to did not describe their work as "meeting Jesus in the poor." Which aspect of the Vincentian charism is important in addition to the commonality and do we overlook if the motivation and meaning of "good care" is not expressed in the religious language?

Evangelizare  
pauperibus  
misit me

- The good news
- The Kingdom of God Is Imminent
- What does this say about the reality around us?


To take a closer look at this aspect, let us take for ourselves the motto of the Congregatio Missionis: 'evangelizare pauperibus misit me', He sent me to bring the good news to the poor. How can this 'good news' be expressed in terms that laypeople can understand? When we consult the New Testament, it is striking that 'the good news' appears several times in connection with 'the kingdom of God' (Mt 9:35; Mk 1:15; Luke 4:34). This aspect of the charism, the good news that the kingdom of God is imminent, says something about the reality around us. But what? What joy can we share with the poor (John 2:46)?

# Part 3

## Disturbed Balances

by Tjeu van Knippenberg

## PART 3 – DISTURBED BALANCES

<p>1</p> <p><b>DISTURBED BALANCES</b></p> 	<p>Dear MEGVIS friends,</p> <p>You have just heard about the request posed by VINFAM in Philadelphia to the Vincent de Paul Center Nederland and the results of our research. In this study we have found that for many people a separation has arisen. Realities that once belonged together have fallen apart: ora et labora, heaven and earth, mission and charity - these twins are no longer natural partners. They have, at the most, a blinking relationship. What is the background of this imbalance and how can we in the Vincentian Family try to restore or renew this connection?</p> <p>First, I will discuss on secularization. Next, I will present some beginning answers that we are developing in the Vincent de Paul Center Nederland.</p>
<p>2</p> <p><b>SECULARISATION</b></p> <p>SECULARISATION OF THE WORLD <i>SAECULUM IS PUT AT THE SERVICE OF MAN</i></p> <p>SECULARISATION OF RELIGION <i>RELIGION IS BANISHED FROM SAECULUM</i></p>	<p><b>1. Secularization</b></p> <p>The imbalances between mission and charity, inspiring and serving, praying and working is a consequence of changes that have taken place in the western parts of the world since the Enlightenment in the 18th century. From then on, a double process of secularization takes place:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- secularization of the world (there is a fading resonance between the world and human beings) and</li><li>- secularization of religion (there is a fading resonance between the world and religion).</li></ul> <p>Two different phenomena that I think are related.</p>

<p>3</p> <p><b>SECULARIZATION OF THE WORLD</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ECONOMY – ACCELERATE</li> <li>• TECHNOLOGY – IMPROVE</li> <li>• CULTURE – CHANGE</li> </ul>	<p><i>1.1. Secularization of the world</i></p> <p>A change has taken place in the West since the 18th century, which is characterized by increasing rationalization. A society emerged that was fascinated by what people can do themselves. They became increasingly able to control the world and to take possession of its resources. The name for this is “progress”. Progress meant: economy must always grow, technology needs to develop always faster and produce more advanced instruments, culture must renew itself in ever-changing hypes and fads.</p>
<p>4</p> <p><b>PROGRESS</b></p> <p><b>CHANGING THE WORLD</b></p> <p><b>ECONOMICAL, TECHNICAL, CULTURAL PUT AT OUR SERVICE</b></p>	<p>We call this "progress" and believe, mostly unconsciously, that our lives will be better if we succeed in putting the world economically, technically and culturally at our service. But with this “belief”, the world becomes an object of conquest. What we are doing is at the world’s expense. Without always realizing, we are constantly changing the world with the goal of getting as much of it as possible. Our reach must always get bigger, as Hartmut Rosa, German sociologist, states. Or in other words: make sure that the world becomes economically, technically and culturally available. To achieve this, we have to make the world in all possible ways (scientifically, legal, political and daily) predictable and controllable.</p>
<p>5</p> <p><b>AGGRESSIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE WORLD</b></p>	<p>This process leads - however often unnoticed yet no less real - to an aggressive attitude towards the world. The world withdraws and becomes illegible and mute. There is no real dialogue with the world anymore. The world changes from "Mother Earth" to "Enslaved Slave". I call this a process of secularization because the world, the saeculum, is increasingly set apart as an object to be lorded over and exploited. That the world has something of "unavailability", purely of its own, has largely disappeared from human consciousness; and if there was anything left of its</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>THE WORLD RETIRES</b></li> <li>• <b>BECOMES UNREADABLE AND SILENT</b></li> <li>• <b>NO RESONANCE HUMAN - WORLD</b></li> </ul>	<p>unavailability, would have to be overcome.</p> <p>All this means that people have changed. We have defined man and "human" as autonomous. We have become all-rounders; saeculum came our way and now we can use it as our experimental space: 'our global reach must always continue to expand'. The autonomous human was able to control the world to a certain degree. He has evolved from manager to ruler. At first glance, everyone is served with it. We owe its prosperity, self-determination, development and global citizenship. But at the same time the world has become a place of rational, instrumental planning. As a result, the world has largely detached itself from human experience. The resonance between man and world is disappearing.</p>
<p>6</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>SECULARISATION OF RELIGION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>SECULARIZATION</b></li> <li>• <b>CHURCH PROPERTY EXPOSED</b></li> <li>• <b>SEPARATION OF WORLD AND RELIGION</b></li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>1.2. Secularization of religion</i></p> <p>Related to the process of secularization of the world is the secularization in the usual ecclesiastical sense. Originally the word meant that church property was expropriated (ownership of lands and monasteries passed from the church to the state, the secular power). Thus, secularization has become the name for a wider and more complex process: the decline in church membership, the reduction of religion to the private sphere and the decrease of social influence of religion (secularism). Here, too, there is a process of the world becoming independent of religion. The world is our own territory; the place where people can move autonomously. Secularization separates the world from church/religion.</p>
<p>7</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>SECULARISATION WORLD            RELIGION</b></p>	<p>Both in secularization of the world and in secularization of religion the world is set apart. It no longer stands in a living relationship with people or with religion. The world becomes a bread-basket for the autonomous human being, who uses it instrumentally for his own benefit. But a man does not live by bread alone.</p>

WORLD  
REDUCED TO BREAD SPACE

RELIGION  
MAN DOES NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE

The attitude towards the world is closely related to the attitude towards its Creator. What does it mean when this consumerist attitude takes control of religion and designates her a place outside the public domain? This reinforces the tendency to limit our relationship to the world to mere rational explanation and instrumental use. The world needs religion, religion needs the world. Separation of world and religion makes both handicapped. What does this mean for Vincentian spirituality and work?

8

## VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALTY

BECOMING HUMAN  
IN THE MIDST OF LIFE

### 2. Beginning answers

#### 2.1. Vincentian spirituality

Vincentian charism is rooted in Vincent's incarnated spirituality. Vincent derives his engagement with God from concrete life and this engagement takes shape midst in life. Vincent's theology focuses on Incarnation: the presence of God becomes concrete and human in Jesus, the Son of Man. The world resonates in a Vincentian spirituality. The world speaks to us, especially the world of the poor, of those who have been marginalized in this world.

9

INCARNATIONAL

DIVINE LIFE MAKES THE WORLD ALIVE

Vincentian charisma is incarnational. This means that divine life has entered the world, making the world alive. The soul (anima) is that in people, animals and things that is most intrinsic to them. An animated world is not a stupid object, but something with an own voice, a resonating subject, a communication partner for people who themselves belong to this animated world.

It cannot be a coincidence that Jesus uses parables in the gospel to show where the kingdom of God can be found. Whether it's the smallest seed on earth, the lilies of the field, or the widow finding her little coin back, Jesus points to the world. When we meet inspiration

<p>PARABLES SHOW THE MEANING OF THE KINGDOM</p>	<p>in people, between people, in nature or in culture, we see a sign of the kingdom of God. In the experience of resonance, the soul is awakened; connection is established between human being and the world, between human beings and other human beings, and of human beings in themselves.</p>
<p>10</p> <p><b>EXPERIENCES OF RESONANCE</b></p> <p>MISSION – CHARITY PRAYER – WORK INTERNALITY – COMMITMENT</p>	<p>Unavailability is the experience that there is a secret within ourselves, in other people, in nature and in culture that we must not possess and that we must leave intact. The gospel, like the life story, is actually structured by resonance experiences.</p> <p>In the context of our charism "Mission and Charity" it is about resonance between the two; resonance between inspiration and service, between gospel and love, between prayer and work, between heaven and earth. Inwardness without commitment is misleading - commitment without an inner self is lost in mere action.</p>
<p>11</p> <p><b>VINCENT DE PAUL CENTER NL</b></p> <p>AN OPEN SPACE TO THE WORLD</p> <p>A PATH INTO THE PANORAMA OF WORLDVIEWS</p>	<p><b>2.2. Vincent de Paul Center NL</b></p> <p>Vincent de Paul Center Nederland focuses on the development of social spirituality. This is a spirituality in which the well-being of man and world are mutually involved. We try to contribute to this well-being by creating an open space for exploring and developing our view on the world. There are churches and other value-oriented institutions that have systematic descriptions of their view on life and world. However, many people have lost contact with the content of these views. What is a Protestant, a Catholic, a Muslim, a Humanist? Many people do not have a conscious embedding in a clear and systemic worldview. More than half of the Dutch are atheists or agnostics.</p> <p>A shift has taken place from an institutional embedded worldview to a free and unhindered position of the individual. Finding a personal</p>

	<p>fitting path in the panorama of available worldviews demands nowadays high performance of personal navigation. As the person becomes less able to rely on calibrated guides, the urgency is increasing to explore boundaries, to find own language, to take the wheel into own hands and chart the course.</p>
<p>12</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>GENERATION17</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">G17</p> <p style="text-align: center;">STORY PRACTICES</p> <p style="text-align: center;">HOW DO WE RELATE TO THE WORLD</p>	<p>For all these reasons we at the Vincent de Paul Center NL are working on these themes. For instance, in project G17. In this name, G stands for ‘generation’. It is G17 because we now are the 17<sup>th</sup> generation after the year 1617 that was the decisive turning point in Vincent's life (one generation = 25 years). In the project G17 we work in small groups – so-called story practices. In these groups participants explore and share what values are important to them, how they view life and the world. Everything circles round questions of how we experience the world: is the Spirit of God speaking to me through the world? Is there resonance? Who do I trust? What do I hope? What do I love? What do I learn from nodes in my life? What behaviour does this reveal? Where do I find sources of inspiration? How can I share this with others?</p>
<p>13</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>LIVED SPIRITUALITY</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">RESONANCE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SMALL GROUPS</p>	<p>The practices of the G17 are about an incarnated spirituality, a spirituality in which there is resonance within people, between people, and between people and the world that is creation. G17 is for those who want to recalibrate the way they view life in today's world by exploring and sharing their own story and thus finding within themselves and with others the power to be dedicated and active in the world. Being addressed to and inspired by different perspectives - in contact with the source, yourself, the other, the world.</p> <p>In the fall of last year, G17 started with five small-scale groups, all of them are now being continued. I mention them very briefly.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ In a group we explore the personal meaning of stories in the Old and New Testament.</li> </ul>

## RELIBIO

### RESTORING DISTURBED BALANCES

- Another group seeks inspiration as a primary necessity of life. From the exchange of where to find sources of inspiration and where they are missing, our personal life orientation becomes clear in its uniqueness and its similarities with others.
- A third group focuses on how to explore my own worldview in the context of domains and boundaries in my storytelling? Is there a vibrating connection or is the world silent to me?
- The group East-West story-practices uses thematic constellations. The group works with characters of meaningful stories from Zen Buddhism, Sufism, Taoism and Christianity.
- ReliBio. Research and exchange of religious biographies. During the meetings, the participants tell each other their life story and they describe the function and meaning of religion in it.

So far this list. We hope that these practices can be meaningful in restoring a shattered balance, a rebalancing between mission and charity that is so important in our Vincentian charism.