I want to begin this meditation with the words of St. John Paul II, the Pope: “Serving the Poor is an act of evangelization and at the same time, a seal of Gospel authenticity and a catalyst for permanent conversion in the consecrated life” (Vita Consecrata n. 82, last paragraph). St. Vincent de Paul is the heavenly Patron of all the charitable activities in the whole Church. In the vision of St. Vincent de Paul, service to the poor is not merely a social work; but it is the work of evangelization. Social work will stop at providing food, clothing, shelter, and other material needs to a poor person. But the poor human being is a person in the image and likeness of God. He has material as well as spiritual needs. Evangelization aims at the total and integral development of the person. While nurturing the spiritual needs of the poor, St. Vincent de Paul did not neglect their material needs as well. St. John Paul II has this to say of St. Vincent de Paul, referring to Coste, volume IX, (Paris, 1923, p.319): “Saint Vincent de Paul, for his part, loved to say that, when one is obliged to leave prayer to attend to a poor person in need, that prayer is not really interrupted, because one leaves God to serve God” (Vita Consecrata, n. 82, 4th paragraph). Social work among the poor can be done even by non-believers; but evangelization of the poor can be done

Vincentian Service to the Poor is a Work of Evangelization

Fr. Antony Plackal
only by Jesus and his close followers. St. Vincent de Paul very closely followed Jesus and learned from Him. St. Vincent obtained his vision of the evangelization of the poor from Jesus of the Gospels. St. Vincent de Paul understood that Jesus of the Gospels proves himself to be the best evangelizer of the poor by proclaiming the Gospel to the poor through words and deeds (cf. Lk. 4:18). “During His passion, He seemed to be a fool to the gentiles and a scandal for the Jews, and in all this He called Himself the Evangelizer of the Poor” (Abelly, The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul, Book 3, pp.19-20). The Lord Jesus has called, has chosen and has set apart every member of the Vincentian Congregation in order to continue his work of evangelization of the poor, through words and deeds.

The Statutes and Practical Norms of the Vincentian Congregation has documented in very clear terms the specific purpose and goal of life of every Vincentian to be an evangelizer of the poor, especially, the most abandoned in the society. Common Rules has this formulation: “the end of the Congregation is… to preach the gospel to the poor, especially the country people” (Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, n. 1, 2). The Vincentian Congregation has adopted the same specific purpose and goal for its members: “Called by God to the Vincentian Congregation each one of us adheres to the spirit and example of St. Vincent de Paul and commits oneself... to preach the Gospel to the poor, especially the more abandoned and to help them in their integral development” (Statutes, n. 2b). Statutes states also: “The specific and pre-eminent purpose of our Congregation is the evangelization of the poor. It is realized in Popular Missions, Retreats, missionary works among non-Christians as well as in charitable, educational and social apostolate” (Statutes n. 4). So thus, for a Vincentian, in whatever ministry he is en-

Vincentian Service to the Poor is a Work of Evangelization
gaged in, including social ministry, that ministry has to be a work of evangelization of the poor.

Jesus of the Gospels reveals evangelization of the poor in the tradition of prophet Isaiah as his life-vision; “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Lk. 4:18-19=Isa. 61:1-3). When we analyze the tradition of Prophet Isaiah historically, we trace his mission of evangelization totally for the poor Israelites [materially, economically and socially poor Israelites] who returned from Babylonia after Diaspora, and who were in material and spiritual need. It is in this background of tradition that Jesus confirmed assertively through the words: “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:21), that this is his purpose in life.

The phrase “evangelization of the poor” is to be understood in the light of the whole Sacred Scripture, and especially in the light of the Gospels as well as in the light of the official teachings of the Church. All the above bear witness to the truth that all human beings are to be evangelized; but the materially, economically and socially poor people are to be evangelized with a preferential option.

St. John Paul II, the Pope, emphasizes preferential option in the “evangelization of the poor”. In his Apostolic Exhortation to those in Consecrated Life, the Pope writes: “Taking up the Lord’s mission as her own, the Church proclaims the Gospel to every man and woman, committing herself to their integral salvation. But with special attention, in a true ‘preferential option’, she turns to those who are in situation of greater weakness, therefore in greater need. ‘The poor’, in varied states of affliction, are the oppressed, those on the margin of society,

Fr. Antony Plackal
the elderly, the sick, the young, any and all who are considered and treated as ‘the least’” (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 82, 1st paragraph). In the vision of St. John Paul II, every Christian and every consecrated person is obliged to adopt this option for the poor in their lives. “The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. All of Christ’s disciples are therefore held to this option; but those who wish to follow the Lord more closely, imitating his attitudes, cannot but feel involved in a very special way” (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 82, 2nd paragraph). If so, a Vincentian, whose specific purpose and goal in life is the evangelization of the Poor, is all the more obliged to follow the way of preferential option for the poor.

St. John Paul II, the Pope, in his Post Synodal [Asian Synod] Apostolic Exhortation, has affirmed the need of preferential option for poor in evangelization. “In seeking to promote human dignity, the Church shows a preferential love of the poor and the voiceless, because the Lord has identified himself with them in a special way (cf. Mt. 25:40). This love excludes no one, but simply embodies a priority of service to which the whole Christian tradition bears witness. “This love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities. To ignore them would mean becoming like the ‘rich man’ who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate (cf. Lk. 16:19-31). This is especially so with regard to Asia, a continent of plentiful resources and great civilizations, but where some of the poorest nations on earth are to be found, and where more than half the population suffers deprivation, poverty and exploitation. The poor of Asia and of the world will always find their best reason for hope in the Gospel command

Vincentian Service to the Poor is a Work of Evangelization
to love one another as Christ has loved us (cf. Jn. 13:34); and the Church in Asia cannot but strive earnestly to fulfil that command towards the poor, in word and in deed. Solidarity with the poor becomes more credible if Christians themselves live simply, following the example of Jesus. Simplicity of life, deep faith and unfeigned love for all, especially the poor and the outcast, are luminous signs of the Gospel in action. The Synod Fathers called on Asian Catholics to adopt a lifestyle consonant with the teachings of the Gospel, so that they may better serve the Church’s mission and so that the Church herself may become a Church of the poor and for the poor” (*Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 34). We are Vincentians of the Asian country, India, where we have a great responsibility and challenge to be zealously engaged in evangelization with preferential option for the poor.

Pope Francis, our present Holy Father also, speaks even more emphatically of the preferential option for the poor. The famous picture that came out in Media of Pope Francis in loving embrace of a poor leper, reminding us of Mt. 8:3, “He stretched out his hand and touched him”, is more than enough to prove his preferential option for the poor. For Pope Francis evangelization Work is a work of joy, because it is open to all, especially the poor. “Our faith in Christ who became poor and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society’s most neglected members” (*Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 186). Holy Father insists that the first ones to be evangelized are the poor: “If the whole Church takes up this missionary impulse, she has to go forth to everyone without exception. But to whom should she go first? When we read the Gospel we find a clear indication: not so much our friends and wealthy neighbours, but above all the poor and the sick, those who are usually despised and overlooked, ‘those who

Fr. Antony Plackal
cannot repay you’ (Lk. 14:14). There can be no room for doubt or for explanations which weaken so clear a message. Today and always, the poor are the privileged recipients of the Gospel, and the fact that it is freely preached to them is a sign of the kingdom that Jesus came to establish. We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them” (Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium, n. 48). This is a clear teaching that advocates “preferential option for the poor” in evangelization. From the time he was elected Pope, through his many statements and actions, Pope Francis has proved himself to be a Pope for the poor. He has very clearly stated that he wants a Church which is poor and which stands for the poor.

These Holy Fathers have learned these principles from the Gospel of Jesus. The Gospel-command is to evangelize the whole world and all the peoples. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:19-20). In fulfilling this universal mission we have to follow the example of Jesus, who is the supreme Evangelizer. Specifically mentioning the term “poor”, in his mission statement or the programme of evangelization (Lk. 4:18-19), Jesus simply affirms that his first consideration or preference is the evangelization of the poor, without diminishing in any way the importance of his universal mission of evangelization of all. Special considerations and preferences according to occasions can be seen in the public ministry of Jesus. When he first sent his disciples to preach, they were instructed to go the Israelites and not to go to the Samaritans. “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the
Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:5-6). This is not in exclusion of the Samaritans or Gentiles, but at that time disciples had to give preference to the people of Israel. In the event of the request of the Canaanite woman to heal her daughter (Mt. 15:21-28), Jesus at first shows refusal, but does the favour in view of the great faith of the woman. Here also, Jesus speaks about the preference of the time. In the work of evangelization of the peoples, entrusted to the Church, preference is to be always shown to those who are really, materially and socially poor people.

This preference of the really, materially and socially poor people is very manifest in the evangelization work of Jesus. The Gospels reveal this truth so well that we can never ignore it. Matthew, the evangelist, has systematically arranged the Gospel contents in this manner. After the instructions for good living of the Kingdom of heaven in the Sermon on the Mount, he narrates the miracles of Jesus, which are directed mostly towards the well-being of many poor people: the leper (8:1-4), a centurion's servant (8:5-13), Peter's mother-in-law and many others who were sick (8:14-17), two demoniacs (8:28-34), a paralytic (9:2-8), two blind men (9:27-31) and a mute person (9:32-34), a man with a withered hand (12:9-14), many sick people in Gennesaret (14:34-36), two blind men (20:29-34). Almost all these miracles are recorded by other Synoptic Gospels. Matthew the evangelist records a unique revelation of the preferential option for the poor as part of the evangelization by Jesus. It is the description of the Last Judgment (Mt. 25:31-46). Here Jesus is raising his voice for the voiceless people who are really, materially and socially poor- the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, and those in prison. He not only speaks for them, but also identifies himself with those poor people: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of

Fr. Antony Plackal
the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40). All these prove that Jesus is an Evangelizer of the poor, meaning, he gave explicit preference to the materially and socially poor people in the work of evangelization.

The zeal and inspiration of St. Vincent de Paul in the work of evangelization of the poor is Jesus. This is evident from the MOTTO-WORD he chose for his life and for the Congregation of the Mission which he himself founded: “Evangelizare pauperibus misit me” – “He has sent me to preach Gospel to the poor” (Lk. 4:18). Jesus is the teacher of St. Vincent de Paul in the art of evangelization through Word and Example (cf. Common Rules, 1, 1).

We will reflect upon two important Gospel passages to understand clearly how the preferential option for the poor is realized in Jesus, the Evangelizer of the poor and also the Teacher of evangelization work. The first passage is Mt. 8:1-4, in which healing of a leper is described. A leper is a totally abandoned person in the society. People isolate him from main stream of life. Nobody wanted to look at or speak to a leper. But here in the Gospel incident, Jesus not only looked at and spoke to the leper, but also “stretched out his hand and touched him” (Mt. 8:3). The fact that Jesus touched the leper before healing him deserves special attention. Here Jesus accepts this poor leper as he is. This is a revolutionary action which was unheard of in history until then. The whole crowd of people was present at this occasion. “When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him” (Mt. 8:1-2). This action of Jesus, performed in the presence of great crowds of people, manifests the special consideration, a preferential option that Jesus gives to a poor leper. Through the words and deeds of healing the leper, Jesus is also teaching the great crowds the preferential consideration to be given to people who are

Vincentian Service to the Poor is a Work of Evangelization
abandoned in the society. Jesus then heals him bringing him to personal well being and takes time to instruct him to go to the priest which is indicative of Jesus’ intention to bring the poor person to his social well being also. Vincentian evangelization of the poor, in word and deed, must aim at the integral development of the poor, personal and social, spiritual and material.

The next passage I choose for reflection is Mark 10:46-52 (=Mt. 20:29-34 & Lk. 18:35-43), wherein the healing of the blind Bartimaeus is narrated. Here also “his disciples and a large crowd” (Mk. 10:46) were present. Jesus and all with him were moving forward from Jericho. Bartimaeus was a “blind beggar” who was “sitting by the roadside” (Mk. 10:46). This shows graphically the poor and abandoned condition of Bartimaeus. When Bartimaeus was crying for mercy from Jesus, the crowd of people did not show any consideration to him; but instead they “sternly ordered him to keep quiet” (Mk. 10:48). But then Jesus does the most revolutionary action: “Jesus stood still and said, ‘call him here’”(Mk. 10:49). Moving Jesus stands still and waits for this abandoned and unfortunate person. By asking the very same people, who were passing by without showing any consideration to Bartimaeus, to call him to come to Jesus, the Lord was teaching the lesson that everyone in the society has to show preferential consideration to such people and have to take care of their needs, with a preference of priority. The example of Jesus here was that he did not go forward until he took care of the needs of the poor, blind Bartimaeus who was a beggar by the roadside. Jesus healed and brought him to well being. A Vincentian is obliged by his vocation to follow this example of Jesus.

Based upon such words and deeds of Jesus, especially upon his words identifying himself with the poor – “you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40), St. Vincent de Paul called the poor our
masters. Two very important events in the life of St. Vincent de Paul centered on the poor transformed the vision of his life, which made him a Saint. One is the Folleville incident and the other is the Chattillon experience.

Folleville was an Estate-village that belonged to Madame de Gondi. Many poor people were working for their livelihood in this estate. St. Vincent de Paul was the spiritual director for the Gondi family. When Madame and family visited the estate St. Vincent also was with them. He learned of the spiritual and material needs of these people. Priests usually did not go to this village to take care of the pastoral needs of these people.

In 1617, while visiting the estates St. Vincent de Paul visited the estates with Gondi family, he visited an old sick man who was dying. St. Vincent persuaded him to make a general confession. The man did make a general confession. The sick man was grateful for the general confession, because he was relieved and consoled in soul and mind through that confession. The man told Madame Gondi that He would have been in hell if he had not made that general confession, as he was living a sacrilegious life until then. Madame Gondi told this incident to St. Vincent. He then organised a mission in Folleville on January 25, 1617, on the Feast Day of St. Paul’s Conversion, persuading the people to make general confession. The people did so. This very successful Mission-Sermon at Folleville made Madame de Gondi to think with concern about the country people. She persistently persuaded St. Vincent to establish a community of missionaries to proclaim the Good News to the many country people in all her estates.

The intention of Madame de Gondi, the grand sponsor of the Congregation, was that the missionaries must preach to the poor common people: “A sum of 45,000 livres was provided for the work of missions to be directed to “poor common people” and which would take place “on their own (Gondi) es-
tates and in other places” (Coste CM, “Saint Vincent de Paul – Correspondence, Documents, Conferences”, Vol 13a, pp 213-217). Village people at those times were people abandoned by others. “If Madame de Gondi showed a preference for country districts, it was because she considered village people to be “as it were abandoned.” (Coste, “The Life and Works of St Vincent de Paul”, p148). The Folleville experience and the persistent persuasion of Madame de Gondi made so great an impression in the mind of S. Vincent de Paul that he wanted to be always among the poor country people. Vincent said: “I can no longer remain silent, rather I feel compelled to tell you of my sincere desire even in the midst of my little infirmities to be able to end my days under an old tree, working in some village. Indeed, I would be most happy if it would please God to grant me this grace” (Flores & Orcajo, The Way of St. Vincent is our Way, p.119). Such a powerful experience caused a conversion of mind in St. Vincent de Paul. He was converted in soul to turn towards the poor with a preferential option. This is the background in which St. Vincent de Paul established the Congregation of the Mission. This is why the preferential option for the poor is the aim of the Congregation of the Mission. So formulating the specific aim of the Congregation, St. Vincent de Paul wrote in the Constitution that it is “to preach the Gospel to the poor, especially the country people” (Common Rules, 1, 2). This aim is reconfirmed for the Vincentian Congregation (Statutes, 1, b). So, every Vincentian is obliged to show this preferential option to the poor common people in the doing his work of evangelization.

In the same year, 1617, in the month of August, St. Vincent de Paul had another experience in the parish of Chatillon. St. Vincent himself spoke about this experience 28 years later, in 1645, in a Conference to his Daughters of Charity: “When I was living near Lyons, in a small town to which Prov-
idence had called me to act as parish priest,” he said to the Daughters of Charity one day, “on a certain Sunday just as I was vesting to say Mass, a person came to tell me that, in an isolated house a quarter of a league away, the whole family lay ill, so that not a single one of them could come to the assistance of the others, and they were in such dire straits as cannot be expressed. It moved me to the depths of my heart. I did not fail to speak feelingly about them during the sermon, and God, touching the hearts of those who were listening, caused them all to be moved to compassion for the poor afflicted people” (Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents, Vol. IX, p 165). This experience in Chatillon moved the creativity in St. Vincent de Paul to organize Charitable Activities in a systematic way through willing good people. That is the beginning of the confraternity of charity, which movement grew into the establishment of the Daughters of Charity. Here also, it is his spirit of love for the poor which prompted corresponding actions. People with a preferential option for the poor will see the urgency and need to organize such activities.

In the teaching and example of Jesus, preferential option for the poor is exercised through mercy. The lesson on mercy is taught through the Parable of Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). According to the teaching of this parable, there are four important elements for a merciful act. “But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them” (Lk. 10:33-34). The above quoted Gospel verse shows that the four elements of mercy are, a) seeing, b) feeling pity, c) coming near and d) ministering. People who are not merciful will see the poor person, but will pass by on the other side as did the priest and Levite of the Parable (cf. Lk. 10:31-32). A personal decision and determination with a willful choice in mind and heart is very important factor in
this work. Jesus answers the praying leper that he chooses to help him. “And there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord if you choose, you can make me clean. He stretched out his hand and touched him saying, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’” (Mt. 4:2-3). There are many poor people with and around us, about thirty millions, in India only. They are on their knees asking for our willingness and choice to help them. Where there is a will, there is a way. Resources as well as economic and social requirements are available when we seek them with willful choice and determination. God has graced us to be in various parts of India and elsewhere to be evangelizers. God has also provided us with the power of many members and opportunities and Vincentian training to help these poor people. We together can create huge waves of change and transformation in the field of evangelization of the poor, in accordance with the example of St. Vincent de Paul, who imitated Jesus Christ in this way of evangelization. We shall not count profit and loss; but instead we shall endure loss and sufferings to serve Jesus Himself, through His own brothers and sisters, the least, the lost and the last of the society. Our reflections and discussions in General and Provincial Synaxes as well as in Domestic meetings shall be centered on this topic in order to make every member of the Vincentian Congregation aware and active in this most important mission of ours, entrusted to us by the Lord Himself. As we see these poor people we shall not pass by like the priest and the Levite; but shall have pity on them, go near to them and minister to them, like the Good Samaritan, using all our talents and resources to the best of our abilities and possibilities.
കൊവയ്ക്കുന്ന ഉദ്ദേശവും പ്രാജനമായതിന് പ്രാണം
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പിടുന്നതാണ്‌. പ്രായമൊന്നിന് പിടിപ്പിച്ചുകാണിച്ചിരിക്കുന്ന
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