



St Vincent de Paul Society

CANBERRA/GOULBURN

good works

MODULE

6



Our Vincentian Heritage

Called to Love and Serve

A Formation Programme for Vincentians

A FORMATION PROGRAMME FOR VINCENTIANS

BACKGROUND and INSTRUCTIONS for *Called to Love and Serve*

The Modules in *Called to Love and Serve* have been developed from “Serving in Hope” the spiritual formation programme developed by Sr Keiran Kneaves and the St Vincent de Paul Society in the USA. The *Called to Love and Serve* programme is being developed so as to fit our Australian culture and experiences. It is designed for use by conference members, staff and volunteers to deepen our experience and understanding of our Vincentian heritage. The programme consists of six modules:

Module 1: Our Vincentian Call

Module 2: Our Vincentian Spirituality

Module 3: Our Vincentian Heritage

Module 4: Our Vincentian Mission

Module 5: Our Vincentian Rule

Module 6: Our Vincentian Conference

When we are reading the writings of St Vincent, Blessed Frederic and other Vincentians we need to remember that they were people of their time. As we read their writings we need to make a “horizon shift” which enables us to translate what we read into our times and to let go of the things which are time bound. This is a similar process to that used when we read scripture.

The programme has readings to share at meetings and questions for reflection. It would be good to set up a prayerful environment, perhaps with a candle, in order to facilitate reflection. You may also like to start each session with the song *Will You Come and Follow Me*, which is provided. The readings are meant to be shared reflectively and it could be helpful to share the reading among the Conference members a paragraph at a time. A good process to use in meetings is to listen to the reading and then share a word or phrase which struck you. After each person has shared then discuss the questions. Conference members may also find it helpful to reflect on the session before the meeting so that they are more ready to contribute in the meeting.

The further reading is there for your personal reflection and provides an opportunity to explore the topics more deeply.

We hope you find this programme both informative and enjoyable.

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WILL YOU COME AND FOLLOW ME – The Summons

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known?
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoner free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean and do such as this unseen
And admit to what I mean in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name?
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show
Thus I'll live and move and grow in you and you in me.



John L Bell and Graham Maule God Never Sleeps CD
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OUR VINCENTIAN CONFERENCE

SESSION 1: OUR SPIRITUALITY



Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

Lk 10:25-28

The Rule states:

Vincentians are called to journey together towards holiness, because true holiness is perfect union with Christ and the perfection of love, which is central to their vocation and the source of its fruitfulness. They aspire to burn with the love of God as revealed by Christ and to deepen their own faith and fidelity.

...They draw nearer to Christ, serving Him in the poor and one another. They grow more perfect in love by expressing compassionate and tender love to the poor and one another.¹

The St Vincent de Paul Society is an international organisation of Catholic lay people whose vocation is 'to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love.'²

It is in Conferences that Vincentians live out their vocation of service to people in need. The Conference has the essential elements of Spirituality, friendship and service. Spirituality is therefore a vital part of the life of Vincentians. It is the first purpose of the Society. The goal of the Society is to **take the love and peace of Christ to those who are suffering.**

Spirituality serves as the life of a Conference, its vitality. Margaret Silf³ uses the metaphor of boats on the sea for the spiritual journey. Each person has a particular boat which has been shaped by their family background and their experience of their faith tradition. For members of the Society our membership of a Conference shapes us and influences the type of boat we travel in. The interaction with the other members of the Conference helps to form us into the person we become.

Without spirituality, our Conference becomes just another welfare agency dispensing food, clothing and money. By bringing God into this picture, the dispensing turns into loving help and concern for the individual we are trying to assist.

¹ The Rule, 18

² The Rule, 15-16

³ Margaret Silf, *At Sea with God*, 9-11

The Rule continues:

Therefore, their journey together towards holiness is primarily made through:

- Visiting and dedicating themselves to the poor, whose faith and courage often teach Vincentians how to live. Vincentians assume the needs of the poor as their own.
- Attending the meeting of the Conference or Council, where shared fraternal spirituality is a source of inspiration.
- Promoting a life of prayer and reflection, both at the individual and community level, and sharing with their fellow members. Meditating on their Vincentian experiences offers them internal spiritual knowledge of themselves, others and the goodness of God.
- Transforming their concern into action and their compassion into practical and effective love.

Their journey together towards holiness will be all the more fruitful if the members' personal lives are characterised by prayer, meditation on the Holy Scriptures and other inspirational texts, devotion to the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary, whose protection we have always sought, and to the teachings of the Church.⁴

Jane Knuth⁵ has written a wonderful book about her experiences volunteering with the St Vincent de Paul Society in Michigan. She describes an encounter at the beginning of her volunteering with the Society. Jane arrives at the St Vincent de Paul centre and there are people waiting outside for assistance.

The youngest man cups his hands around his eyes and peers through the plate glass window at the racks of clothing, mismatched dishes, and blankets, and asks me "is this a church? My worker at the Department of Human Services gave me the address. They told me St Vincent de Paul, but this looks like some kind of store. Am I in the right place?" 'No, it's not a church, and yes you're in the right place. Do you need help with something?'

...Before I unlock the door, we pause and clasp our hands together for a prayer to start the day. We're not very pious at the St Vincent de Paul Society. Usually our prayers are seat-of-the-pants petitions, no preambles, and no qualifiers; people are waiting in the rain after all. 'Lord, we need money.' 'God, give me patience.' 'Help us to listen better.' 'Don't let the roof leak again.'

The work of the St Vincent de Paul Society lies smack in the middle of this drizzly, impious world. We are out

⁴ The Rule, 18

⁵ Jane Knuth, Thrift Store Saints Meeting Jesus 25 Cents at a Time, 1-3

FURTHER READING

EXPERIENCING GOD IN THE POOR⁶

As followers of St Vincent we are called to be contemplatives in the midst of an active life of service.

Many people today find themselves striving to live a spiritual life that 'sees in the poor and abandoned the suffering members of Christ,' that seeks peace and justice, which tries to live in solidarity with the poor.

Wiesner describes three steps in the process in which we become more open to experiencing God in the poor.⁷

Way of Appreciation

This step involves our first contact with the poor and the way that this can be an experience that opens our eyes to their suffering and need. With this experience we begin to develop compassion and the call to acts of mercy. It may also lead us to simplify our lifestyle in order to have more to share with people in need. While these are good things, they are focused more on us than on the poor people.

Way of Dialogue

In the second stage of encounter with the poor we begin to move into relationship with people who are poor. "We see the poor 'at home,' get a sense of the rhythm of their lives, an experiential understanding of the roots of their poverty. We begin to feel yoked with them and pulling as one in the same direction."⁸ In this stage we focus more on the people living in poverty and begin to be more focused on justice.

We may cooperate with the poor, or teach them to help themselves, or empower them, but fundamentally we have treated them as the needy. Now we discover that the poor are perfectly capable of solving their own problems, know what to do and how to do it, and in fact are in a better position to effect structural change than we are. We learn that these needed changes in systems and institutions will come only from the poor themselves, from the oppressed, from the Third World itself.⁹

In our encounter with people living in poverty we discover that we have much to learn from them about what their experiences are and what they really need. The poor often know what would actually help them.



⁶ These notes are adapted from Theodore Wiesner's article of the same name.
⁷ Theodore Wiesner, *Experiencing God in the Poor*, *Vincentiana* 32:3 (1988)328.
⁸ Wiesner, *Experiencing* 328.
⁹ Wiesner, *Experiencing*, 328.

Way of Solidarity

We enter into solidarity with the poor when we realise that there is no longer any distinction between ourselves and them.

We have, it is true, differing talents, life experiences, but the fundamental point is that we stand together as one, of one mind and heart in the midst of the political, economic, and social structures that oppress. We approach the world with the same outlook. We approach it aware of our different backgrounds and roles, aware of our sinfulness, limitations and weakness, but with mutual love and a common cause.

The experience of God in this Way of Solidarity is the experience of the justice of God. We are in solidarity with the God of the poor in Christ Jesus. We have freed ourselves from our superiority, our illusions, our discouragement and disillusionment, our guilt, and our romantic notions of the poor. In addition, we have freed ourselves for, opened ourselves to, Christ in the person of the poor. It is truly the gift of God, much as contemplation is the gift of God. It does not mean, as contemplation does not mean, that we pass beyond our struggles, sufferings, or are protected from misunderstanding and even persecution. But it does mean that we experience God saying to us: Blessed are You poor... for you shall see God.¹⁰

When we move into this way of solidarity we may be doing the same good works for people living in poverty but our attitude has changed. This is the attitude of the Vincentian who experiences God in the poor person and recognises that they have much to learn from them.

What resonates with you in this article? Which 'way' is operative in your life? Do you move into the way of solidarity with the people you serve?

MY REFLECTIONS

¹⁰ Wiesner, *Experiencing*, 333.

OUR SPIRITUALITY CONTINUED

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Jn 15:4-8



The Spiritual Adviser

The Rule says:

3.13 The spirit of poverty and encouragement

Members of the Society are united in the same spirit of poverty and of sharing. They encourage one another to live a profound spiritual life and to share in the spirit of prayer. For this purpose, the role of a Spiritual Adviser is very important.¹¹

A Spiritual Adviser is not solely responsible for the spirituality of the Conference, as this is the responsibility of all members. The Spiritual Adviser is the person who ensures that spiritual reflections are part of each meeting and animates the spiritual life of the Conference. The Spiritual Adviser takes an active part in the whole life of the Conference.

Vincentian spirituality is grounded in experience with people living in poverty. Vincentians find God incarnated in the people that they serve. This means that an important part of the spirituality of the Conference is reflecting on the ministry of the Conference, on the encounters that Conference members have with the people they serve. The process of Apostolic reflection involves recounting an experience of service, reflecting on the story, recalling any wisdom from scripture or our Vincentian tradition that comes to mind and then deciding if there is anything that we may need to do as a result of our reflections. The Spiritual Adviser would lead this process for the Conference and encourage Conference members to continually reflect on their service and on how God is being revealed to them.

¹¹ The Rule, 22

FURTHER READING

Spiritual Leadership

St Vincent encouraged his Vincentian priests in the spiritual life with these words 'The interior life is essential; it has to be our aim; if we lack that, we lack everything.'¹² This sentiment applies equally well to members of the Society. If we are to be true Vincentians then our service must be nourished by our spiritual life. St Louise was a skilled spiritual guide for her sisters and helped them to keep going even when things were challenging. She gave advice to one of her sisters who was struggling:

I am certain that his grace is sustaining you very powerfully during this period when you feel abandoned and lacking in sensibility toward God.... If we are assailed by temptations and trials, we become completely dejected, imagining ourselves to be in a deplorable state. And truly, this would be our condition if we did not cling to God by the tip of our souls, saying to Him, from the depths of our hearts, 'My God, do whatever you will; I belong entirely to you!'¹³

Frederic Ozanam was someone who sought out spiritual guidance from others when he needed it and also provided guidance to his companions in the Society. He said:

The greatest men are those who have never made beforehand the plan of their destiny, but who have let themselves be led by the hand.¹⁴

This guidance is most often provided to us via other people.

The spiritual life of the Conference is the responsibility of all the members; however, the Spiritual Adviser has a role of leadership in this area. Spiritual leadership involves two dimensions: the meaning-making dimension and the relational dimension.¹⁵

The Meaning-making Dimension

Effective spiritual leaders know the importance of the search for meaning. They have a deep inner life themselves and are able to draw on this to help them understand the spiritual journey of others. They are sensitive to the challenges of the spiritual life in today's world. They can:

- Articulate their spiritual experience
- Find God in the events of their life daily and ministry
- Facilitate others in the reflection process



¹² CCD Vol 12, 111.

¹³ Spiritual Writings, 575.

¹⁴ Ainslie Coates, Letters of Frederic Ozanam, 95.

¹⁵ These dimensions are taken from Spiritual Values for Leaders in our Vincentian Family, by Robert Maloney CM

OUR FRIENDSHIP

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Jn 15:9-17



The Rule tells us:

3.3 Meetings of Vincentian Members

The members meet as brothers and sisters with Christ in the midst of them, in Conferences that are genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action. Spiritual bonds and friendship between members are essential, as is the common mission to help the poor and marginalized. The entire Society is a true and unique worldwide community of Vincentian friends.¹⁶

This tells us something of the essence of our Conferences, they are built on relationships. Good friendships reveal something of us to ourselves and each other. We grow in self-knowledge through our relationships in our Conference.

St Vincent wrote to the Congregation of the Mission:

God has looked on us with the eyes of His mercy; He has taken pity on us by removing from the Company a few troublesome men who were the cause of this lessening of love, with the result that someone said to me recently, 'You know, Monsieur, I think we're living in this house like children, in the freedom of innocence and the mutual practice of sincere friendship; we don't hear any boasting or taunting; we respect one another; no one opposes the others.'¹⁷

¹⁶ The Rule, 20.

¹⁷ CCD, Vol 12, 217.

FURTHER READING

St Vincent and Louise as Model of Friendship

St Vincent and St Louise met in about 1625. They were not initially drawn to each other. Louise had been very attached to her previous spiritual director Bishop Camus and we have her account of her reluctance to begin spiritual direction with St Vincent de Paul. Vincent himself was busy starting the Congregation of the Mission and was a little reluctant to take on a woman who he thought may be needy and demanding. One of the early letters of Louise to Vincent indicates that there was some foundation for this anxiety.

I hope you will forgive the liberty I am taking of expressing to you my spirit's impatience, as much with regard to the long time you have been away in the past as concerning my apprehension about the future, and about not knowing the place to which you are going after the one where you are now.¹⁸

Over the next few years as they got to know each other better. Vincent encouraged Louise and guided her gently. Vincent spoke to Louise gently and reminded her of the love of God:

Be then his dear daughter – quite humble, submissive and full of confidence – and always wait patiently for the manifestation of His holy and adorable Will.¹⁹

Kindly assure your own heart that, provided it honors the holy tranquillity of that of Our Lord in His love, it will be pleasing to him.²⁰

We have few letters of Louise from this period but those that we do have indicate how much Louise relied on Vincent for support and encouragement.

On the 6th of May 1629 Vincent sent Louise on mission. He sent her to visit the Confraternities of Charity that he had set up on the de Gondi lands. He sent her to Montmirail with these words:

Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord, I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works.²¹

This mission was the beginning of their true collaboration. Louise visited the Confraternities and investigated the way that things were being done. She was at ease talking to the Ladies and her gifts of organisation began to be seen. Vincent recognised her strengths and their relationship shifted to being one of equals. He addressed her as Mademoiselle rather than 'dear



¹⁸ CCD Vol 1, 26

¹⁹ CCD Vol 1, 24

²⁰ CCD Vol 1, 29

²¹ CCD, Vol 1, 64-65.

OUR COMMUNITY



If a Conference is going to truly be a reflection of the 'fraternal life' that The Rule calls for it needs to be a community. This community life is something that the members create together. It is built on a shared vision and shared experience.

Melannie Svoboda describes three ways that we can build community.²³

- Firstly, she describes assuming the good will of one another. This is the attitude of assuming that all of our Conference members are doing their best and have the right intentions in what they do.
- The second way that we can build community is to be patient with one another. This really involves allowing others to be different and accepting that they will do things differently from the way that you might do them.
- The third way to build community is to seek the truth together. This is about us being on the journey together and being open to discovering new things from each other.

Louise Sullivan describes three models of community which St Louise used to guide her and the first Daughters of Charity.²⁴ The first was the triangle which is based on the Trinity. This model recognises the individuality of each person but also the communion that is created when the individuals come together and share what they have in common. Louise often spoke about the sisters having cordial respect for each other.

The second model is the circle. This model is the opposite of a hierarchical model. All members of the Conference are equal and everyone is on the same level regardless of their role.

The third model is that of an arch. In a stone arch all the stones are essential; if one was removed then the arch would fall down. The community of a Conference is made up by all the members and each one is important. The stones that make up an arch are held together by mortar, in a community, the members are held together by trust, respect and confidentiality. If these elements are not present then the Conference suffers.

How are these aspects of community reflected in your Conference? What do you think would help build community in your Conference?

²³ Melannie Svoboda, In *Steadfast Love*, (Twenty Third Publications: New London, 2007)4-5.

²⁴ Louise Sullivan, *A New Community Takes Form: Louise's Vision of Community*, in *Of Roots and Wings*, Julma Neo (ed) (ODD Prints: Quezon City, 2003) 176-184.

FURTHER READING



5. The first communities according to Acts²⁵

The book of Acts recounts the history of the expansion of the Word of God and the creation of new communities following the death and resurrection of the Lord. It was the followers of Jesus, changed by their Paschal experience, who formed these first communities. The spirit of the Risen Lord and the conviction that he lived and was the Messiah, brought them to a new type of life. These first communities welcomed the Twelve, some relatives of Jesus, an undetermined group of former followers of Jesus, and some others who felt attracted by the example of the common life of the Christians. The first communities were open, little by little more complex, and in a constant process of differentiation from official Judaism.

In the Acts of the Apostles we find many examples of model Christian communities, fruit in good measure of historical recollection, and also partly from the tendency towards idealization. We refer to Acts 2:42-47: 4:32-35; and 5:12-16. St Luke states that those who were baptized: 'devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need... praising God and enjoying favour with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2:42-47).

In these verses St Luke summarily describes the Life of the first Christian communities of Jerusalem and its surroundings, while at the same time he presents a valid model of the common life for the Church, and of course for the Vincentian community. The characteristic qualities of the first Christian communities are clearly shown in the quoted text:

- The members of the communities were moved to meet because of strong experiences of faith.
- The proclamation of the gospel by the Apostles was listened to with attention by both the baptized and the catechumens.
- Fraternal unity was manifested by the sharing of goods with the needy.
- Frequent shared prayer was part of their common life.
- The community met to celebrate the breaking of bread.
- The community was not elitist, opening its door to all without distinction.

Twenty centuries have passed since St Luke penned the passage on which we have commented. Vincentians, beginning with St Vincent, have always seen in these pages of Acts a model of community life. The Vincentian

25 Louise Sullivan, *A New Community Takes Form: Louise's Vision of Community*, in *Of Roots and Wings*, Julma Neo (ed) (ODD Prints: Quezon City, 2003) 176-184.

OUR VISITATION



He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.'

Lk 19:2-5

The Rule tells us that:

Members show their commitment through person to person contact.²⁶ and also that:

Vincentians endeavour to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the same heartbeat of the poor. They do not judge those they serve, rather they seek to understand them as they would a brother or sister.²⁷

The first activity of the Society was to visit people in need in their homes. 'The visiting of the poor in their dismal homes is the distinctive character of the Conferences of St Vincent de Paul.'²⁸ Visitation is still the central activity of the Society whether we do it in people's homes or in a Care and Support Centre.

So, from the beginning of the Society, the central and most fundamental activity has been visiting people. This idea of visiting is based on the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. It is an encounter of mutual respect in which we aim to build a relationship with the person we encounter in order to find the best way to help them. While we have resources to assist people we should be careful not to go into the encounter from a position of power.

Frederic Ozanam told us:

The knowledge of social well-being and reform is to be learnt, not from books, nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man's garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind. When the conditions of the poor have been examined, in school, at work, in hospital, in the city, in the country, everywhere God has placed them, it is then and then only, that we know the elements of the formidable problem, that we begin to grasp it and may hope to solve it.²⁹

²⁶ The Rule, 16.

²⁷ The Rule, 16-17.

²⁸ Emmanuel Bailly 1841.

²⁹ Ozanam in his Correspondence, p279

Some principles which should inform our visits are:

- Our mission statement reminds us that we are called to 'live the gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love'.
- Listening is our most important skill, we must listen to the person in need in order to be able to understand what they really need which may sometimes be different to their presenting request.
- We must go into a visit with an open mind ready to hear what the person is saying to us and without pre-judgement.
- Vincentians show those who are in need that God cares about them, and give them some hope.

David Ranson in his book *The Hospitality of Ministry* reminds us that the Trinity is a community and that we are called to enter into this community. Our experience of this community calls us to become

Deeply sensitive to where and how the pain of exclusion might be being experienced in the world. Consequently, our understanding of God as communion means that we must work to redress the experience of exclusion. In our ministry hell is transformed into heaven, for hell is isolation in its extreme, heaven is communion in its fullness.³⁰

This sums up what we are called to when we visit people in need. We need to take with us the love of God and to help the people that we visit to know that they are not forgotten, that God loves them. Pope Benedict in his letter *Porta Fidei* reminds us that

Through faith, we can recognize the face of the risen Lord in those who ask for our love. 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40). These words are a warning that must not be forgotten and a perennial invitation to return the love by which he takes care of us. It is faith that enables us to recognize Christ and it is his love that impels us to assist him whenever he becomes our neighbour along the journey of life. Supported by faith, let us look with hope at our commitment in the world, as we await 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet 3:13; cf. Rev 21:1).³¹

Reflect on the quality of your visitation. How are you showing the love of God to the people you visit?

³⁰ David Ranson, *The Hospitality of Ministry*, (St Paul's Publications: Sydney, 2012) 21.

³¹ *Porta Fidei*, no.14.

FURTHER READING



WILLING TO BE DISTURBED³²

The gentleman is blue collar, anxious, obviously unused to asking for help. He questions me quietly so that no one else in the store will overhear.

‘Do you give clothes to people who need them? It’s not for me, it’s for my cousin.’

‘Your cousin will have to come down and ask for himself,’ I tell him.

‘He works five in the morning until seven. He just got the job and can’t miss, but he only has one pair of pants.’

I must look a little sceptical at this claim.

He hesitates but then explains. ‘He just got out of prison. It was his second time.’ A shrug, ‘Anyway I told his parole officer that he could live with me until he got on his feet. He’s family; if I don’t give him a chance, who will? They taught him to hang drywall in there. This is the first decent job that he’s ever had, but he doesn’t get paid until next Friday. I gave him some of my pants but he’s six foot three and skinny as a rail. No way he can fit in my stuff. You know anything about drywall? The dust? His pants stand up by themselves when he takes them off. There’s no time to wash and dry them.’

On the clothes racks we find sweatpants, shirts, socks, and a winter coat. As I bag the clothes, he asks, ‘Can I rake your leaves? I’d like to do something to help you folks out. I’ll make sure my cousin comes in to thank you, when he gets a day off, but let me do something today.’

I tell him that it isn’t necessary, but he asks again, and then another time after I hand him the bag. I refuse again just as my co-worker Jim walks by us.

Jim, overhearing the offer, is more perceptive than I. ‘I’ll get you a rake,’ he tells him. ‘Thanks very much it would be a great help.’

The man rakes every leaf into a tidy pile. When he comes back inside, he is no longer anxious or uneasy. He shakes our hands, gathers up his small bag of clothing and walks out.

The man raking the leaves at the St Vinnie’s thrift shop is confirmation of a niggling suspicion I have about the place. Gradually, over the first few months that I work there, it starts to become uneasily clear to me that we are not trying to change the world. We aren’t trying to change poor people either.

The only thing it seems we are trying to change is ourselves.

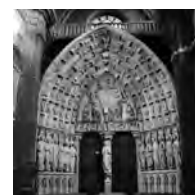
Does this remind you of any encounters you have had with people in need? Has anyone you have been serving asked to give back? How did you handle this? How would you handle this?

³² An extract from Jane Knuth, *Thrift Store Saints*, (Loyola Press: Chicago, 2010) 52-53.

OUR CHURCH

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Jn 14:12-14



The Rule tells us that we need to have a close relationship with the Church's hierarchy.

Faithful to the clear intentions of Blessed Frederic Ozanam and his companions, the Society has a close relationship with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Respect of the members for the hierarchy of the Catholic Church provides the foundation for harmonious reciprocal co-operation.³³

This means that we need to be respectful of the Church hierarchy and not do anything that is against the Church's teaching or that would reflect badly on the Church. Even though the Society is an independent organisation, our Conferences operate in Parishes. We need to be good parish members and to maintain good relationships with the parish. Councils also need to have good relationships with the Church Hierarchy in their areas.

Remember that many of the people that you visit do not have any contact with the Church. For these people you represent the Church and therefore all that you do will reflect on the Church.

Rule, Part 1 6.3 states:

Conferences and Councils should establish a dialogue with their counterparts in other Christian Churches or ecclesial communities and other faiths, with regard to cooperation in charitable work, wherever this is appropriate.³⁴

This reminds us that we should work closely with others who are doing the same work as us in order to provide the best outcome for people in need.

How is the relationship between your Conference and the Parish? What responsibility does being seen as a representative of the Church place on you?

³³ The Rule, 24.

³⁴ The Rule, 25.

FURTHER READING



Vincentian Spirituality for the Laity

Every person is called to find their path to God, as St Augustine said “You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” There are many different ways to God, people can be priests or religious, but for the vast majority of Christians the way is to be a lay person. The Code of Canon Law states:

Since lay people, like all Christ’s faithful, are deputed to the apostolate by baptism and confirmation, they are bound by the general obligation and they have the right, whether as individuals or in associations, to strive so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all people throughout the world. This obligation is all the more insistent in circumstances in which only through them are people able to hear the Gospel and to know Christ. They have also, according to the condition of each, the special obligation to permeate and perfect the temporal order of things with the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, particularly in conducting secular business and exercising secular functions, they are to give witness to Christ (Canon #225).

This spiritual path that is the domain of the laity is lived within the world, in the family, social relationships, work, politics and leisure. It is in that sense secular.

The vocation of the laity comes from baptism. This idea is expressed in the Code of Canon Law: flowing from their rebirth in Christ, there is a genuine equality of dignity and action among all of Christ’s faithful. Because of this equality they all contribute, each according to his or her own condition and office, to the building up of the Body of Christ (Canon #208).

Frederic Ozanam in founding the Society said that “we want this Association to be wholly lay while at the same time wholly Catholic.”

The spirituality of the Society is also essentially Vincentian and this of course necessarily involves ministry to the poor. The best thing that people who are called to follow Vincent can do is form themselves as Christians, which includes an ongoing knowledge of the true spirit of Christ as well as the practice of an authentic Christian life. They are also called to know the poor well in order to serve them in the best way possible. As Blessed Frederic says:

Only when we have studied the poor in their homes, in the hospital, in their workshop, in the fields, only then,



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