



Society of St. Vincent de Paul: Finding Christ in the poor

By Mary C. Uhler

An icon depicts St. Vincent de Paul giving a piece of bread to a barefoot beggar. When we look closely at the beggar, we find that he is Christ.

Those who continue the work of St. Vincent de Paul today often find Christ in the poor. They follow Vincent's example, "In serving the poor, you serve Christ."

But members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul often find that serving the poor is not easy, noted Sr. Kieran Kneaves, national director of education and spiritual formation for the society. She was one of the speakers at the North Central regional meeting of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVDP) held June 20-22 at the Bishop O'Connor Catholic Pastoral Center in Madison.

Serving poor not easy

"Serving the poor is not easy or exciting," said Kneaves, who works in the SVDP national office in St. Louis, Mo. "It's often overwhelming. At times the poor can be very demanding. You can feel anger or frustration rising in you."

But, St. Vincent de Paul says "to look deeper and see Jesus the Lord broken, hurt, and standing before us. We see the Lord and so our hearts are moved beyond pity and anger to compassion. So we go to the poor with kindness and respect."

Kneaves gave a presentation on "Spirituality of Finding Christ in the Poor." She emphasized that Vincentians must serve the poor with gentleness. "They look on you as people sent by God," she reminded them. "You represent the goodness of God to the poor. It's amazing! The poor transform us into Jesus."

Finding Jesus in poor

She listed five ways that Vincentians find Jesus in the poor:

• **Compassion.**

Loving and serving the poor is found in mutual giving and receiving. "Our pain, fear, hopes, and joys are shared," said Kneaves. "The poor often give us more than we give them."

She encouraged Vincentians to ask if they allow the ones they serve to respond to them. "Or do we close the door to service by the poor to us? Sometimes we keep the poor from loving us, keep them at a distance."

Blessed Frederic Ozanam, founded the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris, France, in 1833 when he was 20 years old. Kneaves said Frederic believed that with compassion, helping the poor becomes honorable because it becomes mutual. "The hand that you clasp clasps you in return," she quoted him as saying.

• **Humility.**

Kneaves noted that St. Vincent de Paul himself had some deformities and considered himself "the poorest person he met." The more "we're aware of our own pain, the more we go to the poor with humility," she said. "We need to look first to the Lord, knowing the Lord will empower us."

She said Vincentians may have the tendency to want to solve all the problems of the poor. "But we don't need to solve everything, but to console, love, and forgive."

• **Simplicity.**

Kneaves said "simplicity is Vincent's gospel." Simplicity "keeps our lives centered on God," she added. She observed that the poor often need just a simple smile, a handshake, or to be called by their name.

• **Charity.**

The poor are often marginalized and invisible. "We bring love and charity," said Kneaves. "Often we may fail; the results aren't measurable. But we must keep trying. We know we have to trust in God's providence."

• **Prayer.**

"In prayer we will find God loves us," said Kneaves. "That's why Vincentians must pray. Do we find time to pray, or are we so busy we don't find time to know God loves us and others love us, too? Do we stand alone or do we stand with others?"

That is the gift of SVDP conferences – gathering of members. "We pray, share, and walk out together to help the poor," she said.