

“THE POOR HAVE MUCH TO TEACH YOU. YOU HAVE MUCH TO LEARN FROM THEM.”

• ST VINCENT DE PAUL 1581-1660

LEARNING FROM THE LIFE OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL

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Brief reading from the Gospel of Matthew

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you cared for me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did it for me.’



Here is a vexing question

WHAT IS VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY?

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND WHEN WE HEAR THE TERM VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY?

We may understand it as “serving those who are disadvantaged and marginalised”, or “serving Christ in the poor”, or “advocating for a just and compassionate society”.

Maybe we can understand this lay catholic spirituality in terms of our Vinnies logo, of being practical and grassroots, needing to be engaging and relational but always in a response of love.





In February 1834 the fledgling Society proposed that St Vincent de Paul, a well-known French saint, be the Society's spiritual patron. Frederic became passionate about fidelity to Vincent. He insisted that he always remain "a model one must strive to imitate, ...a heart in which one's own heart is enkindled", because by "appropriating the thoughts and virtues of the saint", the Society could "escape from the personal imperfections of its members, making itself useful in the Church and give reason for its existence". For Frederic, the Society's spirituality and charism is personified in the faith, words and actions of this saint of the disadvantaged and marginalised.



Perhaps the first thing we can learn from Vincent is that God can transform us through our difficulties. St Vincent de Paul was a someone who underwent a great transformation in their life. Originally entering the priesthood to satisfy a desire to be amongst the elite class, St Vincent de Paul sought to live a very comfortable life. However, as often happens, it took a difficult experience to touch his heart and transform him. From the trauma of his being captured by Turkish pirates and living as a slave, and celebrating the sacrament with the servants of the Gondi family, St Vincent de Paul developed a passionate zeal for those in poverty, which led him to inspire others through his witness to humble service of those marginalized in the Society. So, in the same way, if we remain open to the transforming love of God in our lives, our seemingly painful life experiences can become opportunities for growth.



We can also learn much about credibility from the life of St Vincent de Paul. He was a person of integrity, who not only just spoke many words, but lived them. He frequently encouraged others to serve with empathy and compassion, and he witnessed to this with his own life. Conscious that 'it is not enough to give soup and bread', Vincent urged all those who were serious about their faith to serve the poor with patience and gentleness.



Finally, St Vincent de Paul was a person of humility. He knew that he did not have all the answers, and he was willing to listen deeply to the genuine needs of those he served. Just as he invited his followers to learn from the poor, we too are encouraged by his example to not think we have all the solutions to “fix” the problems of others. Instead, we are invited to build relationship with the marginalised, to give the gift of our presence in many different ways to those in need. To devote ourselves to meaningful advocacy on behalf of others especially those who are voiceless. The encounter with the poor wasn’t just a part of the life of St Vincent de Paul, the poor became his life. And the witness of his life of serving the poor became an attractive force impacting on all those around him.

As we celebrate this Feast of St Vincent de Paul...

may we pause, for the grace to be more like him in the way we serve, grounded in humility.

may we pause, for an unconditional love that reaches out to the disadvantaged and marginalised, without judgment

may we pause, that we live as genuine, authentic and courageous people of caritas (love).

may we be inspired by the life, action and words of St Vincent de Paul, our spiritual patron on the journey.

