

Expanding the Circle of Solidarity

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Dennis Holtschneider CM (used with permission)

Good morning.

I've chosen today to speak a bit more autobiographically than usual. I do so not because of any disrespect for more theoretical approaches, but because the dynamic of this conference is meant to invite us into shared reflection. Perhaps you've discovered some of what I've discovered along the way, or perhaps you've discovered something quite different. Regardless, I hope these stories and thoughts will draw out your own stories and acquired wisdom.

I've been given an outline today. I've been asked to speak on Formation for work for the poor; Advocacy for the poor, and how to bring young adults into work for the poor. Three very discrete topics; each could certainly stand alone as a speech. In a sense though, this is freeing since I'll need to speak what I believe about each of these somewhat briefly and simply. Hopefully your conversations will flesh these out a bit more.

The Poor

Before we begin, let's talk about the poor themselves. Thankfully, this is easy to review. You already know them. You work with the poor. You know the names of poor people. You certainly know their struggles. You may even know how they became poor.

In the United States, you know that the majority of the poor are women and children. You know that divorce and birth into poverty continue to be the primary vehicles by which people become poor. You know that a not a small portion of the homeless are the mentally ill, stemming from the closing of so many of the traditional institutions that once housed and cared for them.

You know that the traditional ways out of poverty have changed markedly in the past generation. There used to be three ways: the military; the trades and other blue collar jobs; and high school and/or college education.

The military is still a possible route, but no longer a guarantee that one will leave poverty. In fact, increasing numbers of military families are accumulating debt and sinking into poverty during the time that their spouse or parent is away. The trades continue to provide a way out of poverty, but there is only room for so many each year.

Blue collar jobs, of course, have been steadily disappearing for the past four decades, shipped overseas where wages could be drastically reduced. High School education retains its association with salaries above the poverty line, but only if you stay single and childless. If you raise a family on a high school education, chances are that you will live below the poverty line. And of course, the nasty little secret is that the U.S. has a real high school graduation problem. In Chicago, the high school graduation rate is 50%.

College remains the single best way to move someone out of poverty, but it is increasingly unavailable to the poor. Only 5% of the nation's bottom economic quartile now attempt a four-year education. That means 95% of the poor, do not get a four-year degree. That number continues to drop slowly.

You probably also know that even employment is no longer a guarantee that one will escape poverty. There are those who work full-time serving fast food, working at Wal Mart, packaging merchandise, harvesting food, sewing clothing, who still find themselves living below the poverty line, and unable to afford housing, food and health care all at the same time, much less put anything away for retirement.

You may or may not know that the primary causes of poverty in the larger world are corrupt governments; armed warfare; and geographic location. In Africa, disease should be added to the mix.

Globalization (the free and largely unchecked flow of capital) has made countries more vulnerable to sudden changes in human welfare. Problems in one country can now bankrupt another. Smaller nations cannot move their nations forward without joining organizations such as the WTO and other IFTI's, which are structured to favor the wealthier nations. Developing countries can borrow in order to grow, but it's difficult to grow fast enough to outpace the debt they are accumulating.

The good news is that standard baselines of poverty have improved for those countries who have become free states and who have participated in the global economy, but the inequality of wealth distribution has also grown within these countries. So, while basic needs have been better met, and health care has improved, the feeling of being left behind has also increased. It depends what you call poverty. Relatively few in the United States die of hunger anymore, even in the most desperate regions of Appalachia. It is no longer true, as it was at the beginning of the last century, that over half of the nation's senior citizens were living in poverty. Life is better here than it was, for everyone including the poor. But we are not so callous as to suggest there is no longer poverty in the U.S. That is similarly true in other nations who have restructured their economies to enter the global marketplace.

In the midst of this, the U.S. financial commitment to our social safety net have been growing in recent years, but more to the middle class and the elderly, than to the poor. Social Security and Medicare spending have grown beyond their projections. Social security more because of the dropping birthrate will not enable future earners to fully fund the recipients. Medicare has grown astronomically not so much because of population growth or increased longevity. Those were anticipated. Medicare has grown because of new health care technologies, new medications, new surgical procedures (e.g. transplants), the development of technologies to prolong the final stages of life, and because doctors are so worried about lawsuits that they prescribe every test they possibly can to protect themselves. All these new developments are bankrupting the system, and putting future health care at risk.

Why am I recounting these large-scale developments? Someday, when history is written of this day and age, the story will be told of an extraordinary period of socio-economic adjustment. The world is literally reorganizing itself around us, and that reorganization is affecting the poor greatly. That reorganization requires its own set of responses to the needs of the poor. Or, if we don't, we will be accused of feeding a few poor who we know by name, while letting the world's shifts create new poor around us.

That's our story if we don't pay attention to the important world changes around us, and participate in some meaningful way in shaping those changes. I'll return to some of these themes shortly. First, let's consider what formation for service to these poor looks like.

Formation

The word, "Formation," typically refers to the preparation one should undergo for the service of the poor. In this room, we represent very different lifestyles and types of ministry, so formation is going to look a bit different for each of us. But I believe there are some constants that are true for any Vincentian formation.

First, Vincentian formation doesn't begin with a classroom, or a book, or a lecture. The philosophy of Vincentian formation is a "GO-THEN" philosophy. Go serve them, then come back and talk about it. Go serve them, then begin to ask what works and what doesn't work. Go serve them, then begin to figure out why they (and others like them) are poor in such a wealthy society. Go serve them, then begin to ask others who serve them how they keep serving over the years. The best learning happens when it's grounded in real life and real questions. The Vincentian mission must always be deeply rooted in the lives of the poor. Start there. We don't learn the Vincentian Spirit from a book. We can only get it working with the poor.

I remember my first visit to a sick woman's hospital bed. I was 20. I came into the room while she glared at me, I proceeded to talk too much - introduce myself, explain why I was there, told her about the chaplain's office, and how mass was on tv, and how communion would be provided daily if she liked, try to draw her into conversation, etc. Finally, I decided that she wasn't going to respond, so I said I would be going and I asked her if there was anything I could get her. Suddenly her face lit up and she motioned me closer, then she said into my ear... "You can get...OUT!" It was a good lesson she taught me that day. She was sick and miserable, and I had invaded her space on my terms, without her permission, and finding out what she wanted or didn't want. I was ministering AT her, not to her. So I learned..., and not from a book.

I went back and told the story to the other chaplains. They actually laughed, told me not to worry too much about it, told me about her reactions when they visited her room, and told me other stories of working with the sick, and welcomed me into their camaraderie. Then they gave me some suggestions just by telling me what they had done - and learned - in the doing. And thus, a second philosophy of Vincentian formation: **WE FORM EACH OTHER**. That's where much, if not most, formation for the work happens. It's critically important for the Vincentian mission that we tell our stories. Successes and defeats. Ideals and frustrations. Humorous stories, characters we've met, things we've learned along the way. Those little stories may seem unimportant to us, but that's the primary way that we teach one another and support one another. Don't underestimate them, and don't excuse your own responsibility from sharing those stories. Others' little stories helped you along the way.

Another theory... **IT'S THE POOR WHO MAKE YOU A VINCENTIAN**. It happens when they let you into their lives. I don't mean that they let you give them something; I mean that they let you into their lives as a fellow human being. I remember my first visit to the projects in Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn 21 years ago. I was really scared, but I didn't say anything because I was going with a Daughter of Charity and she didn't seem frightened, so I didn't want to either. We walked through the crowd of toughened young men at the door, (I glanced at them; she said hello), got to the elevator, and I realized there was no where we could go if this group decided to come in our direction. We rode the urine-smelling steel elevator to a high floor, got out and walked down the institutionally turquoise, graffitied hallway to Nelly's apartment. I don't remember her mother's name, just 7-year-old Nelly. Both Nelly and her mother had been raped a year before. Her mother was so traumatized that she no longer left the apartment, so 7-year-old Nelly picked up groceries on the way home from school each day. Sr. Chris was wonderful with both of them, and they were really happy to see her. I caught Nelly's eye sneaking a peek behind

the sofa from time to time, and got her to smile. When I left, Nelly brought me one of those small school pictures, wrote her name on the back of it, and told me she wanted me to have it. Nelly's mother started to cry, and told me that I was the first male that Nelly had spoken to since the rape. I was so overwhelmed, I didn't know what to do with that vote of confidence and love from that child. I learned a lot that day. I learned about my fear. I learned about the poor's fear. I learned about how little it takes to touch another's heart. Most of all, I learned that all the enormous differences between me and this traumatized mother and child can melt away into human friendship. The great divide can be crossed. I still have Nelly's picture. It's in my framed picture of Vincent DePaul. Somehow I connect that moment to part of my own journey to becoming a Vincentian. Nelly and her mother were two of the many poor people who welcomed me into their lives, and by doing so, made me a Vincentian.

A fourth theory... Sooner or later, **IT HELPS TO LEARN THE STORIES, OUR HISTORY AS VINCENTIANS.** When I first went to the novitiate program, that one year of intense study of Vincent DePaul and his writings and spirit, I read the three volumes of Coste's biography of Vincent. At first thought I was spending the time to learn the history. It wasn't until many years later that it dawned on me that I wasn't being taught these stories to know them; I was being taught them to be inserted into them. The story of Vincent's service to the poor and the service to the poor from all those who have followed in his footsteps since that time, was now to include me as part of the story.

The purpose of reading about our founders and our histories is not to assemble interesting information, it is to insert ourselves into the story, and to absorb the values and the lessons about serving the poor that they had learned along the way and wanted to pass on to us. There's a lot of wisdom that Vincent DePaul and our respective founders wanted us to take in, and a lot of mistakes they wanted us to avoid. That's really helpful. But when we read Elizabeth Ann's life, or Louise's correspondence, or the wisdom of Frederic Ozanam, it's important to see them as flesh-and-blood real human beings. Not some idealized figures in an idealized history. Vincent and his contemporaries had to figure it out on their own. They didn't have a model to copy. Those who came after Vincent had to figure it out on their own too, because the world changed and they had to figure out how to serve the poor in their times and countries. We study the past not to copy, but to take heart from it, and to bring the values and purposes forward into a new time and place. We too have to figure it out for this time and place, but we are now part of the story. That's what Vincent understood. He was continuing the love of Christ for the poor, and wanted us to do the same. We are continuing the Lord's and Vincent's service. We are part of the story now. Someday, they'll study what we did in our time. We'll be part of this history.

Which brings me to a fifth theory about formation. If you've flown on an airplane, you know the instructions: If you are traveling with a small child, and the cabin loses oxygen, and the air masks drop down, what are you supposed to do? (Correct response: "Place the mask over your own face first, then over your child's.") Exactly! **SEE TO YOUR NEEDS FIRST.** Vincentian Formation is about learning to be effective ministers of the poor, to be sure, but it's also about shaping our inner selves so that we continue in this demanding, sometimes thankless, work for a long time. You'll be no good for the poor if you are cynical, burned out, frustrated, distant from God, and distant from your own heart. You must learn to pray. You must learn how to step back and reflect on what how you are being changed by the work you do. You must learn how to balance your own life against the infinite needs of the poor, learning how to help but walk away for relaxation, family, rest, and fun. Your person and your heart need to be fully alive if you are going to be any good for the poor long term. You must see to your own needs before you see to the needs of the more vulnerable ones around you. Most of us make mistakes in this regard and

find ourselves worn out. Formation for mission must teach this lesson. We must see to our deepest needs. It's critical.

And finally, one last theory of Formation: **The "IT'S NOT OVER TILL IT'S OVER Theory."** This is the other half of the "GO-THEN Theory." You serve the poor, then you do something to build up your heart. You serve the poor, then you go back and read scripture and realize, perhaps for the first time, how much of scripture is about the poor. You serve the poor, then you start to learn about the services that are available from various governmental and charitable agencies, and you learn how to work the system to help the poor. You serve the poor, and then you read Vincent's or Louise's or Elizabeth Ann's letters to let them strengthen your inner self and teach you something you weren't ready to hear before you had actually met the poor. You serve the poor, and then you spend time reflecting with others who serve the poor to learn from them and to support one another. You serve the poor, and then you pray, and read the writings of the spiritual masters, and perhaps begin to meet with a spiritual director. You serve the poor, and then you begin to ask why it has to be this way, and then begin to read sociology, economics, social work, psychology, substance abuse, history, politics, government, housing, nutrition, health, management, spirituality, and so much more. The "IT'S NOT OVER TILL IT'S OVER Theory" insists that we keep learning along the way. The "IT'S NOT OVER TILL IT'S OVER Theory" insists that there's always more to learn, there always room to grow as a human being, there's always a gap between God and ourselves than can be made closer, there's always more we can understand that will help us help the poor. This doesn't have to be steady. There are other important things in life too. It can come and go in waves, but formation isn't something that's meant to be front-loaded at the beginning, once for all time. **IT'S NOT OVER TILL IT'S OVER.**

Advocacy

Some stories come along at the right moment in your life. Here's a story that has never left the back of my head since the day I heard it...

A villager is walking by the river early one morning. The villager looks out into the water and sees a baby floating down the river. Horrified, the villager races into the water, grabs the baby, and brings the baby to shore. The baby is fine. Relieved, the villager looks back into the water and sees another baby floating down the water. The villager again dives into the water and rescues this baby as well. Once more, the villager looks into the water . . . and sees dozens of babies floating down the river. The villager calls out an alarm, and the entire village comes running to the river to rescue as many babies as they can before the water carries them away. This is a village that is mobilized. Every villager is at the river, trying to save the babies from the water. This is a village that is improving lives. Many of the babies are being saved. But the babies keep on coming . . . because no one is going upstream to find out who is throwing the babies into the water in the first place.

You may have heard this story before. The United Way tells it all the time in its fund-raising efforts. It's simple but it came along at a time in my own life when it changed the way I looked at the world. I was drawn to the Vincentian way of life because of its charity, and the way real, flesh-and-blood people were assisted. I loved working in the soup kitchen; teaching people to read in the literacy classroom; building up the self-confidence and spirituality of youth in an innercity youth groups; getting people into housing; spending time cooking, cleaning, speaking with, and housing people overnight in the shelters; referring people to social services that would make a difference; referring people to legal aid to help them stay in this country... so much more. Those were tangible projects. When I went to bed that evening, I had done something real.

Then came this baby-in-the-river story, and it was like I opened my eyes and saw something I hadn't looked at before. I had wondered about the conditions that made other people's lives so different from my own, but it was such a big question, and I really didn't know much about it, that I usually set the larger questions aside, and just continued doing charitable work. This story made me stop and wonder if I was just like those villagers who kept rescuing the babies, and never solved the problem. What difference was my charity - and life - making?

I have come to believe that it is not enough to give food and shelter, important as that is. If I do nothing to change the situations and structures that make people poor, then I've only dabbed a bleeding wound. I haven't stopped the bleeding. I now believe that God wants us to stop the bleeding. He wants us to go upriver, to fix the problem, not just minister to the symptoms of the problem.

Let me give you a current example: Social Security and Medicare. Before these programs were first begun, over half of the country's elderly lived in poverty. Since that time, most elderly now have an income and basic medical care. These programs might not be perfect, and there might be some who aren't benefited, but overall, the elderly are far better off than they once were. I believe that God wants us to fix social security before it goes bankrupt. Actually, I don't know if God cares about social security. I know he cares about the elderly and the poor. I know he wouldn't want us to sit around and do nothing. So, what do we do? I'll tell you what I think about social security over lunch if you want. My point here is simply that it is not enough to give seniors clothing, or money for their heating bills, if we sit around and do nothing to save social security.

We must be advocates for the poor. We aren't professionals. I know that. We aren't government officials, policy wonks, economists, analysts, or anyone important who can change society. But even if we aren't professionals, we must be advocates. Advocates are important. There aren't enough professionals out there to make a political difference. Things change because enough people come together and create energy. The professionals can't make that change, only large groups like us. Advocates.

So, what did I do after I heard that story about the babies in the river? I joined an organization that was working to make change happen. I started out by writing letters for Amnesty International. If I couldn't change the big picture, maybe I could contribute in some small way to an organization that could. I donated small amounts of money to Network and a couple other organizations that were trying to make systemic change. I try to read and talk to people about what I learn. I've started a book club at the university to discuss major issues of the day. I try to talk about the poor when I preach, or when I have the opportunity meet political figures. These days, I spend time lobbying state and federal politicians to provide more financial aid for poor students.

But that's just me. I've been wondering about the larger Vincentian Family itself. In Vincent's day, no one even thought of changing larger structures to keep people from becoming poor in the first place. They thought about charity. But in our age and time, we have realized that if we make changes to our laws, to our government programs, to our city and educational policies, that many more people can be helped that way than can ever be taken out of poverty by our charitable works. So, I've been thinking for some time about what the Vincentians in the U.S. can do. We don't have policy experts among our ranks, or politicians, or economists. What can we do? What do we have to give?

It crystallized for me during the recent presidential election. No one mentioned the poor. Neither side - republican or democrat - mentioned the poor. The poor were invisible in the last election.

And that's what where we can help. We know the poor. We may not be policy experts, but we know the poor.

I want to make a proposal today. And I want to propose something that would require all of the Vincentian Family to work together in the U.S. Several years ago, we agreed that we should work together more than we have in the past. I've seen some small attempts to assist one another's formation experiences. I've also seen some local meetings for mutual support or prayer. This conference itself fits within that purpose. Perhaps there are even some combined works, but I haven't seen those. To my mind, we haven't been very successful in bringing our organizations together to make something significant happen. I know we want to say that "we are greater together than the sum of our parts," but it's not true right now. We are not greater together than the sum of our parts. So here's my proposal:

Let's get the poor into the public eye. Let's make the poor visible again, and let's do it together. Poor people don't vote, so those in charge need to see other groups take interest in them.

- On a local level, let's get every group of boy scouts and girls scouts, and neighborhood associations, schools, churches to do something for the poor. To see the poor, to meet them, not just drop off bags of clothing for people they'll never meet.
- More regionally, let's meet with elected officials, and give them tours of the neighborhoods we work in. Let's tell them the stories and needs of the poor.
- Let's meet with local newspapers, give them story ideas.
- Let's get people at our churches and institutions to write letters about the needs of the poor.
- When there's a larger issue, get them human interest stories (example of DePaul using student stories with congressman)
- Nationally, let's hire a PR firm to help us figure out how to get the needs of the poor back on the political agenda.
- Let's mobilize the national foundations to put the poor back on the map of public concern.
- Let's work with existing national organizations, such as Network and others, to provide them our access and knowledge of the poor.
- And let's use the poor to do this. Empower them to speak on their behalf. * Let's work across church lines.

Let's create a national visibility for the poor. Let's foster a national desire to do something to help the poor. This will require focus and coordination, a small central office staffed and funded by our organizations. This will require our time and cooperation with that central office. Real time, real cooperation; not "prayerful support" or "sympathetic interest."

We have a big head start on this. The Society of St. Vincent DePaul has done an extraordinary job with their "Voices of the Poor Initiative." We can learn a great deal from them.

Let me put some money where my mouth is. If the combined Vincentian Family will take on this work, I will put the resources of DePaul University behind it, including an offer to house it and defray some of the operating expenses. DePaul University will not, however, start or lead this initiative. I say that because I know too well that this could become nothing more than one university's work, while everyone else looks on and wishes us well. For this to be nationally successful and make a true difference for upcoming elections and legislative sessions, this must be a national initiative, supported by all the branches of our Vincentian Family. DePaul University stands ready to be help.

In the end, that is only one idea. The larger point is contained in the story about those poor babies floating down the river. It's not enough to give charity. Not in this world. Not at this time. The poor need our advocacy as well as our handouts.

Youth and Young Adults

I'm not an expert on this generation. I get to talk with a lot of them, but my knowledge is limited to a subset: I know the ones who go to college. Let me offer a few reflections on them, and then an encouragement for you to work closely with them.

First, let me assure you that the present 18-22-year-olds are not a "me generation." This generation has a great heart. Volunteerism is at an all-time measured high among this group, even before they get to college. They are idealistic and immediately moved to action when the world treats the poor unfairly. You see it in the college movements against free trade; for fair trade coffee; against coca cola; against sweatshops; against Sodexco prison labor; for gay rights, and more. They are both generous and idealistic.

This generation does not have heroes, or at least not the political or social heroes that we remember. Their heroes tend to be parents, other relatives, or adults who had a formative effect on them growing up. Their heroes are local and known to them. In short, you have the potential to be their heroes.

Their knowledge of the poor is spotty at best. Most are shocked and surprised to learn very basic things about the poor – such as that the poor or largely female and children, that the primary cause for poverty is divorce, etc. They can learn much from you.

Their positions on most world issues are unformed, largely because their high school education (and frequently their college educations) did not introduce them to the larger structures that shape the world (economics, geopolitical forces, etc...) They believe strongly in freedom movements, especially movements that enhance the position of women and other traditionally marginalized groups, but these positions are frequently not informed by any real knowledge of history or culture, but a strong belief in self-determination. For that reason, they have little idea of how to be supportive, or how to make a difference. Their economic positions are also somewhat shaped by their fears that they will not enjoy the same economic living standards as did their parents – which appears to be a well-founded fear. That fear thus limits their abilities to talk about a larger social compact.

For those college students who are poor, it is not the case that they are in college simply to improve their economic prospects. That is certainly a goal, but many want to and fully intend to give back to their communities. A number of them are already doing so. That said, it is similarly true that this particular group of students is hardest on and least sympathetic toward the poor. They see themselves as having risen above their circumstances, and they have little patience for those who have not done so. In addition, they are so stretched by work, school, more home responsibilities than other students, and often more difficult commutes to and from school, less home support or understanding of their school requirements or challenges, that they cannot add much more service into their lives. Not now.

So, all that said.... Good hearts. Not a lot of deep understanding about the poor or about the world structures that create poverty. Idealistic. Little time and heavily in debt. How do the organizations represented at this conference bring the youth into this work?

You ask!

You invite.

One young person at a time. A few at a time. You get to know their names. You invite them back repeatedly. **YOU INVITE THEM ALONG**

And then..., **YOU GIVE THEM AUTHORITY**, responsibility for a task. They can tag along at first, but you can't wait for very long before you give them something important to do that will succeed or fail because of their efforts. Help them, to be sure. Give them the support and assistance they need. But let them fail or succeed, and learn from either one. You will lose them if all you do is invite them along. Give them something to be in charge of.

Then, and only then, **YOU MENTOR THEM**. Help them problem-solve. Give them advice when they make rookie mistakes like you did. Show them how to make a difference. Tell them how you got started doing this. Tell them why you do this. Tell them of your failures, your doubts, the challenges. Not all at once. Just slip these things in from time to time. It'll work. They respond when someone from another generation takes real interest in them. So few do!

You'll need to respect the rhythm of their lives. They are highly scheduled, and they tend to be free and willing to work at times when those of us with full-time jobs or who are retired are less inclined to work. Late afternoons, through the traditional dinner hour, late evenings. You'll also need to respect the amount of time that they can offer. Many have part-time jobs on top of school, and must fit service into the spaces leftover.

You'll need to accept the fact that most have no interest in a celibate life. If vocation promotion is your real goal, they'll realize it soon enough and quietly disappear. I have been the youngest Vincentian at every work I've ever been assigned to. The truth is, if I thought I was simply finishing out the backend of something that used to be wonderful, I'd leave religious life. I can't muster enough energy to keep me going for a lifetime, just to keep something going a bit longer. But, if I see my time and task in religious life to be part of designing what's coming next for the church, I can wake up in the morning and say my life's important. Consider your invitation to the youth to fit into that category – "designing what's coming next" – instead of "squeezing out some last recruits before it's too late." (And then if some vocations come, wonderful!)

Perhaps one last thought. I believe that we have a responsibility to the next "generation" of servants of the poor. I mean that seriously - a responsibility. Just as you may be responsible for your children, or for your elderly parents, or your loved ones, or your parishioners, you are responsible for the poor of tomorrow, and those who will serve them. You cannot just take care of today's poor, you have a responsibility that someone will follow you to take care of the poor tomorrow. Play your part, invite younger people along with you. Tell your stories. Give the young something to be in charge of and responsible for. Live with the fact that it won't always be perfect, as you judge "perfect." The point is, we were once welcomed and invited into this work by others. We must do the same.

Conclusion

I began this talk with an assignment to speak of three things – Formation, Advocacy, and Youth. Separate things, to be sure, but they intertwine. The reason we're here is an intuition that the work and organizations we are part of could be strengthened if we worked more closely together.

Perhaps it will be some sort of shared, or cross-fertilized formation experience. Perhaps we'll find new ways to invite youth into our works, helping one another to do so. Perhaps we'll find a way to advocate for the poor together. Perhaps someone may even find the idea intriguing to do something to put the poor back on the national consciousness. Perhaps another idea altogether will come out of the discussions at this conference.

Whatever it is that comes from this, allow me to end with a word of gratitude.

Work for the poor is not always as rewarding as people might think, not most days. Most days it asks work, patience, a little frustration. It's much easier when others work with us. And so, permit me a personal "thank you" to each of you. Your work for the poor is an encouragement for me. Your steady, long-term service helps me to keep going as well. Our mutual witness, our camaraderie, laughter, prayer, simple interest in one another, goes a long way. Thank you for all you do. If we decide to do something further together, we already begin in a place of generosity and mutual support.

Thank you for that. God bless you.