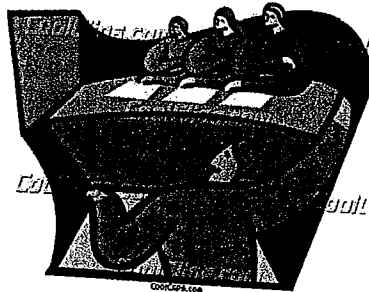


St Vincent de Paul Society (SA)

**LEADERS' FORUM**

**A THEOLOGY OF LOCAL  
CONFERENCE**

Led by Sr Catherine Seward RSM and Martin Delaney.



**When: 11 July 2011, 5.30 pm**

**Where: St Vincent de Paul Society, Ozanam House, 202  
Franklin St, Adelaide.**

This interactive forum will explore questions like:

- What is a Conference?
- How is a local Conference similar/different to a secular community action group?
- What is the spiritual aspect of a local Conference and why is it important?

To reserve your place and request a copy of our paper

RSVP by 30 June to:

Sr Catherine Seward 0406 441 075 [seward.catherine@gmail.com](mailto:seward.catherine@gmail.com)

Martin Delaney 0422 389 903 [martin.delaney@optusnet.com.au](mailto:martin.delaney@optusnet.com.au)

# "Let us go to the poor"

An approach to the renewal of Conference.

Sr Catherine Seward RSM and Martin Delaney.

## Introduction

There is at present a new energy and enthusiasm for renewal of the local Conferences of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in South Australia. Falling membership and increased workloads have made the need for renewal urgent.

Essentially, renewal means attracting and retaining new members to our Conferences ('more members'), providing members with opportunities to deepen their faith ('more spiritual'), improving communication between Conferences, Family Centres, the Society's Special Works and State Office ('better communication'), and speaking up more boldly on behalf of the poor ('stronger advocacy').

In seeking to guide the renewal process, this paper offers a theology of local Conference that puts 'discipleship' and 'contemplation in action' at the heart of what it means to be a Conference member. These same two concepts - discipleship and contemplation in action - have relevance also for volunteers working in the Society's Family Centres and Special Works programs.

We present our ideas in a spirit of exploration, collaboration and solidarity. We invite all who "go to the poor" to respond in a similar fashion with your own thoughts and ideas so that a common understanding may be reached.

## Community of disciples

Christians believe that God's love for all humanity was revealed in the person of Jesus whose life on Earth showed how God is present among us. By teaching love of one another, through healing and restoring life, through care of the most vulnerable, through love prepared to suffer, Jesus began a new time of peace and harmony that he called the kingdom of God.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, a group of his friends continued his good works, teaching, healing and caring for the poor, bringing the good news of God's unconditional love. With the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this 'community of disciples' became the Church – the living body of Christ. Like any other body, the Church has many parts.

The St Vincent de Paul Society ('the Society') is a world-wide Christian community, founded in Paris in 1833 to assist people in need and combat social justice. Its membership is diverse, comprising men and women of all ages, all denominations, and those without religious beliefs who demonstrate a commitment to social justice and are comfortable with the Catholic ethos of the Society.

The Society's members – who are called Vincentians – 'serve the poor cheerfully, listening to them and respecting their wishes, helping them to feel and recover their own dignity, for we are all created in God's image. In the poor, they see the suffering Christ' (The Rule, 1995: 11).

The primary basic unit of the St Vincent de Paul Society is the local Conference. Conference members visit people in their homes to provide friendship, support and material assistance. They support the Special Works of the Society (e.g. Family Centres, Fred's Vans, Migrant & Refugee Service, Mental health and Youth programs). They meet regularly - as a modern day community of disciples - to get to know and support one another, reflect on their action, and take care of business.

## Contemplation in action

St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491 – 1556) has described how a person can become more Christ-like: by contemplating the life of Jesus and the needs of the poor, loving action will arise which will bring about God's presence [or Kingdom] in the world and at the same time transform the lives of the people involved. And so, action and contemplation belong together to continue to establish the Kingdom of God.

The Ignatian concept of 'contemplation in action' is reflected in Vincentian spirituality which involves both prayer and action (St Vincent de Paul Society, 2004: 4).

Conference members see the needs in their local area, reflect on how to respond with charity and love, and take appropriate action to bring about a change in the lives of the people they visit. At the same time, a change will occur in them – this is called a 'double transformation'.

While immediate, practical help in the local area is the first action that Conference members take, reflection on the circumstances of the poor may lead them to question the unjust structures that underlie the problem. In turn, this may result in a deeper understanding of the causes of poverty and a desire for social justice, as Frederic Ozanam himself discovered.

The reflection must focus on the actual experience of going out to the poor (i.e. the home visits); what was the situation? How did you respond? What did you learn from the visit? Members are guided in this by listening to the Word of God and seeing their action reflected in the light of this. In the words of Adelaide priest Fr Tom Gleeson: "If we stop for a while and look back, we can see the God of liberation from the call of Moses; 'I have heard my people, I have felt their pain, I mean to deliver them!' It is to see our action as the continuing action of God in Jesus through us, continuing the work of creation/redemption/creation." A suggested format for this type of reflection, sometimes called Action-Reflection-Action, is provided at Attachment A.

Fr Albert Nolan, Dominican priest and theologian, has written extensively about the Action-Reflection-Action method: 'The movement is two way or circular. It is an on-going process that moves through practice and theory, action and reflection towards a deeper understanding of our faith and a more committed practice of it. This is a theological method that really does nourish and strengthen faith' (Nolan, 1989: 26).

## A personal story

I try through my volunteer work with the St Vincent de Paul Society to make a difference in the lives of the people I visit. In so doing, a change occurs in me. But I am not always aware of this change. In fact I seldom am. I have the experience but then I miss the meaning. (I borrow from English poet T.S. Eliot). Attending my local conference meeting to reflect on the experience of going out to the poor helps me find meaning.

Late last year I visited a young Aboriginal woman and her six children. There I was thought I had it all under control, confidently assessed the situation, determined the amount of assistance I thought was necessary, filled out the voucher book, crossed all the t's and dotted the i's. As I was doing this, a little girl, no older than 3, reached up to her Mum and in tears said, "Mummy, I'm hungry."

I remember hearing what the little girl said, but for some reason it didn't register. I was too busy filling out the voucher book and, like a typical bloke, I can only do one thing at a time!

A short time later at a Conference meeting, Sr Catherine led a gospel reflection in which there was a young child. I immediately thought of the little Aboriginal girl and the full force of what she said hit me, "Mummy, I'm hungry." I believe this was the Spirit speaking to me directly about my actions, challenging me to grow, to change. I need to listen to the poor, and take some bread or a food parcel next time I visit this family.

Martin Delaney

## Implications for the renewal of Conferences

So what are the practical implications of this approach for the renewal of Conferences?

- ❖ If the Conference is a community of disciples, then inviting others to be part of the community is the responsibility of every member. The Conference must welcome with open arms anyone wishing to be involved – in particular young people and people of prime working age who keep the Society revolutionary and new.
- ❖ If the Conference is to be local, then the majority of the members ought to be from the local area. For metropolitan Conferences, this means at least the region in which the Conference is located. For Country Conferences, it is the city or town and outlying district. There are practical reasons for this – people living locally are more readily available to do the home visits and attend meetings. And there are sound theological reasons – the main one being that our actions, our efforts to understand, to find meaning, arise out of our every-day experience; and where we live is a big part of this.
- ❖ If we are serious about deepening the members' faith, then every Conference ought to have a Spiritual Advisor trained in Gospel reflection methods such as the one described in this paper.

## References

Edwards, D. (1987) *Called to be church in Australia*, St. Paul publications.

Honner J. [2007] *Love and Politics*, David Lovell Publishing.

Nolan, A. (1987) *To nourish our faith: theological reflections on the theology of liberation*, CAFOD, Nottingham.

Rolheiser, R. (1998) *Seeking Spirituality: Guidelines for a Christian spirituality for the twenty-first century*, Hodder and Stoughton, London.

St Vincent de Paul Society (2005) *The Rule, 2005 – 5<sup>th</sup> Edition Australia*, National Council of Australia.

St Vincent de Paul Society (2004) *The Ethos of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Australia*, NSW/ACT Community and Corporate Relations Team, Lewisham.

## Authors contact details

Sr. Catherine Seward RSM – 0406 441 075 email: [seward.catherine@gmail.com](mailto:seward.catherine@gmail.com)

Martin Delaney – 0422 389 903 email: [martin.delaney@optusnet.com.au](mailto:martin.delaney@optusnet.com.au)

The authors thank Fr Tom Gleeson for his valuable feedback and contribution to this paper.

May 2011

## Attachment A: Suggested format for spiritual reflection

### Why do this?

- To see God's presence in this visit.
- To come to a deeper understanding of the struggles of the family or individual.
- To examine if my responses were the best help I could offer.
- To be part of some solution to the problem.

### How do I reflect?

- Take some quiet time and place
- Go over details from my memories or notes
- What did we speak about?
- What was the situation?
- What help did I offer?
- What were the deeper needs?
- Ask God to show me what I can learn from the visit. Christians may use a passage from the life of Jesus to ask themselves "What would Jesus do in this situation?" [Gospel reflection].
- Focus on feelings that indicate where future actions may be found.
- Pray for what I need to continue Vinnies' "Good Works".

Sr Catherine Seward

May 2011.

## Attachment B: Glossary

### Theology

The classical definition of theology is that of Anselm: faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Its purpose is to nourish and strengthen our faith.

### Spirituality

A communal search for the face of God.

### Disciple

Discipleship is the term used in the gospels to designate the condition of being followers of Jesus. Jesus taught his followers to make the pursuit of the Kingdom of God their highest priority (Matt 6:33). Discipleship is a life-style which first seeks the Kingdom and its justice, follows Jesus wherever he goes and is willing to renounce all other interests to the extent that they become obstacles to these goals (see Rev 14:4; Matt 8:19-20; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 14:26; cf Matt 10:37; Luke 18:29; cf Matt 19:29; Mark 10:29-30).

### Kingdom of God

The kingdom initiated by Jesus is not the earthly kingdom that was widely inferred from the Old Testament prophecies. It is a spiritual kingdom that is now growing in the hearts of men and women, and it will find its fulfilment in the eventual sovereign rule of God and defeat of all evil. Those people who choose to belong to God's kingdom and serve Him, are those who are destined to inherit eternal life in God's presence.

### Lay person / laity

In religious organisations, the laity comprises all people who are not in the clergy. A person who is a member of a Religious order and who is not ordained legitimate clergy is considered to be a member of the laity (e.g. a nun or lay brother).

### Charity

An act of charity is any good work that is inspired by the gospel command to love one's neighbour. Or it can refer to an organisation, like the St Vincent de Paul Society, that is committed to helping the poor and marginalised based on this same gospel command.

### Social Justice

Justice differs from private charity. 'Charity is about giving a hungry person some bread, while justice is about trying to change the system so that nobody has excess bread while some have none; charity is about treating your neighbours with respect, while justice is about trying to get at the deeper roots of racism; and charity is about helping specific victims of war, while justice is about trying to change things in the world that ultimately lead to war' (Rolheiser, 1998: 160).

---

