



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE US SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

Contemplation: Stop Talking, Start Doing

In his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis discusses the example of the Good Samaritan, who most importantly is the one who stops, who bends down to help. The Holy Father exhorts us to “*not remain mired in theoretical discussions, but touch the wounded flesh of the victims.*” [FT, 261] Yet in our Conferences as in our lives, we do sometimes allow ourselves to spend a great deal of time discussing and identifying problems; time that often could be better spent actually doing something about them.

Emmanuel Bailly, the President of the first Conference, and the first President-General of the Society, warned of this very danger in an 1842 Circular Letter, calling it a “*great danger*” if we were to carry on long discussions “*upon charity instead of being satisfied with doing its deeds... our Society is one of action, it should do much and talk little...*” [Bailly, Circ. Ltr. Dec 1842] To be sure, Bailly acknowledged that there is a place for discussion, but is in acting that we maintain the primitive spirit of the Society to which Frédéric so urgently calls us.

“*Only one thing,*” he wrote, “*could hinder and destroy us: the adulteration of our primitive spirit ... a verbose philanthropy more eager to talk than to act, or again bureaucracies which impede our march by multiplying our machinery.*” [310, to Amélie, 1841] Instead of getting mired in debates and bureaucracy, Frédéric taught, we are called to “*do all the good we can, and trust to God for the rest.*” [Baunard, 81]

We become by doing, Aristotle taught. It is our works of charity, not our elaborate plans for it, that move us along our pathway towards holiness. Frédéric points out not only the perils of discussion that delays action, but discussion that praises our actions, or seeks publicity for them, what he called “*the pharisaism that sounds the trumpet before it...*” [ibid] He calls out “*the expansive zeal of certain new colleagues who go about singing everywhere the praises of our infant work*”, explaining that “*their inflated reports render us suspect to the ones and ridiculous in the eyes of the others. It has been prophesied that publicity will be the death of us.*” [160 To Lallier, 1837]

This is not a call to secrecy, but to humility. Our good works will become known by their goodness, not by our boasting. At the same time, while “*warning against habitual publicity,*” Bailly wrote, “*we carefully except all projects, attempts and methods for affording our suffering brethren more rapid, certain and abundant relief.*” In other words, “*to show many methods of assisting the indigent*” must not be publicity for our benefit or credit but can be another way to serve the poor. [Bailly, Circ. Ltr. Dec 1842]

When the seventy-two returned from the mission on which Christ had sent them, he warned them [not to rejoice at their works, but at their salvation](#). Similarly, we are called to act, but to act in [humility](#), and to reflect not on our great accomplishments, but on our [growth in holiness](#) through our works.

Contemplate

Do I sometimes spend more time discussing problems than I spend doing something about them?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#)