



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

Contemplation: A System of Love

Viewing the world in systems theory, we recognize the interactivity and interdependence of the parts of a system, and how affecting one part can change the whole system. The human body is a system, and while the heart may be only one part, its proper functioning affects the other parts. So it also is with social systems. It is through this framework that we envision “systemic change”, but the true roots of systemic change lie not in an esoteric theory of systems, but in God’s creative and loving plan.

Systemic change, sometimes viewed as a modern deviation from our Vincentian vocation, our dedication to our person-to-person service, is rather the natural progression of the home visit, just as it has been since our earliest days. We do not revere the poor so as to keep them in poverty, but, as Blessed Frédéric explained, “*The same authority that tells us there will always be poor people among us is also the one that commands us to do everything possible to ensure that there are no more.*” [[Of Alms, l'Ere nouvelle, 1848](#)]

“*Defend the lowly and fatherless; render justice to the afflicted and needy. Rescue the lowly and poor; deliver them from the hand of the wicked*” the [psalmist tells us](#). Further, we are told not to “*be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, ...pick your vineyard bare... These things you shall leave for the poor...*” [[Lv 19:9-10](#)] We are even commanded to forgive our debtors every seven years. [[Dt 15:1](#)] In each instance, we are called not only to offer alms, but to alter systems, remove barriers, enable and empower the poor to support themselves.

To truly form relationships based on trust and friendship, as our Rule calls us to do, is to seek ways to walk with the neighbor not only in his poverty, but out of it. So it was with our earliest Conferences, who in the 1830s had begun apprenticeship programs to help young men learn trades, and established libraries and schools to prepare soldiers for life after the army. Systemic change, then, in its simplest form, is to teach a man to fish, or at least, not to prevent him from fishing. In its fullest form, systemic change programs are most effective when we collaborate with as many as possible in our communities.

The system we are called to affect is a body; [a body of which we all are parts](#), and the change we seek is achieved by living our faith, in looking always to “*Christianity, which has equally reproved socialist errors and selfish passions, which is alone able to realize the ideal of fraternity without sacrifice of liberty, which is alone able to find the greatest earthly happiness for men*”. [[Baunard, 279](#)]

Ultimately, systemic change, the system we seek to build, and that we are called to build, is the [civilization of love](#).

Contemplate

Does my Conference discuss our neighbors’ needs, seeking common causes we can affect?

Recommended Reading

[Seeds of Hope, Stories of Systemic Change](#)