



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

Contemplation: The Word

Most Vincentians are aware that we should not use the word “client” to refer to the neighbors we assist, but this is more than a matter of preference for specific labels, or even euphemisms. The reason we don’t say “client” is not that the word itself is particularly offensive, but simply that it is the wrong word. We shouldn’t say client when we mean neighbor any more than we should say apple when we mean orange. They are different things.

You will search in vain to find the word “client” in the Rule, the Manual, or Holy Scripture. We are called by our Savior not to love our client, but to [love our neighbor](#). He taught us that the neighbor is the one who acts with mercy. It is a mutual relationship based not on proximity, but on love. In a similar way, the Rule calls us to “*establish relationships based on trust and friendship*”, and to try to understand our neighbor “*as we would a brother or sister*.” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.9\]](#) All these words – neighbor, friend, brother, sister – are more than mere labels. They are the words Jesus used. They describe not only people, but the relationships between us, in which we share of ourselves [for love alone](#). They are the right words for the people we serve, [in whom, Christ reminds us, we serve Him](#).

The word client, by contrast, derives from a Latin word meaning “to bow before” and was used to describe a vassal, or a dependent. The word often still carries this ancient meaning but it has come also to be commonly used in the context of social welfare agencies. For both of these reasons, it is not the right word for the neighbors we serve, and more importantly, for the manner in which we are called to serve them.

First, the poor are not our dependents in any way. Instead, as Frédéric said, “*we are equals in infirmity and – in virtue – often inferior to those we are visiting*.” [\[1372, to the Assembly, 1838\]](#) How could it be otherwise? After all, in the poor we “*see the suffering Christ*.” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.8\]](#) Second, the Society is not a social welfare agency, or a service delivery organization in any sense of those terms. We are Catholic Christians, living our faith through personal service to all “*those in need and the forgotten, the victims of exclusion or adversity*.” [\[Rule, Part I, 1.5\]](#) We do this not so that they owe us something in return, but to welcome them into community, and to share the gifts we have received through God’s grace.

You may say it is only a word, and that’s true, but God’s eternal Word was made flesh, He was not made client. He is present to us in the poor, so let us resolve always to refer to those we serve as neighbors, brothers, sisters, and friends - not because we are instructed to do so, but because we truly believe that is who they are to us.

Contemplate

Do I truly see the poor as my neighbors, brothers, sisters, and friends?

Recommended Reading

[The Manual](#)