

VINCENTIAN CONTEMPLATIONS

Volume I



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

Introduction

Our Vincentian Formation is a lifelong process of becoming. Through our service to Christ's poor, our friendship with them and with each other, and our devotion to our shared spirituality, we seek to grow in holiness.

Our Rule reminds us that our personal dedication to our formation is also essential. These Contemplations are offered as a way for Vincentians to learn from the words and example of our Saints and Blesseds so that we might prayerfully examine our own words and actions.

Inline references are provided for those who wish to see the quotes in context, and if you are reading these Contemplations electronically, you can simply click on the link.

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Could our Rule be Rewritten Just by Observing your Conference?

Fr. Dennis Holtschneider, in an address to the National Assembly in 2006, reminded us of the tradition of “Rules” for religious orders. Centuries ago, these rules were typically handwritten; fire, water, or any number of things could destroy the single copy on hand. Then what?

The idea of a rule was that, should it be lost, it could be rewritten just by observing how the members of the order live.

I don’t know about you, but when I hear the word “rule,” I think first of restrictive, prescriptive codes of conduct. Our Rule is not that. Like the rules of religious orders, it is primarily a spiritual document. It tells us, for example, that Vincentians “*establish relationships based on trust and friendship*” with those that we serve, and that we seek to understand their problems “*as [we] would a brother or sister.*”

I am not sure I can say what specific things those phrases are instructing me to do. But I can ask myself this:

If an outside observer were to watch me present a home visit report, are those the sentences they would write to describe what I shared? Would they think I was talking about a friend, a brother, a sister?

This is the gift of our Rule. It demands nothing of us. It only describes our calling.

It is up to us to answer that call.

Contemplate

Could our Rule be rewritten just by observing me?

Recommended Reading

[The Rule](#), Part I, 1.7 - 1.12

Help Which Honors

I hope you are not still using the dreaded “c” word to describe our neighbors in need! The words we use can both reflect and influence the way we feel about things, and the way we act.

In a famous essay, Bl. Frederic once explained the difference between help that humiliates and help that honors. If all that we do is deliver material assistance like food, firewood, rent money – things that the poor can never repay – we leave them indebted to us. When we extend a hand to shake, offer a word of encouragement and a prayer, then we are giving things that we, too, will need one day.

Help honors, Frederic explained, because it may become mutual. Because the hand you clasp clasps yours in return.

We are called to establish relationships based on trust and friendship; to understand their troubles as we would a brother or sister; to be the neighbor, the Good Samaritan. Our Rule uses the language of mutual relationships:

To have a neighbor you have **to be** a neighbor.

To have a friend, you have **to be** a friend.

To have a brother or sister you have **to be** a brother or sister.

Clients don't have clients. It is not a mutual relationship. Perhaps during this time of pandemic, it will become easier for us to remember “we are all in this together!”

Contemplate

When I last saw the Face of Christ on a visit, how did He change me?

Recommended Reading

[Spirituality of the Home Visit: A Journal](#), Parts I and II

Jesus Christ, Evangelizer & Servant of the Poor

As Jesus began announcing his ministry in the Gospel of Luke, he pointed to the scripture that said, “*He has sent me to bring good news to the poor...*”

During his life on earth, Christ was fully dedicated to healing, feeding, comforting, and serving “the least among us” teaching us by His example to do the same. He also told us that we would be judged by how we treated them, just as if we had done it to Christ Himself.

Because he held Christ’s personal example as the driving force of his own spirituality, St. Vincent de Paul said that “Jesus Christ is the Rule of the Mission.”

The same may be said of the Society of St Vincent de Paul: we seek to follow Christ’s teaching by following His example. That is why we are called not only to see the face of Christ in those we serve, but to *be* the face of Christ in bringing them hope.

Contemplate

When have I sought to be Christ in my service?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope, Module II](#), 2.2, Enrichment Reading by Fr. Maloney

Praying with Blessed Frederic

As Vincentians, we follow Bl. Frederic's example in our service, true to our founding declaration that "we will go to the poor!"

Ozanam often cited the Letter of James in support of these charitable works: "*If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,' but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?*" (James 2:15-16)

He even went so far as to argue that "religion serves less to think than to act."

It seems almost contradictory that such a man of letters, who could speak or read eight languages, who read and wrote and lectured prolifically, should be a champion of this idea that we should "stop talking, start doing."

Yet, Frederic's example also showed that the active and contemplative need not be mutually exclusive, as his daily devotion to the Eucharist, the Bible, and personal prayer never wavered.

In this way, he gave us models for both the *human* and *spiritual* dimensions of our [Vincentian Formation](#).

Contemplate

Do I make prayer, as St. Vincent said, my "first occupation [so my] mind may be filled with God for the rest of the day."

Recommended Reading

[15 Days of Prayer with Bl. Frederic](#)

Uncertainty, Unrestricted Readiness, and Trust in Providence

We have all, I imagine, been in many calls and meetings this year, trying to make plans despite the vast uncertainty of this time we are living through. St. Vincent once wrote to St. Louise after she had expressed frustration with disruptions to her plans, saying,

"I hate uncertainty as much as you do, but what is really important to us is to govern our lives not by our hatred of uncertainty but by indifference, by which we are open to what God wants. Let us then try to grow in indifference."

This word, "indifference" as it is directly translated from the French *disponibilité*, is better understood as "unrestricted readiness" - a complete openness to God's will before our own.

Uncertainty can be frustrating; in this time, even frightening perhaps. What we fear, though, is not the uncertainty itself, but the realization that we are not in control. This does not mean we should stop making plans, it only means that although we are not in control, HE is.

And when you think about it, that realization should be neither frustrating nor frightening, but comforting.

Contemplate

When have I chosen the certainty of a possession or plan over surrendering to God's will?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#) especially Meditation 2 "Following God's Will"

Trust, Friendship, and Playing the System

After presenting a workshop in which we talked about the importance of extending the benefit of the doubt to those we serve, I was asked: “Do you mean that when we are on a home visit and it is evident that a friend is playing the system we should fall for it?”

This is a really good question! And the short answer is: ***don’t have a system, and nobody will play it.***

One example I’ve heard about how people play the system is that, once told that the conference only helps x times per year, “like clockwork, they call again on day 366!”

If they are working the system, it’s our system; they are following our rules. They literally are doing exactly what we told them to do. “They are very careful,” as BI Frederic once put it, “Not to contradict a single thing we say.”

Now imagine one of your siblings calling you for money over and over again. At some point you’d likely sit down with them and say, “I’d love to help you, but I can see that the money I am giving you is not really solving your problem.”

You wouldn’t do that because you have a system to tell you “enough is enough,” but because you love your brothers and sisters and you truly want to help them.

We’re called to serve those in need in exactly this way - by forming “relationships based on trust and friendship,” and by trying to help “in the best way possible.” That’s not always financial help.

At the same time, we must keep in mind Bishop Untener’s reminder that even though some may be “playing the system,” we should “help them anyway” with their urgent human needs.

There is nothing in our Rule or our traditions that says we can never say “no,” but our default approach in all cases should be to determine how we can help, not look for reasons to withhold our help.

Contemplate

Have I ever left a particular home visit feeling like a better Christian? What made that visit special?

Recommended Reading

“The Undeserving Poor” by Bishop Kenneth Untener in [Serving in Hope, Module IV](#)

A Seed of Sanctity within Our Hearts

As Fr. Robert Maloney explains in his book *‘Tis a Gift to be Simple*,” many of our saints had a “guiding star” in their own paths to holiness. For example, St. Therese of Lisieux, recognized not only as a saint but as a Doctor of the Church, taught us what she called “the little way,” a complete and childlike trust in God as our Father.

As Vincentians, we have chosen to answer our church’s Universal Call to Holiness by following the Vincentian Pathway. It is useful, then, to consider what our Patron’s guiding star was. St. Vincent once said that simplicity was “the virtue I love the most.” For him, simplicity was not just truthfulness, but *the* Truth; Christ incarnate, the Word of God.

Bl. Frederic believed that “each of us carries within his heart a seed of sanctity.” Like Vincent, Frederic taught that we must abandon ourselves to God’s Providence, to seek always to do His will.

And after all, what better way to discern God’s Will than through devotion to God’s Truth?

“Do you see how simple it is,” Vincent once asked, “To be a saint?”

Contemplate

What do I carry with me that is a barrier to simplicity? How can I put it down?

Recommended Reading

[‘Tis a Gift to be Simple](#), by Fr. Robert Maloney

Raking Our Way to Heaven

I've never been much of a "lawn guy." You know him, the one in the neighborhood whose lawn always looks great?

In recent weeks, while working from home, I have taken up the habit of going outside during my lunch break and doing a little lawn work. Those who live in "live oak country" will appreciate that these trees do not change color in the fall, nor bud in the spring. Instead, they drop their leaves year-round.

And so every single day, I rake a little, and even mow or trim some days.

Normally, I would have spent half a day or more on the weekend, doing all those things at once. Now, if I spend extra time on the weekend, I can dig in deeper, or plant a garden. You could almost say I'm becoming a "lawn guy."

In [*Christifidelis Laici*](#), Pope St. John Paul II exhorts us to live our faith in *all* parts of our lives, not only as a "weekend chore" at Mass; to allow Providence to bear fruit in every sphere of activity; in His own time, not ours.

Bl. Frederic "*proudly professed [his] faith*" not only by attending Mass and serving the poor, but also by striving to fulfill his vocation as a professor "*in a Christian manner and to serve God in serving wholesome teaching.*"

My lawn work has helped to remind me that by actively living my faith every day, my "weekend chore" is easier, and nurtures greater growth. So that it can become not just what I do, but what I am.

Contemplate

As Vincentians, we live our faith in our service. In what small way can I live my faith in the rest of my life?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope, Module I: Our Vincentian Vocation](#)

Loaves, Fishes, and Trust in Providence

Moved with pity for the crowds that followed him, Christ healed their sick, then asked his disciples to feed the multitudes who had gathered to hear Him speak. His disciples at first responded with doubt – they hadn't nearly enough! Couldn't the crowd go buy their own food? How could they feed 5000 with only five loaves of bread and two fish?

Give them what you have, Christ told them, and through the miracle of God's providence, it fed the multitudes. Like those disciples, Vincentians also are called to "trust in providence."

Bl. Frederic learned to trust in providence in the earliest days of the Society. He wrote to his mother in 1836, marveling:

"We have reason to hope that the establishment will prosper. Indeed, when it was founded, it seemed to me a great folly, since we had only 180 francs. Providence has provided. I am now very much convinced that to do works of charity, it is never necessary to worry about financial resources, they always come."

Let the day's own assistance requests, one might say, be enough for the day. But Trust in Providence is about much more than the supply of material resources!

For Frederic, this principle also guided his personal life, where he tried always to do God's will, seeing "earth as the workshop of Providence."

For us, following Frederic's example, it means from time to time looking back on events of the past, re-reading our lives to see the significance of God's Will, and to better discern His plan for us.

Contemplate

Do I "trust in providence" not only in my Conference, but also in my personal life?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope: Module III](#) Session 1: Frederic Ozanam

Fishers and Farmers

Ill-tempered and ambitious, young Vincent de Paul was ashamed to be seen with his father when they went to town because “he went poorly dressed and limped.” When he was away at school, he refused to see his father when the “poor farmer” came to visit, and he even rejected his meager inheritance upon his father’s death.

It wasn’t until he was a 36-year-old priest that Vincent would have two powerful moments of conversion while serving poor farmers. We consider his experiences at Gannes-Folleville and Chatillon as the beginning of our Vincentian Charism.

It is ironic that Vincent’s great insight was sparked by encounters with poor farmers exactly like those whom he had rejected in his youth; the people closest to him; his own family. In a sense, you could say that he saw the image of his Heavenly Father in the image of his earthly father.

“Our inheritance,” Vincent once said, “is the poor.”

Christ asked His disciples to become “fishers of men.” True to his upbringing, St. Vincent teaches us to love God like a farmer: “with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow.”

Contemplate

Have I overlooked Christ’s face in somebody close to me? A friend, a coworker, a family member?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

In Times of Civil Unrest, What Would Frederic Do?

The death of George Floyd in the custody of the Minneapolis Police Department shocked the conscience of the nation; the outrage and mourning have been nearly universal. It has also inflamed passions, and has motivated many of our fellow Americans to publicly demonstrate, and others to counter-demonstrate, sometimes amidst violence.

We don't really have to wonder how Frederic might have viewed the conflict. In his own time, he also saw great social upheavals; upheavals that more than once became armed revolution. In these, he did not see an opportunity to choose a side. Rather, he said that "We must cast ourselves between these two enemy armies, if not to prevent, at least to deaden the shock."

He understood that by making enemies of those we wish to persuade, we will only harden their opposition, and deepen the divisions that caused the upheavals in the first place. He saw that conflicts continued when people refused to listen to each other.

"There is no intermediary more powerful than religion," Frederic wrote, and nothing that could better draw people together, "reminding each of its duties to the other, and especially of the obligations of justice."

We are called as Christians and as Vincentians to love our neighbor – all our neighbors – as ourselves, for the love of God. Our Rule's reminder to "understand their problems as we would a brother or sister" is not only for home visits, but for the whole of our lives.

In our time, as in Frederic's, there is truly only one side: God's side.

Contemplate

How can I better keep my ears, eyes, and heart open to my neighbors?

Recommended Reading

[Diversity/Multicultural Guide](#)

I Stand at the Door and Knock

Sometimes new or prospective members ask, “Why do we go on home visits?”

From the perspective of modern society, the question makes sense, in a way; we rely so heavily in our daily lives upon email, texting, social media, videoconferencing, not to mention good old-fashioned phone calls – all of them right in our pockets! *Why not just rely on these tools to gather the information we need?*

The question answers itself! Home visits are not, when it comes right down to it, primarily about “gathering information.” We could mail out forms if that were all we were trying to do.

Imagine if a dating web site promised you an opportunity only to talk on the phone with your “match.” One thing you could be sure of – you would never get to know that person. To get to know somebody, you have to spend some time together.

Our Rule calls us to “form relationships based on trust and friendship.” It calls us to listen and understand with our hearts, “beyond both words and appearances.” We seek to see the *face* of Christ, not the electronic image of Christ.

We also promise, as Vincentians, to give of ourselves, to show God’s love through our presence in the lives of people who, in addition to material deprivation, often feel forgotten and alone.

Christ gave himself fully to us, and he did it in person. We are called to do the same.

Contemplate

In my life, when has the *presence* of another person changed my heart?

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#) (especially “*Home Visits in the Vincentian Tradition*”)

“The session is nearly always concerned with business, it seems long.”

So said a young Vincentian of the Conference meetings he attended each week. He had joined a community of faith in which we are called to grow in holiness together, and instead found meetings consumed with discussions of budgets, numbers, and who knows what.

Are your meetings also “always concerned with business?” Do you sometimes feel as if spiritual reflection and sharing has been cut short?

Don’t despair! The young Vincentian I quoted was Frédéric Ozanam in 1835 – less than two years after the very first Conference was formed! We are creatures of habit, and it is only natural to fall back on habits formed by many years in business, in secular organizations, and managing household budgets. We gravitate towards what seems most familiar.

It takes continuous effort and commitment by all members to ensure that our “*Conference meets less to conduct business than to celebrate and deepen its unity for essentially spiritual reasons*” as the Manual puts it. When our Conferences drift away from our central calling to “grow in holiness together,” it is because all of us have drifted.

We must gently remind *ourselves* first, and then our brothers and sisters, to seek first Christ’s face in those we serve, and together, to seek God’s will through shared reflection and prayer on our service during our Conference Meetings.

Contemplate

How have you encouraged the friends in your Conference to grow in spirit? How have they encouraged you?

Recommended Reading

[Frédéric Ozanam: A Life in Letters](#)

Letter 90. To Léonce Curnier, February 23, 1835

[Apostolic Reflection with Rosalie Rendu](#)

The Good which God Desires

Speaking of the founding of the congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, St. Vincent explained that this accomplishment, great as it was, was the accomplishment of God alone. He said:

“The good which God desires is accomplished almost by itself, without our even thinking of it ... God himself, who wanted to be served in such circumstances, brought [it] imperceptibly into being. If he made use of us, we had no idea, however, where this was leading.”

Vincent did not suffer from false modesty. He was not fishing for compliments. Of course, he knew he'd founded both of those orders and all their associated works. But he also knew that accomplishments can only be measured after the fact. All we can measure beforehand is whether we have acted in accordance with God's will; whether we have been indifferent to the circumstances that challenge us, remaining focused on acting with charity; with love.

“God does not consider the outcome of the good work undertaken,” he once said, *“But the charity that accompanied it.”*

So it is with our home visits, our special works, and our systemic change efforts. If we are acting in accordance with God's will, then the outcome of our work is also God's will, and we, along with the neighbors we serve, will be blessed not with “credit” but with our eternal reward.

Contemplate

What are my personal goals in my works of charity?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#) especially Meditation 2 “Following God's Will”

Do We Make Home Visits in Pairs Only for Liability Concerns?

The short answer, of course, is “no!” But the full answer must include the real reasons:

Our Vincentian tradition of visiting in pairs did not begin with the advent of liability insurance; it dates to the very first home visit in 1833. More importantly, it continues the Apostolic Tradition begun by Christ Himself. As Chapter 10 of Luke’s Gospel tells us, Jesus appointed 72, “whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit,” giving them power over demons and power to cure the sick – much as we make visits empowered to alleviate some of the suffering of those in need.

Another reason can be visualized by recalling a child’s toy - the Viewmaster. By placing one eye on each of its lenses to view two photos taken at slightly different angles, you can perceive a single, three-dimensional picture. In a similar way, since no two people see things the same way, the observations of two different home visitors give depth to our perception. Our shared observations enable us to more fully understand our friends in need “*as we would a brother or sister.*”

In addition, whenever possible, we try to pair one man and one woman together for home visits. In this way, we also benefit from the fullness of our human [complementarity](#).

Most importantly, visiting in pairs nurtures our Vincentian friendship and growth in holiness. As Bl. Frederic reminds us, “*visiting the poor should be the means and not the end of our association.*”

In this we are reminded again of the 72, who, rejoicing in their power over demons and illness, were admonished by Christ to remember that there was a higher purpose to the power he had given them, and that they should “*not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven.*”

Contemplate

Do I see my home visit companions as true friends? How do we grow together in spirit?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope, Module II](#) especially 2.4 “Journey Together to Holiness”

To Give Back to Heaven All We Have Received

St. Vincent once said that there is no greater love than martyrdom. Indeed, to give one's life for others also is an act honored throughout the secular world. In his Gettysburg Address, President Lincoln called it "the last full measure of devotion."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church [tells us](#) that martyrdom "is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death."

But in a letter to his friend Léonce Curnier, Blessed Frédéric said that "to be a martyr is possible for every Christian."

In saying this, he was not calling for Christians to seek out death. Rather, he explained, we could give our lives in sacrifice either in a single instant, like the burned sacrifices of the Old Testament, or slowly, smoking "night and day like perfume on the altar."

For Frédéric, the Christian vocation was to be lived not only on Sunday mornings, but in our family lives, our daily occupations, and our involvement in civic life and society. In exercising the gifts and talents we have received, we can dedicate our work to our own egos, he said, or to God and humanity.

Ozanam's words foreshadowed what we now call the Apostolate of the Laity, and his life stands as a model for us to follow. He remained dedicated to the charitable works of the Society he had founded, faithfully devoted to his wife and daughter, and, as a professor at the Sorbonne, he sought to fulfill his profession "in a Christian manner and to serve God in serving wholesome teaching."

We pray for the strength of faith to make the ultimate sacrifice if it is ever asked of us, but the truth is that we all are called to offer our lives to God one day at a time, for as many days as we are given.

"This offering," Frédéric said, "is in our hands."

Contemplate

Through my ordinary work and activities today, how can I serve God?

Recommended Reading

[Christifideles Laici](#)

Our Transformative Home Visits

It is the calling of all Christians to grow in holiness; to become “perfect, just as your Father is perfect.”

But how? Aristotle observed that to become a builder, you build. By extension, he reasoned, to become a virtuous person, you do virtuous acts. He spoke of the cardinal, or human, virtues. You become courageous, for example, by behaving courageously.

But how can we perform *perfect* acts?

Vincentians are certainly people of action. We cherish St. Vincent’s call to “love God with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow.”

Even Ozanam, the academic, the intellectual, declared that “religion serves less to think than to act,” and we are called to acts of charity; serving our neighbor, as our Rule says, “for love alone.”

It is in our acts of charity that we begin to “will in all things what God wills,” as St. Vincent taught. The more we seek to fulfill God’s will before our own, the closer we are drawn to perfect union with Him.

As Vincentians, our primary act of charity is the home visit. We receive His grace in our home visits in two different dimensions. First, the joyful grace of having fulfilled what our Savior asked us to do; like a child bursting with pride at having cleaned up his toys without being asked. *Gaudete in Domino!* Second, and more deeply, we receive His transformational grace; we become as the Apostle tells us, “a *new creation*.”

Love itself is an act of will – to put the needs of another before our own. Our home visits are indispensable to our vocation. Through them, we serve both the will and the person of Christ, and in doing so, we are transformed.

That is what Blessed Frédéric meant when he wrote that “*visiting the poor should be the means and not the end of our association*.”

Contemplate

Am I regularly going on home visits, seeking and serving Christ in His poor?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope, Module VII](#)

The Source and Summit of Our Faith

Our Rule tells us that on our journey together toward holiness we are to have a special “devotion to the Eucharist.” (Rule 1, 2.2) Certainly, we know that Bl. Frederic received Holy Communion daily (which was not common in his time.) But aside from the practice of receiving it often, how is this Sacrament especially important to our Vincentian Vocation?

St. Vincent taught that “Christ is our rule.” For Vincent, Christ’s example during his time on earth as servant and evangelizer of the poor was the very specific example we were called to follow. After all, to teach us how to live, to show His love for us, and to free us even from death was His entire purpose when He “clothed himself in our humanity.”

Both by His example and by His words, he called us to join with him in eternity, to be “perfect, just as your Father is perfect.”

But for those of us not yet born during the time of His incarnation, Christ found a way to share His true presence, to offer His sacrifice again, and again, and again; to give Himself personally to each of us. He did this, St. Vincent said, because “*Love is inventive, even to infinity.*”

As Vincentians, we are called to the virtue of selflessness, to give of our time, our possessions, our talents, and *ourselves*. (Rule, Pt. I, 2.5.1) And because “no form of charity is foreign to the Society,” we seek to give of ourselves creatively...inventively.

Through the inventiveness of Christ’s love in the Eucharist, we carry within us Him whose example we follow, and whom we seek to serve.

Contemplate

Do I renew my dedication to the Vincentian Vocation in receiving Holy Communion?

Recommended Reading

[CCD Volume XI](#): Conference 102. Exhortation to a Dying Brother

Humility, the Foundation of All Other Virtues

The virtue of humility, in which we are called to emulate St. Vincent, is defined in our Rule as “*accepting the truth about our frailties, gifts, talents, and charism, yet knowing that all that God gives us is for others and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.*” [Rule 2.5.1]

It is tempting to reduce humility to the difference between muttering “aw shucks” and shouting “I’m the king of the world!” when we receive praise or recognition, but humility is a call to a much deeper transformation.

For Vincent, humility was “desire for shame” that enables us to empty us of ourselves; to open our hearts to be filled by God, so that God is “acting in us and all will go well.”

This virtue, he taught, was essential not only to our works of charity, but to the practice of servant leadership; that in leading we must follow Christ’s example, “not to be served, but to serve.” In humility, we avoid seeking glory, or serving our own ego by our works.

Just as Vincent taught that God will fill hearts emptied by humility, Blessed Frederic cautioned that the melancholy of contemplating our own faults can lead us to become jealous of the virtues of others; to become “displeased with ourselves so violently only because we love ourselves too much.”

It is easy to fall into this self-centered, or false humility, because “it is easier to dream than to act; tears cost us less than sweat; and it is sweat that the inexorable sentence demands of us.”

It is only by allowing the recognition of our own faults to open our hearts to God that He will make us “go out and do” in accordance with His will: *In ipso movemur et sumus* (In Him we move and have our being.)

It is in this sense, that humility empties us of ourselves so that we may be filled with God, that both Frederic and Vincent echo St. Augustine, who said that “humility is the foundation of all the other virtues.”

Contemplate

Do I allow myself to be overwhelmed into inaction by contemplation of my own faults?

Recommended Reading

[Frédéric Ozanam: A Life in Letters](#) – 160. To François Lallier

Don't Let Us Be Too Hard on Them

We're called to withhold our judgment in visiting the poor; to judge the problem, the need, but not the person. This is one concrete example of how, as Vincentians, we seek to live Christ's teaching. (Matthew 7:1-3)

As Vincentians, we can hardly find a more vivid example of serving without judgment than Bl. Rosalie Rendu. She always taught that the poor, above all else, need our kindness and our understanding.

It is easy to agree with this in theory, but also very easy to forget in practice. Imagine, for example, being on a home visit and learning that just last month the family in need spent their tax refund on a trip to the beach. What might be your inward reaction?

"What were they thinking?! Why didn't they save that money for next month's bills?!"

Might some families need a little assistance in budgeting? Of course, but might we also be more understanding of their need for the exact same things we all desire?

In one memorable incident, a poor woman – almost starving - had been given a ring to sell in order to buy food. Rather than do this immediately, the woman wore the ring for two days, despite her own hunger. This was reported with great indignance to Rosalie. What wastefulness! What folly!

Rosalie replied, *"Poor creature! How silly! But I daresay it is the first time in her life she ever had a pleasure, and very likely it will be the last. Don't let us be hard on her!"*

Indeed, that small moment of pleasure may have been worth more to that woman than all the meals she bought. Rosalie often arranged for poor families to go spend a day in the countryside, believing it was as much a refreshment to their bodies as to their souls.

The poor whom we serve are not machines, and our service is not a math problem. The poor share with us all the same desires for recreation, relaxation, appreciation of beauty, and so many other things that to a judgmental eye, may at first appear frivolous or wasteful – but may also be the things they lack the most.

The Scriptures, our Rule, and Rosalie's example call us to establish a relationship of trust and friendship, and through that to listen not just to the words, but to the whole person in front of us.

Contemplate

Have I made judgments of the poor because I thought they "wasted" money or time?

Recommended Reading

[Faces of Holiness](#)

Truth and Humility Go Well Together

Perhaps because we live in a world that celebrates and rewards ego, humility is the Vincentian Virtue that often seems the easiest to forget.

Called to serve and not to be served, we can easily imitate the outward signs of humility without quite fully seeking, and accepting, our own smallness.

St. Vincent was clear in all his writings that humility must be both *interior* and *exterior*; that if we are truly humble in ourselves, we should have no concern at all about how we might be seen by others. Recalling the example of one of his missionaries who had always actively sought the work that others thought was beneath him, Vincent said of him that “*when he said this with his lips, he felt it in his heart, wherein lies true humility.*”

As in all things, our example was set by Christ, who could have chosen to come to us in the form of a king, a warrior, or a man of wealth. Instead, as Bl Frederic said, the Son of God “*was hidden for thirty years in the workshop of a carpenter.*”

It does not matter our station in this life. We are called to dedicate all of our gifts and talents to God; to “seek first the Kingdom.” Without humility, our highest truth is self, which blinds us to the only Truth that set us free.

“*Part of my vanity,*” St. Louise wrote, “*Is surely due to ignorance since, properly speaking, humility is the knowledge of truth. This is why it is possible to recognize it in God.*”

Our Rule tells us exactly that! Humility is “*accepting the truth about our frailties, gifts talents and charism, yet knowing that all that God gives us is for others and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.*” [2.5.1]

With humility, we become God’s instruments, serving the least among us just as Christ called us to do. The poor are indeed our “Lord and Master.”

That is the truth of the Vincentian Vocation, and as our Patron said, “Truth and humility go well together.”

Contemplate

How can I make my habits of humility transform my heart?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with St. Louise de Marillac](#) Meditation15: Humility

Gentleness, the Most Important Thing We Give

Of all our Vincentian Virtues, gentleness may be the most visible outward sign to those whom we serve that we are visiting them in friendship, with Christ in our presence.

Gentleness, our Rule teaches, is “friendly assurance and invincible goodwill, which mean kindness, sweetness, and patience in our relationship with others” [2.5.1]

Each of these characteristics of gentleness is important in itself, and all of them together form this virtue that Vincentians are called to, but let’s consider patience for a moment.

On our home visits, we often encounter people who, trapped in the “tyranny of the moment” have made decisions that, outside the overwhelming stress of their lives, would seem to make no sense.

“How could you do that?!” we want to shout, losing our patience inwardly, while maintaining our kind smiles outwardly. Like all virtues, gentleness has its full meaning when it is not only on our lips, but in our hearts.

In one of St. Vincent’s great moments of inspiration in 1617, he took the confession of a dying man in the town of Gannes. Feeling distraught and forgotten, the man desperately sought reconciliation with God.

“But you knew you should have been making your confessions regularly!” Vincent could have shouted, and the statement would not have been incorrect.

Instead, he saw the importance of both our personal presence, and of our gentleness in reassuring those who feel lost, forgotten, and alone that God has not forgotten them. It is our gentleness that reassures them not only of our understanding, but of God’s presence and His love.

As important as it is to appear gentle and patient, it is even more important to truly be gentle and patient; to see, as Vincent taught us by his example, that we are called be vessels of God’s love, radiating His presence, kindness, and assurance to all those we serve.

The poor, Bl. Rosalie taught those first Vincentians, “will appreciate your kindness and your love more than all else you bring them.”

Contemplate

How can I better listen with patience, and respond with kindness?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations](#) - Especially Chapter 16

Zeal, the Soul of the Virtues

Zeal seems to be the least discussed of the Vincentian Virtues, perhaps because we Vincentians are all so passionate and enthusiastic about this vocation that we just figure we've got that one covered!

Our virtue of zeal, though, is much more than simple enthusiasm. The Rule defines it as “a *passion for the full flourishing and eternal happiness of every person.*” [Rule Part I, 2.5.]

Certainly, zeal can be expressed, or observed, as enthusiasm, but to be the “soul of the virtues,” as St. Vincent called it, zeal mustn't go “outside the enclosure of love of the neighbor.” If it does, he cautioned, it will become “no longer zeal, but the passion of antipathy.”

Imagine that! We seek to bring the hope of eternal life to those we serve and end up pitting ourselves against them instead.

Christ, we recall, admonished Martha when she complained about her sister Mary, who had abandoned her duties to listen to Jesus. Martha's zeal for the *proper* way to serve blinded her to the one *important* way to serve in that moment, the one that Mary had chosen.

“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing.”
[Lk 10:41-42]

If we are truly committed to the full flourishing and eternal happiness of every person, our zeal must be for the person, tempered by understanding, and avoiding what Bl. Frederic called “the proud pharisaism of an indiscreet zeal.”

True zeal must always remain bounded by “love of the neighbor,” as Vincent explained; by the “one thing” to which Christ referred; towards the ideal our Rule defines: to act “for love alone.”

Contemplate

Do I let my zeal cause me to be rigid or harsh when I could be more understanding and patient?

Recommended Reading

[CCD Vol. II, Letter 460](#)

What is a Patron Saint; or WWSVdPD?

In our great constellation of Vincentian Saints and Blesseds, we can point to examples of great works, great sacrifice, great wisdom, and most of all, great holiness. We regularly read the words of our founder, Bl. Frederic Ozanam; we recount the wise words of Bl. Rosalie as she guided those first members; we strive to be as committed as St. Louise.

But one Saint stands out, because in its earliest days the Society adopted Vincent de Paul as our Patron Saint. Pope Leo XIII would later name him as patron of all works of Christian charity (perhaps he was influenced another Vincentian, Bl. Giuseppe Toniolo, who had earlier advised the Holy Father on his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*.)

But for us, Vincent is more than an icon on which to meditate, or a wise teacher whose words we may read from time to time. *“He is not even,”* as Frederic once wrote, *“an honorable name for preserving a good appearance in the religious world; he is a model one must strive to imitate, as he himself imitated the model of Jesus Christ.”*

For us, seeking the holiness that Vincent exemplified through his own example, he is a role model in mind, body, and heart. Our dedication to following that example must also be complete. Reading his words, imitating his actions, and praying for his intercession regularly, we offer what Frederic called our *“two-fold devotion [to] him, imitation and invocation.”*

Our Vincentian Pathway, as we call it, is our chosen pathway to personal formation, and to growth in holiness as a community of faith. That pathway is the one trod by St. Vincent, both literally and figuratively; the pathway on which St. Vincent saw “how easy it is to be a saint.”

We are members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Blessed Frederic again reminds us that it is only by *“appropriating the thoughts and virtues of the saint, that the society can escape from the personal imperfections of its members, that it can make itself useful in the Church and give reason for its existence.”*

Contemplate

How often can I ask myself, “What would St. Vincent de Paul do?”

Recommended Reading

[Mystic of Charity](#) by Father Robert Maloney

Let Go of Your Poverty, Let Go of Your Wealth

The Rule tells us that our Vincentian Virtue of selflessness is “*dying to our ego with a life of self-sacrifice; members share their time, their possessions, their talents and themselves in a spirit of generosity.*” [Rule, Pt I, 2.5.1]

What stands in the way of our “dying to our ego?” In emphasizing the importance of developing our interior life, and our detachment from worldly things. St. Vincent implies that it is defining our self-worth, our ego, by our worldly circumstances that we separate ourselves from God.

Vincent himself, having been born and raised in poverty, initially sought wealth and status through the priesthood. In his ambition, he was ashamed of his father, the poor farmer. Once assigned to the de Gondi household, had achieved exactly that. But it would be his interactions with the poor, and his embrace of poverty that would draw him closer to God.

St. Louise, by contrast, had spent her first twelve years among the nobility, studying arts and culture, wanting for nothing. She was charming, beautiful, a painter, a writer, and a voracious reader. Young Louise prayed that she might dedicate herself to God in the religious life. Finding herself nearly destitute when she was widowed, Louise was despondent, and Bishop Camus (her director) admonished her, saying: “*Mademoiselle, my dear sister, I do not know why your spirit is troubled and thinks itself to be in darkness and abandoned. For what reason? You are no longer divided. Now you belong wholly to the heavenly Spouse having nothing more to do with earthly things.*”

Just as Vincent had learned not to be blinded to God’s will by wealth, Louise learned not to be blinded by poverty. It is the attachment, not the things, that separate us from God.

As Vincentians, our primary purpose is our own spiritual growth, and our secondary purpose is to serve those in need, bringing them closer to God.

Let go of your poverty, let go of your wealth! Through selflessness, we seek total abandonment to Divine Providence, and grow closer to God along with those that we serve.

Contemplate

Do I cling to any possessions or desires? How can I let them go, and let God in?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Louise de Marillac](#)

I Would Understand Them, for I Would Be with Them

In describing our relationships with those in need, our Rule reminds us that we “seek to understand them as [we] would a brother or sister.” (Rule Pt. I, 1.9) But how can we understand if they speak a foreign language?

In answering the question literally, St. Vincent explained “*With such differences of language, how can missionaries go throughout the world to proclaim the Good News if they know only their own language? And how can they learn other languages if they don’t ask God to teach them, and apply themselves to studying them?*” (CCD XII, Conf 183)

Vincentians are listeners, and we cannot really listen without literally understanding the language, but there is much more to understanding a person than just to understand his words.

Bl. Frederic once said that “*the policeman might cast an uneasy eye seeing six or eight young men*” on the streets late at night, and that Parisians passing them “*would not understand their language.*”

He was not speaking of a literal foreign language, but of the full language and expression of a group of people. “*But I, I would understand them, for I would be with them and, in understanding, would think and speak as they did and would feel my heart expand.*”

It’s easy to understand our own groups, our own selves. At times we may even take pride in our separation from others. Think of the many t-shirts reading “It’s a _____ thing; you wouldn’t understand.”

Vincentians are called to listen not only to the words, but to the whole person; to empathize; to understand them as brothers and sisters. To be “with them.”

And that means we must make constant efforts to “learn the language,” to be present, to treat every person, as my father used to say, as if they have something important to teach you.

Contemplate

Have I misunderstood somebody because I did not take the time to learn their language?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Guide to Multicultural Issues](#)

Life is Not Simply Time That Passes

In his newest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis sounds some very Vincentian themes, especially in his exegesis in Chapter Two on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He challenges us to be the neighbor, to help build a “civilization of love.”

To love, he explains, is more than a “series of benevolent acts.” Instead, we are called to love the other fully for who they are, which leads us to seek the best for their lives. (This is the very definition in our Rule for the Vincentian Virtue of zeal!)

The Samaritan did not have the modern option of “slacktivism,” wherein one publicizes the plight of the poor through social media but can’t be bothered to touch them. He had to make a choice – in the middle of his busy day, in the middle of a trip, in the middle of the road. He chose to give his possessions, and more importantly his time, to a fellow human - a stranger - not because he was deserving, but because he was in pain.

Like the Samaritan, Vincentians offer a ministry of presence; we don’t merely stand with the poor, we sit with them, we listen to them, we pray with them, and we help them in the best way that we can.

Blessed Frederic challenged himself and his friends, saying “*weak Samaritans, worldly and people of little faith that we are, let us dare nonetheless to approach this great sick one. Perhaps he will not be frightened of us. Let us try to probe his wounds and pour in oil, soothing his ear with words of consolation and peace...*”

“By his actions,” Pope Francis says, “the Good Samaritan showed that ‘the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions.’”

As Christ said after telling the parable, “Go and do likewise.”

Contemplate

How can I use more time for interactions of love and kindness?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations II](#) – especially 8. Come on

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

As Vincentians, our primary purpose is growth in holiness. Our means towards achieving that is bearing witness to Christ's compassionate and liberating love by serving those in need, especially the poorest of the poor. We also are called to recognize that there are new types of poverty.

Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI, in *Caritas in veritate*, also calls us to "broaden our concept of poverty," explaining that "one of the deepest forms of poverty a person can experience is isolation."

"Poverty is often produced by a rejection of God's love, by man's basic and tragic tendency to close in on himself, thinking himself to be self-sufficient or merely an insignificant and ephemeral fact, a 'stranger' in a random universe."

The poverty of isolation is best alleviated by the gift of friendship, of community, and of our Vincentian "ministry of presence."

Ours is an evangelical mission not in the sense that we are called to "preach" to our neighbors, but that we are called, as St. Vincent put it, "*to be more reserved in their presence, more humble and devout toward God, and more charitable toward [our] neighbor so that they may see the beauty and holiness of our religion and be moved to return to it.*"

In spirit and in material state, the poor do not benefit from our prejudgments about what they need or deserve, but by our kindness and gentleness sharing God's love, just as He shares it with us: unconditionally.

Contemplate

If I were accused of being Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me?

Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#)

What is the Essence of the Society?

In considering what may be “the greatest” of our three Essential Elements of Friendship, Spirituality, and Service, it seems we sometimes confuse them with the Theological Virtues, of which, the Apostle teaches, love is the greatest.

But is this the case with our Essential Elements? Is there one above the others?

“[T]he strongest tie, the principle of a true friendship,” Bl Frederic once explained, “is charity...and good works are the food of charity.”

He went on to remind us that our visits to the poor are “at least equally for them as for ourselves, so as to become progressively better friends.”

Our Vincentian friendship, then, is accomplished through our service.

Our service, in turn, is animated by our spirituality. We don’t simply offer philanthropy, or volunteerism; instead, we seek to “draw nearer to Christ, serving Him in the poor and one another.” Our ideal is to relieve suffering “for love alone.”

Our service puts faith into action; it is a concrete instance of our spirituality.

Finally, just as our service is an expression of our spirituality, that spirituality is itself a call to both service and to friendship; we love God, in St. Vincent’s words, “with the strength of our arms, and the sweat of our brows.” We are members of Conferences, which are “genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action.”

We grow in holiness together, in friendship and in service.

Each of the three elements is *important* by itself, but they become *essential* as they fully intertwine with one another – and with us.

Contemplate

How has service fed my friendships? How has friendship served my growth in spirit?

Recommended Reading

[The Spirituality of the Home Visit](#) (A Journal)

The Faith and Charity of the First Centuries

Robert Barron, Bishop of Los Angeles, recently pointed out that in the Bible, whenever one “is given an experience of God, it comes with a commission.” Moses was sent to free his people after encountering the burning bush, Paul was called to apostleship on the road to Damascus, and so on.

As Vincentians, we are committed to charity; to serving Christ in the person of the poor. More importantly, we are called *to see the face of Christ*. Like Moses, Paul, Isaiah, and so many other biblical figures, we are given – if we seek it – an “experience of God.”

When Frederic’s good friend Leonce Curnier founded a new Conference at Nimes, he asked Frederic for the early records of the first Conference to help guide him – but the records had been lost.

Frederic wrote to his friend, explaining that the loss of the records wasn’t really a loss, for “*Charity must never look behind it, but always before, because the number of its past benefits is always very small, and the present and future misery it solaces is infinite.*” (Life in Letters: 90)

Inspired by Curnier’s words “*so brimming with charity, so full of that apostolic fire,*” Ozanam shared the letter with the Paris Conference, one of whose members responded:

“Indeed, this is the faith, this is the charity of the first centuries.”

When we seek the face of Christ in those we serve, we will see Him. That is not the end of our mission, but the beginning; it does not exalt us, but humbles us; it is not our reward, but our calling.

Let us allow our experience of God in our home visits to light our hearts on fire, to be Christ’s instruments in serving His poor in charity, faith, and hope.

As Frederic said, “*It is not too much for our century.*”

Contemplate

When did I last see Christ’s face? What is my “commission?”

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations](#) (especially chapters 13, 15, 16)

The Great Hope that Cannot be Destroyed

Vincentians, as our motto reminds us, serve in hope. Caught up in the transactional nature that so much our material assistance tends to take, it is easy to allow our hope to be reduced only to wishes that the lights will stay on, or the eviction will be avoided.

As important as those things are, and as hard as we should continue to work for the material comfort, stability, and self-sufficiency of our neighbors in need, that's not the hope we are called to share, nor the theological virtue to which we aspire.

It is true that we will always have the poor with us, and that is the reason for God's command to serve them generously. It is also true that poverty can lead our neighbors to true hopelessness; not only the belief that they are condemned to material want, but that they are simply not part of the community of faith; that the promise of salvation, too, is simply not for them.

In a similar way, we can sometimes allow our own hope to be diminished by worldly affairs, unless, as Pope Benedict XVI teaches, "*we are enlightened by the radiance of the great hope that cannot be destroyed even by small-scale failures or by a breakdown in matters of historic importance.*" [Spe salvi, 35]

It is through our service in humility, selflessness, and love that we remove – even if only temporarily – the veil of hunger and need that can blind the poor to God's promise, just as our own worries can blind us – even if only temporarily - to our mission of hope.

As Bl. Frederic reminds us, "*Many other wishes disturb our hearts, and we know that despite the cares which are taken as happiness here below, God foresees our need to hope for another.*" [522 to Lallier, 1844]

We always will have the poor with us, just as we always will have cares that can burden us. When we abandon our worldly cares to Divine Providence, our interior light of hope grows brighter, drawing those we serve to join with us on our pathway to eternal union with Christ, the one true hope.

Contemplate

What stands in the way of my hope?

Recommended Reading

[Spe salvi](#)

If it Does not Seem so to You, All the Better

The Society of St Vincent de Paul, we sometimes marvel, is one of the best kept secrets of our church.

“As it should be,” we congratulate ourselves. “We don’t brag!”

This seems, paradoxically, a shining example of our Vincentian virtue of humility. As individuals, when we tally up our own hours and dollars given in this ministry, we may take silent satisfaction that we are really setting a fine example for others.

But humility isn’t a reward. Humility is a deep acceptance that we are seeking to do God’s will; to fulfill God’s plan. If God is our measure of success, then unlike fitness or career or financial goals, we can never literally know when we “measure up.”

We must tally up and report our dollars and works, of course. We owe that as an act of accountability to our benefactors. But these reports are only exterior signs. Within our hearts, they should be less a measure of achievement, than a reminder that we must strive always to do better, always to do more.

Humility is not patting ourselves on the back in secret. It is knowing that what we achieve is for God’s glory, not our own. It is recognizing that all the gifts and talents we have received are “*for others and that we can achieve nothing of eternal value without His grace.*” [Rule, 2.5.1]

Christ called us to “be perfect, just as [our] Father is perfect.”

For the perfect, there is no need for humility. For the rest of us, it is probably best to keep in mind the counsel of St Vincent, who once said, “*you are serving God very effectively where you are. If it does not seem so to you, all the better.*” [SVP IV:364]

Contemplate

Is there a talent or gift I am storing up? Is there more that I can give?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with St Vincent de Paul](#)

How Delightful!

One of the most important precepts of our Vincentian spirituality is that we are called to “see the face of Christ” in those we serve. But how would it be if we were to literally see Christ’s physical appearance in so many people and places? Wouldn’t that be a little...crazy?

St. Vincent, in a conference given to the Daughters of Charity in 1646, reminded them of St Augustine’s teaching in his *Confessions* that putting full trust only in our physical senses, uninformed by reason, can blind us to the Truth of God’s presence and providence.

The ultimate truth of our vocation is that in the poor, we serve Jesus Christ. And this, Vincent teaches, is a joyful truth!

We will, he said, “go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day [we’ll] find God there... Go to visit a chain gang, you’ll find God there. Look after those little children, you’ll find God there. How delightful...! You go into poor homes, but you find God there. Again ... how delightful! He accepts the services you do for those sick persons and...considers them as done to himself.” [SV IX:199]

It is easy to become overwhelmed with our own senses, to “fulfill our duties from habit...our good works by routine” as Frédéric once put it. We begin to become jaded by the poverty that remains, by the unfinished work, even by the apparent ungratefulness of some of those that we serve.

Yet ultimately it is not we who serve them, but they who serve us, drawing us closer to Christ who lives in them!

We can’t let ourselves be fooled by trusting solely in our physical senses. Christ Himself taught us the truth of His presence in the poor, and it is Him that we serve.

How delightful!

Contemplate

How do my physical senses distract me from the Truth?

Recommended Reading

[Correspondences, Conferences, and Documents, Vol. IX](#) – Conference 24, beginning p. 190

To Humble Ourselves in Gratitude

This week of Thanksgiving seems like a good opportunity to examine the role of gratitude in our Vincentian lives. Gratitude is not one of our Vincentian Virtues, or our Essential Elements, but is nevertheless very important.

In fact, St. Vincent once admonished one of his missionaries to “not open your mouth except to express gratitude for the benefits you have received, and never to mention your discontent.”

Although this was advice for a specific situation, he often expressed in his letters and conferences the notion that gratitude is very closely tied to humility, the Vincentian Virtue that St. Augustine once called “the foundation of all the other virtues.”

We are grateful not simply as a matter of manners, but grateful because we are undeserving. He went so far as to say that our ingratitude can make us “worse than the greatest sinners alive.”

We sometimes make lists of the things for which we are most grateful. How often is your list topped by the things you did not earn? We don't *deserve* our children; we don't *deserve* the love of our husbands or wives; we don't *deserve* friendship, comfort, or even life itself. All these things are ours by the grace of God.

We may also be grateful for our paychecks or our possessions, but unlike the love of family and friends, we earned those things!

And so our gratitude for God's gift to us comes with a duty, and a desire, to repay that love. To “give [ourselves] wholly to God in gratitude for His having chosen [us]”

God is here. God is at our Thanksgiving tables, perhaps sitting in one of the empty chairs this year. We are not alone, we have been chosen. For every grace and gift we receive we possess another we can give – gratefully, gratuitously, and gladly!

“It only remains for us,” Bl. Frederic said, “to humble ourselves in gratitude for having been chosen, frail and weak as we are, as instruments of so great an enterprise.”

Contemplate

What am I thankful for, and how can I repay it?

Recommended Reading

[Book of Prayers](#) by Frederic Ozanam

The Circumstances Around You

As Vincentians, we are called to “trust in providence.” Because “providence” is a form of the verb “provide” we can be tempted to trust simply that the things we may need will be provided to us.

Indeed, in 1836 Bl. Frédéric told his mother that he was “*very much convinced that to do works of charity, it is never necessary to worry about financial resources, they always come.*”

Most present-day Conferences have had exactly this experience. Just as our funds are running short, a new benefactor appears with a donation, or the calls for assistance suddenly drop off, and somehow, we don’t run out of money. This is wonderful and is no doubt a gift from God!

But Providence is something much more than merely an eager donor. The words “providence” and “provide” both come from the same Latin roots, which mean “foresight.” We trust in Divine Providence not merely to give us what is needed, but to *know* what is needed to execute His will.

And it isn’t always money, is it?

Trust in Providence, then, is not only trust in God, but abandonment of ourselves to His Will; trusting that if our will can become His, all will be as it should be.

After all, as Frédéric once explained, “*Providence does not need us for the execution of its merciful designs, but we, we need it and it promises us its assistance only on the condition of our efforts.*”

Our trust, then is not mere resignation, but continuous effort to discern His will, so that we may become His active instruments. God has given us the tools to do this; in our hearts and in our minds, in our thoughts and in our feelings. As Frédéric put it in a letter to Léonce Curnier:

“*Providence gives its own counsel through the circumstances around you, and the ideas it bestows on you. I believe you would do well to follow them freely and not tie yourselves down with rules and formulas.*”

God can accomplish so much more through us when we abandon ourselves to what St. Vincent called “His adorable Providence.”

Contemplate

Do I “tie myself down” at the expense of discerning God’s will?

Recommended Reading

[15 Days of Prayer with Bl. Frédéric Ozanam](#)

Hail Mary, Full of Grace

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception is a Holy Day of Obligation in our church, befitting Mary's special role. Although Pope Pius IX promulgated the Immaculate Conception as dogma in 1854, our Vincentian Family held this doctrine dearly from its earliest days.

It was at the insistence of Bl. Frederic the Society adopted Our Lady as its Patroness, and celebrated this feast day as what he called, "*the patronal feast of our association.*" This day also marked one of the four annual meetings of the Society's General Council (then called the Council of Direction.)

Although Frederic, like Vincent before him, had throughout his life held a deep Marian devotion, he was no doubt especially inspired by the vision of a contemporary Vincentian saint, Catherine Laboure, to whom the Blessed Virgin had appeared as Mary of the Immaculate Conception, inspiring the Miraculous Medal, in 1830. St. Catherine experienced her vision just blocks away from where Frederic and his friends would found the Society just three years later.

The centrality of our Vincentian devotion to Mary may have been best expressed by St Louise de Marillac, who wrote that the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin "*...leads us to realize and to adore the omnipotence of God because grace totally vanquished nature in her. She was saved without ever having been lost...*"

St. Louise, who never knew her earthly mother, considered Mary to be her only mother, and invited her Daughters of Charity to view the Blessed Virgin in the same way.

Although our Society bears the name only of our Patron, Saint Vincent de Paul, it is well for us always to remember the gentle and powerful role of our Patroness. Our Rule tells us that every conference meeting should begin with prayer, including a Hail Mary; and the Feast of the Immaculate Conception remains a Vincentian Feast Day, just as it has been since the beginning.

Customarily, the feast days of saints and blessed occur on the day of their death – and rebirth. In the case of Bl. Frederic, it seems almost a final act of devotion and humility that he died on September 8th, a day already dedicated as the Feast of the Nativity of Mary, whom he loved so dearly.

As Vincentians, we pray regularly for the intercession of our Patroness, remembering, as St. Louise taught, "*...that it depends only on us to receive the assistance of the Blessed Virgin in all our needs. This is so because it seems to me that it would be impossible for God to refuse her anything...*"

Contemplate

Have I prayed for the intercession of Mary today?

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Louise de Marillac](#)

The Spirit of Our Vocation

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin *vocare*, meaning “to call.” As Vincentians, we have answered a special call from God to put our faith into action, to grow in spirit by serving Christ in the person of His poor. It is well for us to remember that our vocation is both His call, and our answer to it.

“It was not you who chose me,” Christ reminds us, “but I who chose you...” [Jn 15:16]

St. Vincent taught that the special grace of God’s calling should serve as a reminder to keep the spirit of our vocation; the call is not enough by itself. By way of example, he explained that we are no more in God’s graces than Judas, “who had been called by the very Author of all graces and lived in His company.” [SVP X:246]

To answer God’s call, our hearts must remain open hear Him: *Hodie si vocem ejus audieritis, nolite obdurare corda vestra* (If today you hear God’s voice, harden not your hearts!) [Ps 95:7-8]

And to live our vocation, we must “seek first the Kingdom,” and feed the spirit of our vocation.

“Those who have the spirit of God,” said St. Vincent, “do the works of God.”

He went on to explain that if one has the spirit of a baker, he cannot be a tailor; a soldier in a lawyer’s office will be useless. “[T]he spirit of each consists in devoting himself to learning everything he must know for his profession.” [SVP IX:341]

For members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, our “devotion to learning” takes the form of dedication to personal formation; through Ozanam Orientation, Spiritual Retreats, personal study, and shared reflections at every Conference Meeting.

In these ways, we feed the spirit of our vocation, so that it becomes not just something we do from time to time, but something we are at all times, and in all parts of our lives.

Our formation is our vocation! It is “the sublime vocation God has given us.” as Bl. Frederic wrote. “Would that we were a little bit worthy of it and bent easily to its burden.” [Letter 90]

Contemplate

How can I feed the spirit of my Vincentian Vocation today?

Recommended Reading

[Serving in Hope: Our Vincentian Vocation](#)

Holy Infant, Proof of God's Humility

St. Louise de Marillac once wrote that the incarnation of one of the persons of God gave us proof of God's own humility – an example that should instantly wash away our own pride!

As we celebrate the Feast of Christ's Nativity this week, we see in the many crèches on display in our towns and churches a very special face of Christ – the face of an infant, helpless and holy. That face changed the entire world that very night, and continues to inspire faith hope, and charity.

My mother for some years worked for the Salvation Army, and she often remarked that they were overwhelmed with donations during the holiday season.

As Vincentians we are called to see Christ's face in each other, and in all whom we serve. Christmas, and the face of the Christ Child, inspires us anew. We, and so many others, like the sojourners who followed the star to Bethlehem, feel compelled to support, protect, and venerate Him when we see that face of pure innocence.

We all know the face of an infant; it has been our own face at one time! It is easy, and God no doubt wished it to be so, for us to see through His incarnation that, as St. Louise said, *"we can never again be separated from the love of God."*

"But, my soul," Louise asked, "what is God asking of us by the Incarnation of His dear Son other than gratitude for our Redemption? Just as He personally left heaven to be united to the earth, so He wants us willingly to abandon the earth of our sensuality so as to be united to the essence of His Divinity."

We greet Jesus with joy in this Christmas Season, reminded that the great love of God first appeared to us as a baby in need of help.

Let us be renewed in our faith, strengthened in our charity, and recommitted to serve in hope.

Contemplate

How can I see the face of the infant in all whom I serve?

Recommended Reading

[A New Century Dawns](#), By Fr. Robert Maloney

TFW You Suddenly Grow in Faith through Serving

The primary purpose of the Society of St Vincent de Paul is the spiritual growth of its members. So, what does it look like to “*journey together towards holiness*”?

Our Rule outlines this journey, and concludes with this:

Their journey together towards holiness will be all the more fruitful if the members’ personal lives are characterized by prayer, meditation on the Holy Scriptures and other inspirational texts and devotion to the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary, whose protection we have always sought, and to the teachings of the Church. [Part I, 2.2]

While we strongly discourage performing works of the Society at the expense of the obligations of family or work, that doesn’t mean our vocation is to be packed neatly away in a closet until the next home visit or Conference meeting!

On the contrary, ours is a “*vocation for every moment of our lives.*” Our faith informs and inspires our service to Christ in the person of his poor, and our service, in turn, informs and deepens of our faith.

Having come from the home of a neighbor in great need, you read “*whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me*” [Mt 25:40] and suddenly know that you truly have seen His face in those you served. Or you read “*where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*” [Mt 18:20] and realize you felt Christ’s presence when you prayed with that family.

And as you stand outside the door on your next home visit, you hear Christ saying “knock and the door will be opened to you...” [Mt 7:7]

Even before the founding of the Society, as his own faith continued to form and grow, a young Frederic Ozanam wrote to his friend Falconnet. He ended up filling much of his letter with thoughts of his faith, he closed saying:

Forgive me if religious matters have taken up my whole paper. What would you expect? It is the foundation and the crown, the A and Ω, and ever reminds you of your friend, A-F Ozanam

[Letter 44, March 25, 1832]

Blessed Frédéric, our founder and role model, always sought first to live and grow in his faith.

Contemplate

Have I sought to see my service in the Gospels, and to live the Gospel in my service?

Recommended Reading

[The Gospel of Matthew](#)

(TFW means “that feeling when”)

A Bite from a Different Apple

These little essays, published each week, are meant to encourage the contemplative spirit of our Vincentian vocation; to look inward and upward for a better understanding.

Lest we forget, though, we are a community of “faith and **action**.” [Rule I:3.3 emphasis added]

St Vincent de Paul once explained to his confreres that thinking about virtue is not enough, “*for all our reasons are fruitless if we don’t go on to affections.*” (He uses “affections” in its sense of “acting upon something.”)

He likened virtue to an apple on a tree, which “*even though I see it very clearly and find it very beautiful, I’m not holding it for all that. I’m not enjoying it.... reason helps us to see virtue clearly, but it doesn’t give it to us.*” [SV XI, 119]

Vincent’s metaphorical apple is clearly not the one that tempted Eve, who sought only to have, not to understand. For us, putting our faith into action begins with reason, and leads to action.

Reading, contemplation, devotion, prayer – all these things are central to our faith and to our vocation, but one of the tenets that distinguishes our Vincentian vocation is *action*.

Even Bl. Frédéric, academic, man of letters, university professor, declared that “*religion serves less to think than to act.*”

Neither Vincent nor Frédéric were suggesting we skip contemplation in favor of action. Rather, they were suggesting that action is a necessary part of contemplation.

And so, to extend Vincent’s metaphor, the actions we take in the practice of virtue and charity are the fruits that we bear. And by those fruits those we serve will know us.

Contemplate

What action can I take today to live a virtue; or to fulfill Christ’s teaching?

Recommended Reading

Instead of reading, let’s watch [Our Faith in Action](#) about the Society, first aired on EWTN

Be Brave, Seek First the Justice of God

We can only live in our own time, only face our current challenges. At the same time, we will be both comforted and better prepared to face our challenges by seeking the example of Bl. Frédéric.

For all the tribulations of 2020-21, there is an example to be found in 1848-49, during which a cholera epidemic killed nearly 20,000 in Paris, a revolution chased King Louis-Phillippe from the throne; a second uprising challenged the new republic; and an economic collapse left thousands destitute.

It also was during this year that Frédéric founded *L'Ere Nouvelle*, in which he penned memorable essays on issues of justice and charity that continue to influence church teaching. The Society served both the poor and the sick, receiving substantial grants from the French government that recognized the impact of their work, which, as Ozanam had written years earlier, sought “*to make equality as operative as is possible among men; to make voluntary community replace imposition and brute force; to make charity accomplish what justice alone cannot do.*” [Letters, 136]

Frédéric remained actively engaged in civic life, serving in the National Guard, and running (unsuccessfully) for a seat in the national assembly that year, but he always understood the far greater role he and the Society could perform by serving the cause of the church, and by serving the poor in charity.

“The first duty of Catholics,” Frédéric said, “is not to fear themselves; the second, not to frighten others. It is rather to reassure those who are uneasy at the political and financial crisis through which we are passing, by pointing out that Providence is at hand... Be brave, seek first the justice of God, the good of the nation and all else will be added thereunto.” [Baunard, 262]

We are, of course, called to civic engagement, but our vocation calls us to something greater, and more long-lasting. Bl. Frédéric gave us his example, and in turn had examples of his own.

Asked to contrast Cardinal Richelieu and St Vincent de Paul, contemporaries during the horrors of the Thirty Years War, Frédéric pointed out that Richelieu, the politician, was a man of one country, and one time, while Vincent was a man for “all lands and for all time.”

“His work never grows old: who does not wish to continue it? If we have courage and faith, gentlemen, what will keep us back?” [Baunard, 275]

Contemplate

How can my service in these times be more timeless?

Recommended Reading

[Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam](#), by Ray Sickinger

Our Gifts to God

We often use the term “charism” when describing our Vincentian Spirituality. During this week in which we celebrated the 404th anniversary of Vincent’s homily at Folleville on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, which marked the first mission, it seems like an appropriate time to examine our shared Vincentian charism.

We sometimes simplify the meaning of charism to talents we may have, and surely our talents are gifts. But the gifts of the Holy Spirit run deeper.

The Church defines charisms as “*graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church...*” [Catechism: 799] Like the word grace itself, the root of the word charism comes from a Greek word referring to gifts or favors. These gifts are given to all of us freely and gratuitously.

If we think of our charisms as the seeds in the parable of the sower, we should seek to become the rich soil that yielded a hundredfold what was sown. [Mk 4:1-20] The gifts themselves are our calling – how we use them in the service of God and His Church is our answer.

Or to paraphrase the late writer and motivational speaker, Leo Buscaglia, “Your [charisms] are God's gift to you. What you do with them is your gift back to God.”

We also recognize special charisms given to individuals or groups that inspire the founding of religious families within the church, such as the Congregation of the Mission, which dates its founding to that 1617 mission in Folleville.

At that time, and even more so as he contemplated it in his memories, St Vincent discerned the special charism that had been given to him, and that he freely shared with all who sought – and seek – to follow his way.

The Vincentian charism calls us to “*love God with the strength of our arms, and the sweat of our brows;*” to trust in God’s providence; and to follow Christ’s teaching to see and serve Him in the person of the poor. This is the specific way in which we, as Vincentians, seek to live the Gospel daily.

These things are not instructions, or burdens – they are gifts to us!

What we do with them, is our gift to God.

Contemplate

What personal charism do I try to return to the church “one hundredfold?”

Recommended Reading

[Praying with Vincent de Paul](#)

What Great Reason We Have to be Cheerful!

There is an old expression that “you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar,” and I suspect most of us can confirm this from our own personal experience. Nobody wants advice from a sourpuss; many will even decline a helping hand offered from beneath a furrowed brow. As Ella Wheeler Wilcox put it in her poem *Solitude*:

*Rejoice, and men will seek you;
Grieve, and they turn and go;
They want full measure of all your pleasure,
But they do not need your woe.*

It turns out that cheerfulness is not simply a nice thing to offer but is a necessary component of our Vincentian virtue of gentleness.

It is true that some people, as St. Vincent de Paul once explained, are gifted by God with a “*cordial, gentle, happy manner, by which they seem to offer you their heart and ask for yours in return,*” while others, “*boorish persons like [himself,] present themselves with a stern, gloomy, or forbidding expression...*” [CCD XII:156]

But a virtue, our Catechism tells us, is “*habitual and firm disposition to do good.*” [Catechism:1833] Habits, good and bad, can be changed, and our disposition towards cheerfulness can be natural, or it can be acquired.

St. Vincent reminded his missionaries of Christ’s great gentleness through His own sorrows, His own suffering. Throughout His passion “*no angry word escaped Him,*” and even at the moment of His betrayal He greeted Judas as “*friend.*” [CCD XII:159]

As in all things, we seek to follow Christ’s example, to accept our own suffering, as Vincent once said, “as a divine state,” confident that our true hope lies in doing His will. And if we truly seek to “serve in hope,” our very countenances should shine with confidence, hope, and good cheer – especially so every time we are blessed to serve Christ in the person of His poor.

As Vincent reminded Louise: “*Be quite cheerful, I beg you. Oh, what great reason people of good will have to be cheerful!*” [CCD I:84]

Contemplate

What is keeping me from smiling, and how can I surrender it to God?

Recommended Reading

[Vincentian Meditations](#)

The Secret Work of God

When we think about our Vincentian virtue of humility, it seems sometimes that it may act against the interest of the poor if it results in fewer people donating to the Society. But this confuses humility with secrecy, a point Bl. Frédéric often discussed!

Indeed, while celebrating the rapid expansion of the Society across France in its early years, he noted that “*we love obscurity without cultivating secrecy*” [Letter 310, 1841]

He emphasized that “*humility obliges associations as much as individuals.*” [Letter 160, 1837] We must maintain the humble spirit of our founding, just as Vincent once admonished a priest of the mission for referring to it as “our holy company.” Vincentians, like all Christians, seek holiness, we do not proclaim it for ourselves!

Secrecy does not serve the work, or the poor. We work in obscurity, not as servants of an unworthy or illicit cause, but as what Bl. Frédéric called “weak Samaritans,” and what St. Vincent called “unprofitable servants.” Our work is worthwhile because it is truly the work of God!

What robs the poor is when we take personal credit for the God’s work; when we see ourselves as the cause. Our humility as a Society, Frédéric explained, “*must exclude that collective pride which so often disguises itself under the name of esprit de corps...*” [Letter 160, 1837]

We seek to do God’s will, and we should not be silent about the good that results, but any success we achieve is His alone.

Why wouldn’t we tell that story? Why wouldn’t we want to share this great gift we receive with everybody we know? It is a great story exactly because it is not about us.

“*There is much pleasure in telling of the humble origin of great things. It is so wonderful thus to reveal the secret work of God.*” [Letter 460, 1842]

Contemplate

How can I share our story?

Recommended Reading

[‘Tis a Gift to be Simple](#) by Fr. Robert Maloney

The Smallness of Our Alms

At times it can be frustrating to think that the assistance we give to a neighbor in need will not only be insufficient to lift them from poverty, but may not be enough even to get them through the next week.

The efficient and plentiful distribution of goods and services isn't our primary purpose, though. As the original edition of the Rule in 1835 explained, "*we must never be ashamed of the smallness of our alms.*" Rather, for each neighbor we assist, it is "*our tender interest - our very manner, [that gives] to our alms a value which they do not possess in themselves.*"

Our primary purpose since the beginning has been to grow in holiness, and our secondary purpose to bring our neighbors closer to God. Our service, in the form of the home visit, is the primary means towards both of those purposes.

"*No work of charity should be regarded as foreign to the Society,*" that 1835 Rule continues, "*although its special object is to visit poor families.*"

It is only through this special ministry of person-to-person service that "*our tender interest*" attaches to "*the smallness of our alms.*" What may appear small to the wealthy, is large in the eyes of the poor. More importantly, it is when we serve those in need personally, following the example and teaching of Christ, that we may also bring Christ to those in need.

"*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*" [MT 18:20]

Mohandas Ghandi once said, that "*there are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.*" The bread we offer, the bill we pay, the prayer we offer, can be the light of God when offered for love alone. It can begin to relieve the greatest poverty – the feeling that one is forgotten, or unworthy.

Our offerings to the poor, Christ assures us, will be received as if given to Himself. Our service to the poor is not about demanding a result, but about offering Christ's love, and ours, in a spirit of selflessness and humility. It is about giving, not achieving.

"*Our charity would be less meritorious, and might expose us to vainglory, if we saw it always crowned with success.*" [The Rule, 1835, as reprinted 1906, Superior Council, NY]

Contemplate

What result do I seek in my home visits?

Recommended Reading

[The Rule](#), Part I

One Heart and One Soul

The Rule tells us that “*All decisions are made by consensus after the necessary prayer, reflection and consultation.*” [Rule Part I, 3.10] And that, “*In rare circumstances, if consensus cannot be reached the decision may be put to a vote.*” [Part III, Statute 16] Doesn’t that just drag things out? Isn’t it faster to vote?

These are the wrong questions! Our goal isn’t to reach the fastest decision, but to reach the right decision; the one that is aligned with God’s will.

The process of reaching consensus, then, is a concrete instance of discernment.

The foundation of consensus in our Conferences is for each of us to let go of our egos, “surrendering our own opinion,” as our original [1835 Rule](#) put it, “without which surrender, no association is durable.”

This concept of surrender, of emptying ourselves, occurs throughout the Scriptures, and is a result of our Vincentian virtue of humility, which St. Vincent taught “causes us to empty ourselves of self so that God alone may be manifest, to whom glory may be given.” [\[CCD XII, 247\]](#) Even Christ “emptied himself” to better fulfill the Father’s will! [\[Ph 2: 6-8\]](#)

There is an old joke that voting is like two wolves and a sheep deciding what to have for dinner. In a similar way, consensus is like a group of friends deciding where to go for dinner. We would never make our friend with the fish allergy go for seafood, and it is obviously better to skip the pizza if another friend just had that for lunch.

When we keep our friendship foremost, our consensus on a dinner destination becomes obvious. Our differing needs and opinions don’t block the road, they light the path.

Just so, in our Conferences, with the bond of our Vincentian friendship enabling us to listen and speak openly, the group’s wisdom and insights will soon distill, revealing to us God’s will in the form of our consensus. Rather than vote fellow members off the island, we all remain in the same boat.

St. Louise often advised that “*following the example of the Blessed Trinity, we must have but one heart and act with one mind as do the three divine Persons.*” [\[Correspondence, p.771, 1647\]](#)

The Divine life, in the example of the Holy Trinity, is a shared life, and our pathway to it also is shared; in service, in spirituality, in friendship, and in consensus.

Cor unum, et anima una!

Contemplate

When have I let my own strong opinions shut down other voices in my Conference?

Recommended Reading

[Turn Everything to Love](#) – especially “*Listening to God’s Word*”

A Harmony Between Souls

Friendship is one of the Essential Elements of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. Certainly, it is easier to work together when we all get along, but the friendship we are called to is of a very special character. This friendship is sacred, Bl. Frédéric wrote, it is “*a harmony between souls.*” ” [\[Letter 142, 1837\]](#)

St. Vincent loved to remind his followers that Christ treated his Apostles as his friends, teaching that there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for his friends. For Vincent, then, we can have no better friend than God! Therefore, “*must we not love all that He loves and, for love of Him, consider our neighbor as our friend!*” [\[CCD XI:39\]](#)

God created us to live in community, and just as the Holy Trinity shows us that the Divine life is a shared life, so our pathway to it is also shared. We are formed as Christians through our relationships with others. Our call to friendship, then, is an essential part of our call to holiness.

If this seems difficult at times, if there is tension between us, it is forbearance, Vincent said, that is “*the bond of friendship that unites hearts in sentiment and action, not only among themselves but in Our Lord, in such a way that they enjoy great peace.*” [\[CCD VI:51\]](#)

Serving each other as friends in Christ, we should take special joy in sharing each other’s burdens. Bl. Rosalie, replying to a request for a great favor from a friend, gladly agreed to help him, saying, “*I cannot tell you how you please me in giving me the opportunity to do something for your interests. Always act this way with me, without any hesitation. It is the proof of friendship that I hope for.*” [\[Sullivan, 237\]](#)

It is charity, the love of God, that connects us in friendship with each other and with those we serve. Charity, Bl. Frédéric said, is the strongest tie – the principle of a true friendship. Yet charity “*is a fire that dies without being fed, and good works are the food of charity.*” [\[Letter 82, 1834\]](#)

You may have observed that you grow closer to your friends when you share a meal, or go to a movie, or have them over for a cookout. Through these acts that we share, our lives intertwine; our bonds become stronger.

“*But if purely human acts have this power,*” Frédéric explained, “*moral acts have it even more, and if two or three come together to do good, their union will be perfect. Thus, at least, He assures us who says in the Gospel: ‘Truly, when you are gathered together in my name, I will be in your midst.’*” [\[Letter 142, 1837\]](#)

Contemplate

To have a friend, you have to be a friend. How can I be a better friend?

Recommended Reading

[Antoine Frédéric Ozanam](#) especially Chapter 7, ‘Friendship’

It Would be Ungrateful not to Hope

To trust in Divine Providence is to seek the will of God. This trust does not come for free – we must invest in it our patience, humility, gratitude, and hope.

St. Louise advised the Daughters to “*remain at peace until Divine Providence lets you know what It is asking of you.*” [Sp. Wri., 249] Often filled with anxiety when things did not go according to her own plans, Louise had learned that abandonment to God’s will requires patience for God’s timing, even when we have already embarked on God’s work.

As Vincentians, we know that in serving the least among us, we are doing God’s will, because he very specifically, and explicitly [told us to do exactly this!](#) So, when we run into things that feel like obstacles in the course of our works, we must not be discouraged or anxious. “*Having begun His work in us,*” St. Vincent taught, “*He will complete it.*” [CCD XI:31]

If the money seems low in the treasury, but it is enough to help the needs before us now, then it is enough. God knows and will provide for our needs, now and next week, “*particularly those which human prudence can neither foresee nor meet,*” as St. Louise put it. [Sp. Wri., 174]

As Frédéric put it, we should remain “*content to see the stone on which we should step without wanting to discover all at once and completely the windings of the road.*” [Letter 136]

Or to use an old cowboy saying, “Dance with the one that brung ya.”

It takes great humility to set aside our own prudence and foresight, earned over many years of worldly experience, with faith that God will provide. At the same time, it is an act of profound *gratitude*.

If we are thankful, as we pray at every Conference meeting, for the many blessings he has already bestowed on us, then as St. Louise explained “*we would be the greatest ingrates in the world*” if at the first obstacle we were to abandon our trust in the Providence which has so far given us all that we need. [Sp. Wri., 174]

Trust in Providence is not only for the work of our Conferences, but for every part of our lives. For each time we set aside our anxieties, for each day we let the day’s own troubles suffice, we will be reassured once again of God’s abundance and love, which we receive that we might share.

And in time we will say with Bl. Frédéric that Providence “*has for some time granted me so many favors that I would be ungrateful not to hope.*” [Letter 365]

Contemplate

Do I sometimes let pride in my own wisdom override my trust in Providence?

Recommended Reading

[15 Days of Prayer with Bl. Frédéric Ozanam](#) (especially 14 – Providence)

Our Unlimited Resources

In the course of its 188 years, many have marveled at the Society of St Vincent de Paul's great freedom of action, seeking always to help those in need in the best way possible. As our Rule says, "*No work of charity is foreign to the Society.*" [Rule, Part I, 1.3] There is only one explanation for this: love.

In 1933, on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Society's founding, an editorial in [The Tablet](#), a Catholic newspaper in Brooklyn, observed that "*The Society is great because it follows in the footsteps of Our Lord and Saviour...He was not interested in 'cases' or 'clients,' but in men, women, and children.*"

We are called to form relationships with those in need, to understand them as we would a brother or sister. Like brothers or sisters, like neighbors, like friends, we always want to do what is best for a person we value and love. Because of this, the members who made the visit are assumed by their fellow Vincentians "*to have a special insight into the best way to give help.*" [Manual, p. 27]

Ours is not the "*The organized charity, scrimped and iced, In the name of a cautious, statistical Christ*" from [John Boyle O'Reilly's poem](#). Rather, with Bl. Frédéric, we believe that "*in such a work it is necessary to give yourself up to the inspirations of the heart rather than the calculations of the mind.*" [[Letter 82. To Curnier. 1834](#)]

The poor are accustomed to standing in line, taking a number, or filling out a form to try to "qualify" for the assistance they desperately need. They are reduced to numbers in the eyes of many agencies. To many in their communities, they are invisible. To us, they are "*the sacred images of that God whom we do not see, and not knowing how to love Him otherwise shall we not love Him in [their] persons?*" [[Letter 137, to Janmot. 1837](#)]

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is not an agency; our help does not come with strings attached, because while agencies' resources are limited, ours are not. Our funds belong to the poor already, so we "*never adopt the attitude that the money is [ours,] or that the recipients have to prove that they deserve it.*" [Manual, p. 26]

More importantly, the resource we share on every single visit, is ourselves. But the ultimate reason that no work of charity is foreign to us is that the greatest resource we have, is one that multiplies as it is shared: love.

Contemplate

Are there times that I "budget" my love?

Recommended Reading

[The Spirituality of the Home Visit](#) – Read, but also keep your own journal!

The Joy of Communion

Our journey towards holiness will be more fruitful, our Rule says, if it includes “devotion to the Eucharist” [Rule, Part I, 2.2] which “plays a major role in Vincentian spirituality.” [Manual, p.65] The Eucharist unifies us and sends us forth.

The spiritual dimension of our Vincentian Formation teaches us that our pathway is a shared one, that we are meant to grow in holiness together as members of a community of faith.

Bl. Frédéric once said that although they might not be with him, when he received Communion he was “*in close touch with my friends, all united to the same Saviour.*” [Baunard, 381] After his mother’s death, he said that he believed that when the Savior visited, his mother “*follow[ed] him into my poor heart.*” [Baunard, 158]

In this, he echoed St. Louise, who reminds us that “*Holy Communion with the Body of Jesus Christ causes us truly to participate in the joy of the Communion of Saints in Paradise.*” [Spiritual Writings, A.15]

The Eucharist, which takes its name from the Greek word for giving thanks, is a gift we receive because Christ’s love is “*inventive to infinity.*” [SVdP, CCD XI:131] Having received Him, we must thank God “*by our desire to honor Him in all the actions of our lives.*” [St. Louise, Spiritual Writings, A.15]

Following Mass, filled with the “power of conviction,” [Baunard, 342] Bl. Frédéric always visited the poor of his Conference on his walk home. As his biographer Monsignor Baunard put it, he “*returned to Our Lord, in the person of His suffering poor, the visit which he had just received from Him in the Holy Eucharist.*” [Baunard, 209]

And so, having taken the Body of Christ into our own, we see that Jesus brings “*not only Himself ... but also all the merits of His mysteries.*” [Spiritual Writings, M.8B]

Sending Louise on a mission, Vincent advised her to go to Communion on the day of her departure, so that Christ may “*bless your journey, giving you His spirit and the grace to act in this same spirit, and to bear your troubles in the way He bore His.*” [CCD I:65]

This sacrament is central to our Vincentian Vocation for the same reason it is the church’s “foundation and wellspring.” [Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 5] Through the Eucharist we are united not only with Christ, but with our entire human community; we are fortified, strengthened, and called to serve them as He served us. Our service to the poor is the expression of our devotion to the Eucharist.

Contemplate

How can I give thanks for the Eucharist in my Vincentian service?

Recommended Reading

[Ecclesia de Eucharistia](#), Encyclical Letter of Pope Saint John Paul II



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