

St. Vincent de Paul Society

Commitment To Compassion

The St. Vincent de Paul Society is more than an organization maintaining clothing boxes in the parking lots of many parishes. Its international members try to bring Jesus' healing presence to suffering by acting as his hands and voice.

by Marjorie Kunce

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What is it like to be hungry and cold? How does it feel to be frightened and alone and baffled by the system we call society?

Most of us have no idea, even though we regularly confront the impersonal world of material needs. Our month may outlast our money sometimes and bills may dominate our mailboxes, but the humiliation and suffering that make up the daily lives of the poor are something we only read about.

And yet even without completely understanding what it means to lack the money to live decently, the Christian heart has a God-given spirit of justice and charity that causes its possessor to reach out to help the brother or sister in need.

It is from hearts such as these that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was born, and continues to grow and spread throughout the world. The Society is a silent army of men and women who are trying to live in accord with their beliefs as followers of Christ, to become human beings who care and share.

No one in the organization pretends to have a solution for human misery. In fact, the complicated lives of the poor often dismay the ones trying to help. Beyond those feelings of consternation and inadequacy, however, is a determination to live and teach God's simple plan: giving joyfully when there is extra and receiving gratefully when there is need. Members often referred to as Vincentians, believe in the dignity of every human being and that rich and poor alike are created in the image and likeness of God.

THE ORIGINS OF THE SOCIETY

Begun in 1833 in Paris, France, as the Conference of Charity, the Society was the dream of a young Frenchman named Frederic Ozanam. Originating as a small group of friends working together in the defense of the Catholic religion, it soon grew to include the positive actions necessary to show the fruits of the faith they held.

"But what do you hope to do?" the little group was asked by doubting peers. "There are so few of you in a city that swarms with human misery."

Their response was that, by the grace of God, they could do something. The young men who formed the first conference never dreamed of a large organization to campaign against human suffering. They only hoped to bring assistance to a few poor persons in the name of Christianity.

More than 150 years later, those small seeds of faith and charity have germinated into an international Catholic lay organization devoted essentially to the act of giving of oneself on a personal basis at the parish level. Ozanam and his friends decided to place the Conference under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul, the great saint who devoted his life to the service of the poor. From that time on, the Society has derived its inspiration from his writings and work.

“You will find,” warned St. Vincent de Paul, “that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket. But you will keep your gentleness and your smile. It is not enough to give bread and soup. This the rich can do. You are the servants of the poor....They are your masters, and the more difficult they will be, the more unjust and insulting, the more love you must give them. It is for your love alone that the poor will forgive you the bread you give them....”

THE SOCIETY'S DEVELOPMENT

Today the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is spread throughout the world, with 50,000 parish conferences comprising more than 750,000 members in 112 countries. They work together within the boundaries of their parish to provide moral and material help by person-to-person involvement.

It wasn't always this way. During the years following the establishment of the Society, membership was restricted to adult males. For the times, the practice was not unusual since women's education and opportunities to participate in social and cultural life were very limited.

Yet from the beginning women have worked closely with the Society. The Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul directed the first Vincentian men to the poor they were dedicated to serving. Just as important, it was the prayers, encouragement and support of wives and mothers which enabled the first members to give so generously of their time, energy and funds.

In 1945, Pope Pius XII emphasized the importance of women's participation. During his address on “Women's Duties in Social and Political Life,” he said that women “associated with men in civil institutions would apply themselves especially to those matters which called for tact, delicacy and maternal instinct,” and that women “knew how to temper legislation with kindness without loss of effectiveness.”

Enrolling women as members and adding their temperament, insight and skills to those of male counterparts, the next step in the natural development of an organization dedicated to caring was to stimulate youth recruitment. During the 1970's, efforts were made for the first time to provide useful guidelines for reaching and involving young people.

In today's world, hungry for compassion as well as food, it takes the combined love and gentleness of men, women and youth to run the soup kitchens, serve free hot dinners, provide shelters, rehabilitate alcoholics, send poor children to camp, operate centers for senior citizens, set up employment bureaus, purchase wheelchairs and crutches for the disabled, aid disaster victims, serve the sick and elderly in their homes, educate the illiterate, care for migrants, make hospital visits, transport parish food donations to local food pantries, and provide special assistance at Thanksgiving and Christmas. These are the many tasks that the Society takes on in the attempt to be part of the solution to society's most urgent problems.

To the individual member, the Society is not a large impersonal organization but a group of fellow parishioners dedicated to offering friendship, spiritual encouragement and material aid

to their neighbors in need. These are the goals: to know the people in distress, and to try to understand their special problems without judging.

POVERTY IS PERSONAL

Old beliefs die hard. People aren't always poor because they are lazy or weak in character. Many are jobless because there are no jobs or educational opportunities open to them. Others are poor because they are too old, too sick or too young to work. Still others are victims of financial disasters which have depleted their resources.

Poverty is personal. It is eight-year old Terri going to school and trying to learn on an empty stomach because she is too proud to tell anyone she is hungry.

Poverty is 21-year-old Jeff, the unemployed father of a 10-month-old baby, hearing about a job across town and having no money to pay for transportation to get there. And it is also his wife, Liz, who has several loads of dirty diapers and a broken-down washer.

Poverty is 70-year-old Myrtle, who has glaucoma. She risks her eyesight to pay the taxes on her modest little two bedroom home because on her Social Security pension she can't afford to buy the needed eye drops if she pays the property tax.

For Susan, the young mother of three preschoolers whose husband beat and abandoned her on their fifth wedding anniversary, poverty is trying to keep her babies warm in an apartment where the heat is shut off during the day while the landlady is at work.

Poverty is personal for 42-year-old John, a disabled mechanic who tries to feed, clothe and house a family of seven on his wife's minimum-wage paycheck and his less-than-adequate pension. Their combined monthly income of \$1,400 is over the poverty level. But during a recent bitterly cold winter when the extreme low temperatures had taken their toll in repeated illnesses, frequent car repairs and high heating bills, there was often very little money left to buy groceries.

There is a tendency in our society to use words like "inner-city problems," "disadvantaged areas" or "low-income groups." Yet to the poor, poverty is more than a social condition. To them, it's peeling paint and faded curtains, worn out furniture and appliances, unrelieved drabness and the smell of hopelessness.

To those who experience it, poverty is need, lack of opportunity, helplessness to cope with hostile or uncaring social problems. It is lack of dignity and vulnerability to injustice. It's lonely, frightening, dehumanizing—and can happen to almost anyone!

Poverty is hard to determine if you are on the outside looking in and even harder to understand if you have a bank account or an adequate paycheck that comes in regularly. Only the person who has no money to live on and no source to draw from can know how it feels to be surrounded by reminders of abundance and luxury, and know that their own needs and longings

cannot be fulfilled.

Author Michael Harrington writes about the invisible poor in *The Other America*. His statement that “it takes an effort of the intellect and will to see the poor in today’s affluent society” speaks of the new segregation of the poor which is compounded by a well-meaning ignorance. Society shields itself from the defective so that at the very lowest level of awareness poverty is often ignored. At best it is tolerated.

But that was not good enough for St. Vincent de Paul. He knew that Christ taught us to love others, not merely to tolerate them.

ST. VINCENT’S BELIEF IN LOVE

During his lifetime in 17th-century France, Vincent de Paul devoted his time, energy and intelligence to the service of the poor. So divinely inspired were his efforts that invariably he began with a single person’s problem and ended with a well-structured solution which benefited many.

His energetic efforts on behalf of abandoned children resulted in the first foundling home. With the same determination Vincent inaugurated care for the sick in their homes, special workshops for the unskilled, jobs from private businesses for the unemployed, food donations each Sunday after Mass to feed the hungry, comfortable beds and hot meals for the displaced, and many other important works which were the forerunners of the helping institutions we have today.

St. Vincent de Paul was canonized in 1737 by Pope Leo XIII and proclaimed patron of works of charity. He taught the rich to love the poor and the poor to love the rich. Only love, he believed, could open the closed fist of the rich, closed by fear and distrust. And only love could relax the clenched fist of the poor, clenched in despair and frustration. These beliefs live on today in the thousands of Vincentians who endeavor to follow his way.

HOW THE SOCIETY FUNCTIONS

Vincentians gather together in groups traditionally called “conferences” which meet regularly and frequently within the parish. These parish chapters are linked together by district, diocesan, national and international councils. Each member on all hierarchy levels is a volunteer. And although there are some staff members who are paid to do the daily work, for most the only compensation is a closer personal relationship with Christ.

The parish is a logical base for serving people in distress, and it is at this level that most active members are engaged in the person-to-person service. A call for help which has come in to the parish rectory or been referred by other agencies is assigned to a two-member team which schedules a home visit to assess the situation.

These home visits are the heart of the Society’s work. Financial assistance, usually of an

emergency nature, is necessary but the love and friendship offered a person in need is just as valuable and, most of the time, just as urgently needed.

In these personal contacts the Vincentian teams strive to 1) get to know the family; 2) work with them towards solving the immediate financial crisis; 3) talk and act in such a way that confirms their human dignity and divine potential; 4) assist with long-range problem-solving and/or referrals to other agencies that could help the family; and 5) safeguard privacy and confidentiality and maintain the family's trust.

There are two types of members that make up these parish conferences. Active members like Sharon, a 48-year-old wife and mother, and Joe, a 66-year-old retired postal worker, attend regular meetings and comply with the directives that insure a good helping relationship. They give freely of their time, not only when an emergency call is received at the rectory but also with the many other activities. These include serving lunch at the senior center, coordinating efforts for fundraisers, painting rooms at a family shelter, driving clients to their doctor's appointments or to look for suitable housing.

In addition to active members, the Society also has associate or contributing members. They take part in the charitable activities of the conference and/or provide financial support on a regular basis. Tony is a good example of this valuable part of the Society. He is a friend of an active member and always willing to haul a load of canned goods to the food pantry, bag and sort clothes for the annual clothing collection, and reach deep into his pocket every time a collection is taken. Tony's prayers, encouragement and financial assistance are a constant source of help.

Most of the funds to help others come from poor boxes in the church, allotted parish charitable contributions, personal donations and an annual charity fundraiser (usually an archdiocesan effort). Some business firms also make donations.

The fluctuating economy, increasing work layoffs, and a rise in single-parent families on public assistance create new needs every day, and make it more important to inform parishioners who have a little more than they need about those who don't have enough.

Vincentians find that fellow parishioners are often unaware of both the variety of needs and the organization's goals and objectives. Yet, once informed, these good-hearted Christians are eager to help in the work of charity.

VINCENTIANS: HUMAN EXPRESSION OF CHRIST'S LOVE

The Society is actively engaged in recruiting new members and developing new conferences. The areas for personal service are virtually inexhaustible so that the necessity for Christian involvement is always present.

Anyone willing to be the human expression of Christ's love and gentleness can be a Vincentian. The organization's manual states, "The Society is constituted by and for struggling

pilgrims, men and women, humbled by the knowledge of their own weaknesses but wanting to grow toward God through community prayer and charity.”

Some Vincentians are affluent people who are trying to practice good stewardship with their money, but more often Society members are average wage-earners who have at one time experienced financial struggles of their own. They have “been there,” and know the importance of maintaining human dignity in a world where a person’s value is often equated with material possessions.

Although much of the help provided is corporal, the work of the Vincentian is also of a spiritual nature. The idea of bringing the healing presence and power of Jesus Christ to the suffering, by acting as, his hands and voice is one on which members base efforts.

“It would seem,” said Archbishop Daniel Sheehan, spiritual director of the Omaha, Nebraska, diocese, addressing a breakfast meeting of Vincentians from the city’s many parish conferences, “that too often we direct our efforts to the mind when trying to teach the value of Christian community.”

He paused and looked at the assortment of faces from various walks of life. “We need to make our appeal to the heart. This is where caring begins and this is where we search for Christ in our fellowman.”

This statement echoes the dream of the Society’s founder. Ozanam knew that a world peopled with loving caretakers would certainly not be a selfish world. He believed in the communion of saints and that the soul which raises itself raises the moral and spiritual level of humankind.

A community of concerned disciples with a commitment to compassion, a parish family who support one another in times of need, an unselfish world that promotes human dignity and integrity—this was a dream worth working for. It still is.

Anyone needing help, wishing to join the Society or to contribute should contact their local parish conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. If your parish has no such program as yet, contact your pastor or write: SVDP Council of the United States, 58 Progress Parkway, St. Louis, MO 63043-3706, (314) 576-3993.

In the Diocese of Phoenix, call (602) 261-6841.

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