

OZANAM LECTURE

Go and Do Likewise!
Revisioning the St. Vincent de Paul Society
For the 21st century
With the enthusiasm for the mission, faith and thirst for Good
Which were the hallmarks of the Society's Foundation

Early in the 17th century Vincent de Paul founded the Congregation of the Mission, a community of priests and brothers with a single purpose: *to bring the good news to the poor*. Vincent found his inspiration in the fourth chapter of the gospel of Luke where Jesus, preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth reads from the prophet Isaiah, *"I have been sent to bring the good news to the poor...."* Vincent understood that here, at the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus was proclaiming his mission, his *raison d'être*, if you will. Jesus was making it clear that he was not sent by the Father to found a Church, but rather to proclaim the Reign of God. Thus it has been articulated by theologians that Christians should understand that "the Church does not have a mission, but rather, the Mission of Christ has a Church." Thus, the Church, in its finite and earthly existence, serves the Mission of Christ, not the other way round. This understanding of Jesus and his mission has clear implications for all Christians. 1. Every disciple of Christ is a missionary and 2. Faith is a verb, not a noun. The baptismal vocation requires all disciples to proclaim the good news in word and act. Faith is a call to a way of life, a path of action and cannot be limited simply to what we do on Sunday in our churches.

Vincent's vision for his Congregation and for all his sons and daughters was clear and simple: what greater mission for any community than to take up the same mission as Christ. Hence, the motto of the Congregation of the Mission, *Evangelizare Pauperibus Misit Me.* (I have come to bring the good news to the poor). Thus every Vincentian takes up the mission proclaimed by Jesus in the gospel of Luke. Every Vincentian is mission driven. Every Vincentian is a missionary, a missionary to the poor and a missionary who brings good news, who brings the reign of God in a tangible form into the lives of the poor.

In the words of Vincent himself we hear the challenge. *"Wasn't that what Our Lord and many great saints did, and they not only recommended poor persons to others, but they themselves consoled, comforted, and healed them? Aren't those who are poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Aren't they are brothers and sisters?So then, if there are any among us who think they're...to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, 'I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others...to do what is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, and that's the most perfect way;*

it's also what our 'Lord did, and what those should do who represent Him on earth.' (CCD, XII, 77-78)

For Vincent the call of Christian baptism was a vocation to respond to Jesus' challenge after he had washed the feet of the disciples, "go and do likewise." It was not enough for Vincent to "know" his faith, faith, he discovered, was only authentic when it was "lived." Vincent understood that faith, to be authentic was found in our heads, our hearts and our hands. This, I would submit is exactly Frederic's insight when he determined that his "Conference of History" which attempted to evangelize only with words and ideas of debate needed to evolve into an evangelization that involved not just the life of the mind but direct action to the poor. And it was the example of lived faith in action, directed to the poor with a focus on organization and addressing social ills that he found in Vincent de Paul. Once Frederic understood the profundity of Vincent's understanding of Jesus' mission as related to him by Sr. Rosalie Rendu, a daughter of Vincent, he changed the name from the Conference of Charity to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. To this day, every Vincentian is indebted to and inspired by the vision of Vincent. Vincent helped reform the Church simply by reminding her of her mission.

This evening, with your permission, I would like to use our short time together to explore the aspects of the vision of Vincent that so captivated Frederic with the aim of moving all of us to understand the vision that undergirds the mission of the Vincentian family and our challenge to bring the vitality of this vision into the 21st century.

Vincent burned with the desire to move Christian faith from a mere cultural experience or a notional sense of orthodoxy or family practice to a commitment. He expressed this commitment of living faith as "effective love" or love put into practice. Vincent knew that the greatest commandment, "to love God and neighbor" was not a "command" but a way of life that in itself was life giving. Frederic himself caught fire with this vision of Christian discipleship and invited others to find meaning and happiness in the service of the poor and most abandoned. The call to refound the Society of St. Vincent de Paul will only be heeded if we understand a refoundation to be more than a review and revitalization of projects, no matter how wonderful the projects. In the end, all Vincentian projects are only "means" never "ends" in themselves. It is the Vincentian vision that must continually evolve and renew itself for it is the vision that drives the mission. The Vincentian projects of 17th and 19th century France, and even some of those of 19th and 20th century Australia may not be the projects necessary to meet the needs of the poor in the 21st century, but the Vincentian vision, if it is authentic remains as the fire that lights the path for an authentic animation of the spirit of Vincent and Frederic in our times.

Poverty in Vincent's Lifetime

From Report of the Estates of Normandy (1651)

Saint-Quentin. Of the 450 sick persons whom the inhabitants were unable to relieve, 200 were turned out, and these we saw die one by one as they lay on the roadside. A large number still remain, and to each of them it is only possible to dole out the least scrap of bread. We only give bread to those who would otherwise die. The staple dish here consists of mice, which the inhabitants hunt, so desperate are they from hunger. They devour roots which the animals cannot eat; one can, in fact, not put into words the things one sees.... This narrative, far from exaggerating, rather understates the horror of the case, for it does not record the hundredth part of the misery in this district. Those who have not witnessed it with their own eyes cannot imagine how great it is. Not a day passes but at least 200 people die of famine in the two provinces. We certify to having ourselves seen herds, not of cattle, but of men and women, wandering about the fields between Rheims and Rhétel, turning up the earth like pigs to find a few roots; and as they can only find rotten ones, and not half enough of them, they become so weak that they have not strength left to seek food. The parish priest at Boult, whose letter we enclose, tells us he has buried three of his parishioners who died of hunger. The rest subsisted on chopped straw mixed with earth, of which they composed a food which cannot be called bread. Other persons in the same place lived on the bodies of animals which had died of disease, and which the curé, otherwise unable to help his people, allowed them to roast at the presbytery fire.

Vincent's counsel:

It is our duty to prefer the service of the poor to everything else and to offer such service as quickly as possible. If a needy person requires medicine or other help during prayer time, do whatever has to be done with peace of mind. Offer the deed to God as your prayer. Do not become upset or feel guilty because you interrupted your prayer to serve the poor. God is not neglected if you leave him for such service. One of God's works is merely interrupted so that another can be carried out. So when you leave prayer to serve some poor person, remember that this very service is performed for God. Charity is certainly greater than any rule. Moreover, all rules must lead to charity. Since she is a noble mistress, we must do whatever she commands. With renewed devotion, then, we must serve the poor, especially outcasts and beggars. They have been given to us as our masters and patrons.

Poverty in Frederic's lifetime

The worst thing about poverty in the 19th century was the callous attitude of many Victorians. They were great believers in 'self-help'. That is they thought everyone should be self-reliant and not look to other people for help. They also believed that anyone could become successful through sheer hard work and thrift. Logically that meant that if you were poor it was *your* fault. Many Victorians (not all) felt that the poor were to blame for their poverty.

At the end of the 19th century more than 25% of the population was living at or below subsistence level. Surveys indicated that around 10% were *very* poor and could not afford even basic necessities such as enough nourishing food. Between 15% and 20% had just

enough money to live on (provided they did not lose their job or have to take time off work through illness).

If you had no income at all you had to enter the workhouse. The workhouses were feared and hated by the poor. They were meant to be as unpleasant as possible to deter poor people from asking the state for help. In workhouses you could not wear your own clothes. You had to wear a uniform. Husbands and wives were separated and children were separated from their parents. Inmates had to do hard, unpleasant work such as breaking stones or pulling apart old rope.

Poverty in the 21st century

GLOBAL HUNGER

1.02 billion people do not have enough to eat - more than the populations of USA, Canada and the European Union;

(Source: [FAO news release](#), 19 June 2009)

The number of undernourished people in the world increased by 75 million in 2007 and 40 million in 2008, largely due to higher food prices;

(Source: [FAO news release](#), 9 Dec 2008)

907 million people in developing countries alone are hungry;

(Source: [The State of Food Insecurity in the World](#), FAO, 2008)

Asia and the Pacific region are home to over half the world's population and nearly two thirds of the world's hungry people;

(Source: [The State of Food Insecurity in the World](#), FAO, 2008)

More than 60 percent of chronically hungry people are women;

(Source: [The State of Food Insecurity in the World](#), FAO, 2006)

65 percent of the world's hungry live in only seven countries: India, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Ethiopia.

(Source: [The State of Food Insecurity in the World](#), FAO, 2008)

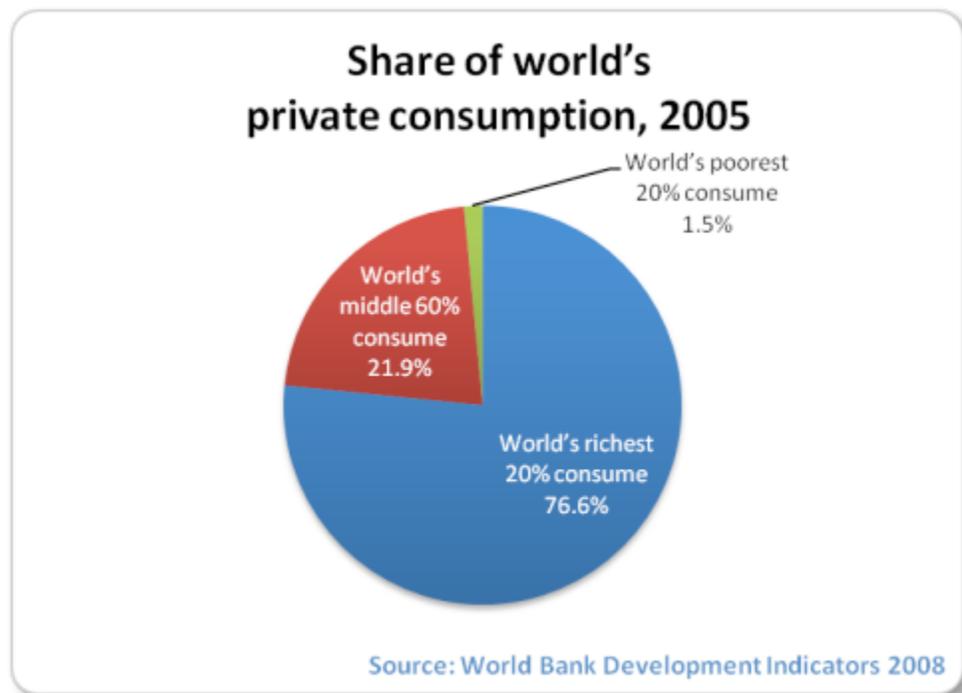
Facts on poverty in Africa

1. 315 million people – one in two people in Sub Saharan Africa survive on less than one dollar per day.
2. 184 million people – 33% of the African population – suffer from malnutrition.
3. Less than 50% of Africa's population has access to hospitals or doctors.
4. The average life expectancy in Africa is 41 years.

5. One in six children dies before the age of 5. This number is 25 times higher in sub-Saharan Africa than in the OECD countries.

Facts on Poverty in the World

1. More than 1.2 billion people—one in every five on earth—survive on less than \$1 a day.
2. The top 1% of the world's richest people earns as much as the poorest 57%.
3. More than 2.4 billion people do not have proper sanitation facilities, and more than 2.2 million people die each year from diseases caused by polluted water and filthy sanitation conditions.
4. Two-thirds of the world's 876 million illiterate persons are women.
5. The annual dairy subsidy in the EU amounts to \$913 per cow per year; EU's aid to Africa is \$8 per African per year.



For 156 years the St. Vincent de Paul Society has been serving the poor of this community. The establishment of the Society in 1854 here in Melbourne is remarkable in

that it was only 20 years after the society was first established by Frederic Ozanam and a few students in Paris and one year after his death in 1853.

We need to ask ourselves two foundational questions: (1) who were these remarkable persons, Vincent and Frederic and (2) what can they mean for us today? The world has changed significantly since the time of Frederic and the foundation of the Society in Melbourne, is the vision of Frederic, founded on Vincentian spirituality of any value and relevance to us as we begin the twenty-first century? If the answer is in the affirmative then we need to challenge ourselves to reanimate that vision for ourselves and our society.

At their first meeting, the seven members of the Society simply resolved to bring some assistance to- homes of a few poor persons.

Faced with so many anguishing situations, with so much undeserved distress, of so many families stricken by hunger, cold and sickness, these young people made a resolution to answer the call of Christ by dedicating themselves to the poor.

They asked Sister Rosalie, a Daughter of Charity, for the addresses of some families in distress to whom they would bring some bread and especially of friendship. Their resources were solely their own. Such was the origin of the first Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul. The History Conference became the Conference of Charity, which eventually and quickly became the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The hermeneutic key and the focus for us this evening is to ask “why Vincent?” “What of Vincent resonated so deeply and authentically within Frederic?”

It will be seen that the students of 1833 thought neither of founding a big organization nor of participating in a widespread campaign against misery. They wished to help one another to remain faithful to their baptismal promises and to carry out supported by their mutual friendship, one of the essential duties of the Christian life.

Nevertheless, less than five years later, in 1838, three years after the Confraternities of Charity officially became the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Frederic is challenging the members to reanimate themselves. They were already settling into ruts that were jeopardizing the mission of the Society.

“It is your duty, by age and office in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, to reanimate it from time to time by new inspirations which, without harm to its primitive spirit, foresee the dangers of too monotonous a uniformity. Let us be careful not to straighten ourselves with customs too hidebound, within bounds impassable in number or density. Why cannot the conferences of Saint-Etienne and Saint-Sulpice go beyond 50 zealous members? Why cannot the Society here (Lyon) get larger than scarcely forty members? Think about it.”

I would like to suggest today that the task or project of revisiting the St. Vincent de Paul Society for the 21st century begins with exegesis of the foundational vision of Frederic. At least a part of Frederic’s vision, and I would argue a significant part of that vision lies within the person of St. Vincent de Paul, especially the retelling of the story of

Vincent by Sr. Rosalie Rendue to Frederic. The power of the story of Vincent animated Frederic to such an extent that his dream became a powerful reality, the anecdotal and ad hoc service to the poor became a systematic organization that resonated with thousands of people, immediately and almost explosively. That initial explosion was heard and heeded in Melbourne. Let's take a moment and ask ourselves: what indeed constituted the heart of the story of Vincent that rocked Ozanam's soul?

Let me suggest that we can find in Vincent's story three elements that are authentically human and authentically Catholic, elements that resonate with the human soul and elements and that are totally in rhythm with the Catholic vision of human flourishing.

Vincent, educated, but far from being a systematic theologian came to understand the profundity of three foundational aspects of the Catholic faith:

1. That every human person is created in the "Image of God."
2. That only by securing the "common good" can we truly guarantee every member of society's "personal" good.
3. That the consistent ethic of life is essential to any moral vision and to the creation of a truly just society.

It's not necessary to trot out a long line of quotes from Vincent to see the authenticity of these aspects in Vincent's vision, it is but necessary to look at his life. I would propose that in the telling of Vincent's story, Rosalie captured Vincent's soul and heart in a way that no academic treatise ever could. She translated Vincent for Frederic in a way that left him entranced and seduced with a vision of effective love. This narrative captured the imagination, the very soul of Ozanam.

The facts of Vincent's later life are profoundly telling in themselves. First, His concern for all persons, rich and poor is interwoven throughout his ministry. Every person was inherently valuable because they were created in the image of God. The galley slave, the homeless, the discarded mentally ill, the abandoned and probably illegitimate child, the aristocrat at court, the wealthy and powerful, all were God's children and all were deserving of the same loving care and attention but in different ways and for different reasons.

Ozanam was quick to find his own vision of the human person in the Vincent that was revealed to him by Sr. Rosalie.

Himself only a teenager, years before the decree of the Provisional Government abolishing slavery in French colonies and possessions promulgated on 27 April 1848 at the proposal of the Martinique deputy Victor Schoelcher, Ozanam vigorously denounced the inhumanity in the treatment of the Blacks.

"There is no denying the sad and deplorable condition of these unfortunate victims of European barbarism; it will unquestionably continue to be a cause for indignation and tears for the true philosopher and the true Christian, this horrible cruelty of these men

who call themselves civilized and who in the name of a holy religion appear on foreign soil like thieving brigands who snatch sons from their mothers and fathers from their children.

Let us weep for the shame of our persecuting brothers! Let us weep for the evils suffered by our oppressed brothers! But you who are lamenting with me turn your eyes away for a moment from those calamities to find out their cause. Listen and listen well to what is in a father's curse, the vengeance of almighty God from whom all fatherhood proceeds and who punishes the audacity of a guilty son to the very last generation.

There are sacred pages which reveal to us the primitive source of all these horrors. The spirit of light dictated them to the sacred historian for the instruction of future races."

Second, Vincent's desire to provide not only a "hand out" but a "hand up" was a prescient vision to what we now call social justice. Vincent, the apostle of charity saw the profound connection between charity and justice. He fully understood the adage, "Give a person a fish and they eat for a day, teach a person to fish and they eat every day." To feed the poor is truly important, but to ask "why are there poor" is perhaps even more valuable. As Bishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil, a man dedicated to the poor once remarked, "When I fed the poor they called me a saint, but when I asked "why are there poor" they called me a communist."

Of course the concern for the poor was not introduced by Vincent. We find it throughout the scriptures, but especially in the teachings of Jesus. The early Church fathers and mothers continued to challenge Christians to adopt a preferential option for the poor. St. John Chrysostom, the golden tongued preacher of the 4th and 5th century spoke vigorously of this responsibility. "*Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs. When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice.*" This same theme was echoed in the twentieth century words of Pope John XXIII who reminded us that "all property has a social mortgage."

Again, Ozanam finds in Vincent a clear example of the vision of discipleship that was so important in his life; that serving one's neighbor is not optional, it is essential to authentic effective Christian love.

Twelve years before the communist manifesto of Karl Marx in 1848, Frederic was deploring the increasing gap at the heart of society between the strong and the weak. His articles suggesting social interventions on behalf of the poor were eventually to be incorporated into the first of the Church's social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891. This gave him a prophetic premonition of the terrible and unavoidable confrontations between rich and poor.

"The question which divides men in our time is no longer a question of political systems. It is a social question: that is of knowing which will prevail: the spirit of selfishness or the spirit of sacrifice? Whether society is to be simply a great opportunity

of exploitation for the benefit of the strongest or a dedication of everyone for the benefit of all and especially for the protection of the weak...."

Third and finally, the understanding that human life is sacred from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death is not of twentieth century theological coinage. Rather it is found throughout the history of the Church and Vincent adopted it as a rule of life for Vincentians.

If indeed there is at least a piece of the truth in that the original vision of effective love, a vision that so animated Ozanam to action, was based on the narrative of Vincent that challenged every Catholic to live by three precepts:

that every person is created in the image of God,

that ensuring the common good is essential to the Christian vision of society,

that life is sacred from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death,

then we are ready to address the second goal of tonight's lecture: Is this vision of any relevance to the contemporary world, is this vision one that can reanimate the St. Vincent de Paul Society so that it brings a message and meal to a world hungry for authentic meaning and authentic happiness. Does it mean anything to us that the Society in its infancy resonated almost exclusively with the young, that those older and more traditional generations whose Catholic identity was tied exclusively to notional assent and sacramental participation were hardly touched by the vision of Vincent that so thoroughly rocked the life of Frederic "Is Ozanam's vision, the Vincentian vision of effective love, anachronistic?" I would answer that the society's vision, its authentic vision is only as anachronistic as "love." If love is old fashioned, out of date and mythic then maybe the Vincentian vision is also. Vatican II reminded the church that the two marks of authentic faith are "joy" and "hope." These same two marks are found in the Vincentian vocation as articulated and lived by Vincent and Ozanam. The society needs to be inventive unto infinity in the service of the poor and every member needs to adopt the authentic Vincentian spirituality that allows them to be grounded in prayer and flexible in service. I truly believe that the future for Vincentians, all Vincentian depends on our reappropriation of the Vincentian vision in every member and every conference.

I would suggest that Australia is ripe for the Vincentian vision:

The Society can lead the way in preaching through its actions that every person is the image of God and has inestimable worth regardless of their social class, their skin color or their country of origin. The Society needs to capture the energy of the Catholic Social Gospel, the good news that justice is a right and that systemic sin won't be tolerated. And finally the Society needs to make it clear that it serves every human life from the moment of conception until the moment of natural death.