

Saint Vincent de Paul:

A person of the 17th century,



1581 16

1881 1945 1981 2010

a person for the 21st century.



Seeking and finding the forgotten

During the first half of the seventeenth century, a priest named Vincent de Paul walked daily through the crowded streets of Paris. What would have caught his eye as he traveled around the city he knew so well? The countless churches, palaces, monuments, fabulous sights? The royalty, nobles, bishops and priests, lawyers and doctors, professors and merchants, soldiers and every other type of person hurrying past him going about their business in that bustling city? No, Vincent was always on the lookout for the countless poor people who were forgotten, marginalized, and even despised and feared by the world that surrounded them.



Whatever you did for these least brothers of mine...

As Vincent walked through these streets, everywhere he looked he saw homeless people and beggars. He saw hungry people. He saw children and elderly men and women who were neglected. He saw sick people without health care. He saw refugees from warfare. He saw people who were spiritually abandoned and without hope.

In these people he found those whom he had been looking for: his brothers and sisters in Christ.



The kingdom of God on earth



Vincent was profoundly dissatisfied with what he saw because he knew it was at odds with the "good news" of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus Christ to the poor; a kingdom where each human being created in the image and likeness of God possessed an inestimable dignity and value as a person.

He turned his sense of frustration and dissatisfaction into an urgent, faith-filled desire to do as much as he could, as well as he could, to reach out to improve the lives of the people whose gazes he returned so intently and whose suffering moved him so personally.

A model which is still followed today

As a person, Vincent de Paul can be described in many ways. He was innovative and approachable, realistic and visionary. He was opportunistic and a risk-taker. He was hard-working. He was very intelligent yet blessed with common sense. He was a master of detail and could design complex systems, but never at the expense of his own or others' humanity.

His communication style was simple, to the point, and powerfully persuasive. He was also prayerful and contemplative. He felt equally comfortable in the presence of a queen, or in the presence of a beggar.



Example of Our Lord Jesus, Evangelizer of the Poor

In the end, his road to sanctity can be explained by his heartfelt desire to model his life of service on the example of Jesus Christ, the evangelizer of the poor and the source and model of all charity.



Master of collaboration and teamwork

Always depending on God's grace and the guidance of divine providence, Vincent instinctively looked around to see who was willing to join him with the "strength of their arms and the sweat of their brows" in this important mission. He never had to look far to find men and women like Saint Louise de Marillac, a noble woman, widow, and mother who joined him as a friend and indispensable collaborator. Those who flocked to Vincent's side were organized into groups such as the Congregation of the Mission, the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the Ladies of Charity and the Confraternities of Charity. What all these groups had in common, and still have in common almost 400 years later, is a shared mission to serve people in need, and transform the world for the better by doing good and doing it well.



Then and now

The 21st century world that surrounds us is changing with a rapidity that is unprecedented in human history, and that at times can leave us breathless in our attempts to keep pace. In this sense our 21st century world is very different from the 17th century world of St. Vincent de Paul. However as we walk down the streets of our cities, we can see the people in need, just as Vincent did. We can recognize the causes and solutions for contemporary injustice and poverty. We may be Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or even a non-believer but can't we, shouldn't we, respond on the basis of our shared humanity, in the same way as Vincent did, to what we can see?

