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Homily for the 150th Anniversary of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul

BY

MOST REV. J. TERRY STEIB, S.V.D.¹

“I go away for a while, and I come back to you then your hearts will rejoice with a joy no one can take from you.” (John 14: 23-29).

In today’s gospel passage, Jesus says two things that on first hearing seem to pose a contradiction: one, that he is going away for a while (John 14: 28); the other, that he and his Father will make their dwelling place with us (John 14: 23). In many respects, it is a contradiction that seems to run through the whole Last Supper Discourse in John’s Gospel. Jesus says his farewell, and he tells us that we should rejoice. What does this mean?

Perhaps our gospel passage is presenting us with a paradox that we all know very well in our own dealings with God. God is the great all-powerful Being, beyond limits and beyond knowing. At the same time, God is the dear God, more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. It should not surprise us, really, that the God-beyond-us would go away from us. Like the expanding universe, God is always going away. We can never grasp him, much less pin him down. The truly surprising thing—and the New Testament never loses this sense of surprise—is that the God-beyond-us took flesh of the Virgin Mary, and lived and walked among us here on earth. He was laid in a manger at his birth. He lived, and taught and celebrated among the poor. He died a criminal’s death, wrongfully accused. This was all shocking enough. Then he rose from the dead.

True to his word, he and his Father sent the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, to remind us of what he said, and to instruct us in everything

¹This homily was given at a Eucharist celebrated at the 150th anniversary and convention of the Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Louis, Missouri, 29 September 1995.

(John 14: 26). This is the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy, of a heart made new by the outpouring of the Spirit (Ezekiel 36: 26-27). Jeremiah had foretold that the law of the new covenant would be *written* in those new hearts, not on tablets of stone (Jeremiah 31: 33). So, the words of Moses in today's passage from Deuteronomy take on a deeper meaning: "This command is not too mysterious and remote; it is not up in the sky, that you should say, 'Who will go up in the sky to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?' Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?' No, it is something very near to you . . . it is already in our mouths and in our hearts! (Deuteronomy 30: 10-14). The Paraclete becomes God-within-us in a special way, and through the Holy Spirit, the God-beyond-us, the Father, and his Incarnate Son, take up their dwelling with us. Even there, even within us, this God is not finished with surprises, for the Spirit blows where it will, and no one knows where it goes (John 3: 8), or where it leads us.

Where does that leave us? In the same place, I suggest, that it always leaves the Christian: mystified but hopeful. We celebrate those attitudes in a particular context in these days, the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society in the United States.

Certainly we are mystified! Any of us who work among the poor feels troubled at one time or another at the injustice that creates their hardship and the suffering! Here there is nothing glamorous or alluring about evil. We see it breaking human beings and we are disgusted. "Why does a good God allow such things to happen?" we ask. And answers are slow in coming. We know that the injustice does not come from God. We know that God's hatred of injustice is, if anything, even more passionate than our own. But we also know that God created us in freedom, and that God loves freedom. God did not make us as little automatons, programmed to say, "We praise you, God." He fashioned free creatures, who could give his offer of friendship the answer that they wanted to give. That very wanting—*our* wanting—is precious to him. Even though God knew we would commit sins and injustices, he gave us freedom just the same. And that is a loving mystery.

In another sense, we Vincentians are mystified that he has chosen to show us his greatness and his transcendence, precisely among the poor. Humanly speaking, a God in fine robes in a stately palace, thundering his judgments, would be more understandable, maybe even preferable. But the God who reveals himself to us in the least of his brothers and sisters (Matthew 25: 40) is a pure mystery. Fellow

Vincentians, our experience among the poor is indeed a powerful experience of the God-beyond-us, and let us never forget it. Let us reverence God there, with every vehicle of praise at our disposal.

We are mystified most of all that God has chosen to do his own work on earth with instruments as frail and fickle as the human beings we each know ourselves to be. Yet we have seen, too, time and time again, that however haltingly the work gets done. God truly chooses the weak things of this world (1 Corinthians 1: 27) and makes them strong (2 Corinthians 12: 10), to show clearly that the surpassing power of our ministry comes from him and not from us (2 Corinthians 4: 7). With Paul, then, sisters and brothers, let us be content with weakness, with distress, with difficulties for the sake of Christ and his poor, for when we are powerless, it is then that we are strong (2 Corinthians 12: 10).

We are mystified but we are hopeful. To put it simply, we hope that our work with the poor makes a difference. We do not *wonder* whether it does or not; we know that it does. But we face the future with a sense of *confidence* that what we do with the poor is part of a larger picture, a picture in which not one moment of human sorrow is lost on a providential Lord, in which a kindness as small as a glass of water is noted for reward (Matthew 10: 42). We hope because we know that Christ gave his life for these poor, and his blood gives them an incomparable worth. May that hope be a beacon in a hopeless world. May it guide us into a future which is more loving and more just.

“I go away for a while, and I come back to you,” says Jesus (John 14: 28). “Then your hearts will rejoice with a joy that no one can take from you” (John 16: 22). There is nothing to fear. There is nothing to deter us. We stand with Vincent, Louise, Elizabeth Ann, Frederick, the saints we have known in our lifetime, and the whole company of the servants of the poor. We stand among our brothers and sisters, the poor—and we count it a privilege. We stand before a God who is at once beyond and within, a God who is Beauty without measure, and our only true wealth. May God bless and prosper our lives and our work.

It is a ruse of the devil by which he deceives good souls when he incites them to do more than they can in order that they might not be able to do anything.

(Saint Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 7 December 1630)

Always do what you can so that, prayer being your first occupation, your mind may be filled with God for the rest of the day.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
2 August 1640)*