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Love – Inventive to Infinity

BY

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Is there any history more depressing than the history of the poor? The poor, in fact, would perhaps have no history at all except that their plight forms the prelude and the postlude of so many other events that fill the pages of every nation's history. Not much has ever really changed from the times when Jesus himself observed, "The poor you have always with you." The faceless poor, so often and in such great numbers, are the hapless result of the decisions made by those other and more important ones in history, those who have a face and a name, persons of power and substance in a society. We speak about "poverty" as though this were simply an impersonal, social blight for which no one is responsible, yet which affects everyone.

Poverty, when it goes on and on and on, grinds away the human spirit. Poverty, when it goes on and on, dehumanizes the poor person and de-faces the poor in our midst. Poverty, when it goes on and on, generates still other social evils, and threatens us all with hopelessness and despair. Our Scripture speaks of the "blessed poor" while on most days our newspapers speak only of the wretched poor.

These are some thoughts that came to me as I read the words of Reverend Robert Maloney that have inspired this morning's gathering. "What a powerful force we could have by networking the various branches of the Vincentian Family, and those 'infected' by the Vincen-tian spirit! What a tremendous impact we could have on the lives of the poor." The thought of networking is exciting. The potential synergy of the gifts and talents of just the people gathered in this room inspires hope and awe. We ask what impact we could have on the lives of the poor, and we have a resource that Vincent and Louise and Elizabeth and Frederick did not have. We have the potential of a "world wide web," not of electronic media but of men and women already aware, organized, equipped, and involved in service to the poor of our times. Nevertheless, we share something of our founders' experience:

the questions, the doubts, the temptations to despair as they faced the enormity of this challenge.

We must not separate in our thinking the exciting potential of networking on behalf of the poor and the formidable dimensions of the work to be done. If we separate these two factors, we will continually bounce between the poles of euphoria and despair. If, on the other hand, we keep these two factors connected, they will nudge us into asking more and different questions. Certainly, we will ask how can we make a network happen, given the awareness, commitment, experience and expertise of the people in this gathering? However, we will go on to ask how it is possible to look without despair at the seemingly endless destructive potential of poverty, at its intractable evil? How is it possible never to give up on projects and programs that seem to be such weak attacks on such a powerful evil, efforts that seem so ineffective in the long run? How can we avoid using our concern for the poor merely to assuage our personal sense of powerless guilt? How can we stay in solidarity with the poor, without wasting our energy in justifiable but fruitless rage?

Make no mistake about it, our founders had these same questions, doubts, and temptations. They faced them squarely and took their measure. They did not avoid the questions, the doubts, and the temptations inherent in the service of the poor, and turn their attentions instead to complex schemes and superficial busy-ness. Our founders were creatively pragmatic in their approaches to the challenge. Our histories witness to the fact that they accomplished what they set out to do. "It is essential," said Saint Vincent, "to continue well, because to begin is nothing."¹ Yet they did not anxiously rely on the success of their projects to regenerate their confidence and their energy. Our founders generated the remarkable Tradition of Charity that has made all of us gathered here brothers and sisters of the same Family.

The charism that we share has many wonderful characteristics: organization, practicality, flexibility and adaptability. This apostolic tradition is holistic in its emphasis on both physical and spiritual assistance. It is collaborative and parish-based. Wonderful as all these gifts are, and our founders model all of them, these gifts are not the secret to their impact on the history of the poor.

¹ Joseph Leonard, C.M., trans., "On Fidelity to Rising and on Prayer, 16 August 1640" in *The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity* (Great Britain: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1979), 31.

Deep in their hearts and spirits, our founders were seized by a profound truth. They listened and heard deeply the Good News of salvation addressed first to them. In their hearing, they recognized and embraced the mutual identification that must exist among Jesus, the poor, and the servants of the poor. In 1934, Evelyn Underhill wrote, "God is Love... generous, out flowing, self-giving Love, Agape... Charity is the color of the Divine personality, the spectrum of Holiness... To enter the Divine order then, achieve the full life for which we are made, means entering an existence that only has meaning as the channel and expression of an infinite, self-spending Love. This is not piety. It is not altruism. It is the clue to our human situation."² I believe that our founders were grasped by this truth, and understood that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus gave us access to this Mystery of Love at the heart of the universe. They truly "entered an existence that only has meaning as the channel and expression of an infinite, self-spending Love."

I think that this is the keystone for comprehending Saint Vincent's words that we are using to name this conference today: Love is infinitely inventive. In an "exhortation to a Brother who is dying," Vincent describes the Eucharist as a demonstration of the infinite inventiveness of Love. Vincent says:

This Lover of our hearts, seeing that sin had unfortunately ruined and effaced the resemblance, determined to break all the laws of nature in order to repay this havoc and did so with this wonderful additional favor (the Eucharist). Not content with implanting in us a resemblance and mark of His Divinity, he even decided, with the same intention that we should love him, to make Himself like unto us and even to clothe Himself with our human nature. Who then would refuse such a just and salutary duty as loving him? Moreover, as Love is infinitely inventive, after being nailed to the infamous gibbet of the Cross in order to gain souls and win the hearts by whom He desired to be loved... He resolved to institute the Most August Sacrament in which He is as really and truly present as He is in Heaven.³

² Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity* (London: Longmans, Green, 1934; repr., Wilton, CT: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 10.

³ Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretien, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), 11: 146.



"Blessed Vincent gives comfort to the poor and elderly men and women with a most fitting establishment of a hospice." Scene from the life of Vincent from a series of prints created at the time of his beatification.
Engraved by Dupin after the painting by Bro. Jean-André, O.P.

It is their grounding in these profound insights of our faith that freed our founders to do the tasks that lay before them. They truly took the Gospel as their only rule of life. I do not mean by this that they read the Gospel merely or that they meditated on it daily. I mean that they internalized the Word, not as words but as wisdom, as practical guidance. This internalized Wisdom freed them to focus their daily activity in the service of the poor, freed them to use every means in their power to accomplish the mission.

Writing about the place of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac in the French School of Spirituality, Raymond Deville explains:

(Vincent) insisted on the necessity of imitating Jesus who was the model of all the virtues. The *Common Rules*, for example, are replete with this theme: Vincentians must clothe themselves with the spirit of Jesus, essentially a spirit of charity, compassion, and tenderness; they must conform their actions and intentions to his, especially his commitment

to the poor. In a special way -- and I think this was Vincent's charism -- he insisted on carrying out Jesus' mission. For Vincent, Jesus must imprint us with his mark and character. This is the fruit of the Spirit of God, of the Spirit of Jesus... "Jesus is the only rule of the Mission."⁴

I think that we trivialize our charism and tradition, if we limit it to mean only works of service. Unless we are as passionate as our founders were, to grow daily into this identification with Jesus and his mission, we cannot claim the name Vincentian. We can exhaust ourselves in implementing our strategies to serve the poor. But as Vincentians we will fail, if we do not contextualize all of our service in the three-way identification seen so clearly by our founders: the trinitarian relationship, if you will, among Jesus, the poor person, and the servant of the poor. We take certain pride (holy, I hope) in the practical, down-to-earth quality of our charism and tradition. That is true enough. Nevertheless, the grounding insight of our founders was mystical, powerful and empowering. This was the insight that answered their questions, allayed their doubts, and strengthened them when the testing came.

Standing in the empowering freedom of their insight into the nature of God, our founders found it possible to look without despair at the seemingly endless destructive potential of poverty, at its intractable evil. They found it possible to be equally intractable in their efforts, never giving up on projects and programs that seemed to be such weak attacks on such an evil, efforts that seemed so ineffective in the long run. They felt empowered and responsible in putting on the mission of Jesus, rather than powerless and guilty in the face of what have always looked like overwhelming odds. They followed Jesus who gave the phrase, "solidarity with the poor" its original meaning. They did not waste their energy in fruitless rage against what was unjust in their society. Instead, with intrepid, courageous love, a love that was effective not merely affective, they calmly invented new ways to address the urgency of need that they saw all around them. They took the urgency of need to be a revelation of God's will for them. Again, Reverend Deville writes:

⁴ Raymond Deville, S.S., "Saint Vincent and Saint Louise in Relation to the French School of Spirituality," *Vincentian Heritage* 11, No. 1 (1990): 40.

In the same way (as in the case of the foundlings) all of the other primitive apostolates of these early communities of charity providentially emerged from Louise and Vincent's prayerful and calm attentiveness to the revelation of the urgent needs of the most abandoned of the sick, the most abandoned of the uneducated poor, the most abandoned of the galley slaves, the most abandoned of the aged, the most abandoned of the mentally ill, the most abandoned of the orphaned, the homeless and the hungry.

This "prayerful calm attentiveness to the revelation of urgent need" was rooted in a grasp of their identification with Jesus and with the poor.

The "prayerful calm attentiveness" did not make the invention of the means something simplistic or easy. We have only to read the correspondence between Vincent and Louise to realize how busy and complicated their daily lives were! But rooted in this powerful and empowering relationship of identification, our founders gladly took on the practical challenges inherent in inventing the means, in finding the way. They did not do it all at once and they did not do it all by themselves. They literally created networks of the baptized, engaging each one according to the state in life God willed for each, in their vision.

The poor were not faceless and nameless, they were men, women, and children right in your parish. And so the confraternities came about as a way of organizing and channeling many efforts into one work, with focus and purpose. The poor were also the children of God, and so the servant of the poor had to find ways to bring them closer to this God who loved them. Mere physical assistance was never enough.

We sometimes excuse ourselves from such inventiveness by saying, "Oh, it was much easier then!" I do not think so. There was always the government, always the structure of the Church, always human nature to contend with. But these founders of ours were always looking for another way, another door, another path when the first was blocked by social custom, political power, canon law, or human failing.

The Church of Vatican II offers us the right moment for the Vincentian tradition. I believe that the idea of building a network among Vincentians, Daughters and Sisters of Charity, Ladies of Charity, and the Saint Vincent de Paul Society is to restore something essential in our tradition. The centuries that saw the separation of our efforts were a detour on our journey. Many historical events can account for these

separations and distinctions, and as Saint Vincent would say, it is all in God's Providence.

But if today, we see a new possibility, if today we can envision the synergy that is possible in our efforts for those who are poorest in our world, then I think Saint Vincent would also name this a revelation from God.

Standing with the poor in the empowering identification with Jesus, clear-sighted and clearheaded about the size of the challenge before us, let us employ every talent, skill, and strategy in our power to focus this synergy on behalf of those who are poor. In considering how you can do this right here in the metropolitan area, you are acting in the spirit of Saint Vincent who said to take up the work that is right in front of you.

As you feel the stirring of this new possibility, I urge you not to undo the good thing by being too eager to do everything all at once. Massive problems seem to call for massive strategies, and comprehensive strategies for pervasive ills. We need systematic effort for systemic impact. Contrary as it might seem, however, I think it wise to hear what Saint Vincent had to say. Saint Vincent has an idea about this too. He said that God is more pleased by small beginnings than by projects that begin with the ringing of bells!

Vincent's way of knowing that he was doing God's will was to start small, seek good advice, and wait. This waiting was not a passive indolence, but an active listening to and discerning of what God seemed to be doing in the situation. I can think of no better set of guidelines for your deliberations than this Vincentian way: start small with what is at hand and if possible, seek good advice, actively listen and wait. You can be sure of it, God, our Providence, will go with you to create the future.

I pray that the holy will of our great Master may always be accomplished by all of us and in all of us.

(Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, L. 127)

I will tell you quite simply that we must wait peacefully for grace to produce true humility in us by revealing our powerlessness to us.

(Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, L. 80)

Where are the gentleness and charity that you must preserve so carefully when dealing with our dear masters, the sick poor? If we deviate in the slightest from the conviction that they are the members of Jesus Christ, it will infallibly lead to the weakening of these beautiful virtues in us.

(Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, L. 104b)

May the Divine Goodness increase your strength in proportion to the matters with which everyone is overwhelming you.

(Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, L. 123)

It also seemed to me that I was doing what I was meant to do without knowing how.

(Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, L. 159)