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People of the Scarred Coin

BY

THOMAS F. MCKENNA, C.M.

The annual Vincentian Chair of Social Justice lecture, delivered at the Vincentian Convocation of Saint John's University on 31 January 2002.

Introduction

Saint John's means quite a bit to me: I went to Saint John's Prep School; I earned a degree in its graduate school; taught in its theology department; I am a member of the Board of Trustees; and for a long time I have greatly admired what it sets out to do — educate in the Catholic Vincentian tradition.

The Basis of Human Dignity

In a previous life, I was a part of the higher education enterprise here at Saint John's University. In every one of the courses I taught, I would get around to a certain hard-to-articulate issue — human dignity and its basis. With a persistence that sometimes irritated my students, I would press the question in a deepening dialogue:

“Tell me why you'd ever want to help somebody who was repulsive — whom you didn't even know.” Put more graphically, “You're walking down Union Turnpike near the University and there in front of you a little crowd is gathering around someone lying on the sidewalk. You walk over and see it's a badly dressed older man, disheveled, fairly drunk and he can't get up. Someone from the crowd picks him up, sits him on the curb, talks to him, has someone call a cab, pays the driver and finally sends him home.” Then, I would pose the key questions, “Why would anyone do that?” “What is there in that stumbling old man that's worth helping him like that?”

Some student would say, “He's human.” To which I would reply “Yes, but what is there in being human that makes it worth it to go out of your way for?” Then, the answers would really start to roll: “It

could be me"; "It makes me feel good"; and "I'd be guilty if I passed him by." I would say "yes" again, but press the underlying question, the nub of the issue. "What is there in him that you don't want to see trampled on, that you would show respect for? What does he have inside that could command such a response and what name do you put on that something?"

Religions Respond

Religious traditions answer: something God-like is inside that old man, something of the most precious, priceless, inestimable reality in existence, and that is, the Divine. When Moses came upon it, he offered the Middle Eastern gesture of respect. He took his shoes off, as he felt the presence of the Divine in the burning bush. The same is true of the encounter with the drunken man. Something special, worthy of incalculable dignity, is present in him and meant to be treated as such. It is not the same as this man, but it is somehow within him – and so, we bow down.

In the Christian tradition there is also a classic answer to the question "Why stop and help?" It comes from the mouth of the Risen Lord Jesus, "Because in doing it for that poor person, you are doing it for Me."¹

Saint Vincent de Paul Responds

Inside the same Christian tradition, there is a riff on that answer which in our circles has come to be regarded as classic too. The signature response of Vincent de Paul to the question of human dignity – "Why help this disheveled old man?" – is "Because you've seen through to the other side of the coin."

Vincent's metaphor depicts a beat-up, dented, scratched, scarred, and very common coin, which turns out to have another side. It is applied to the beat-up, dented, dime-a-dozen, mostly invisible ones – the poor. "Why treat that common nobody on the ground as if he is somebody?" Here is Vincent's answer:

I should not judge poor peasants, men or women, by their surface appearance, nor by their apparent mental capacities. And this is hard to do, since very frequently they scarcely seem to have the semblance or

¹ Matt. 25.



*Collectio Picturae
Vincentianae del.*

*B. Vincentius Infantium expositorum
Vita ac Educationi providet.*

*Grav. a Missa per P. Basso
et incis. a Th. P. Basso*

"B. Vincentius Infantium expositorum. Vita ac Educationi providet. Period engraving.
Print Collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

the intelligence of reasonable beings, so gross and so offensive are they. But, turn the coin, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, Whose will it was to be poor, is represented to us by just these people.²

Supporting this conviction are two bedrock beliefs: first, God is the most real and the most precious reality there is, and second, this precious God lives in His people, at the tip of their hearts, in their inmost personal chambers, shot through the core of their very selves. This, at base, is what gives us reason to “take our shoes off” when we come into their presence.

Anyone wanting the key to Vincent de Paul’s great soul could not get much closer than meditating on these two convictions – two beliefs which, for Vincent, were wrapped one inside the other. They are his answer to “Why stop to help a crumpled old man who can’t help you back?”

The Vincentian Motivation to Educate

I ask you to transpose these convictions several hundred years from Vincent’s 17th century France to Brooklyn, New York, in 1868. A Bishop approaches one of Vincent’s followers, a member of the Congregation of the Mission, and asks him to start a school. Why would a person of this “scarred coin persuasion” say yes?

❖ *Education is one of the prime catalysts to elicit the human, coax it out, wake it up, and massage it into life.*

A follower of Saint Vincent de Paul seeks to educate, first because humans are worth educating. Perhaps better put, because education has a unique and un-paralleled ability to call forth what is precisely human in people. Education is one of the prime catalysts to elicit the human, coax it out, wake it up, and massage it into life. It nourishes the human like almost nothing else can. So, if we believe in the God-based dignity of people, of course we would look kindly on the chance to nourish that dignity by educating it.

² Conference #19, in Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre J. Gabalda, 1920–1926), 11:32. Hereinafter cited as *CED*.

There is another dimension. Education must have a special feel for those ordinary folk of the dented, scarred coin, i.e., the poor. In some way, it should be directed to them. It should be aware of them, have a mind to treat them as worthwhile, and in so doing swim against the strong current of society that would want to hide them, take them for granted, and render them invisible. This education would include awareness for how the dull-looking coins of society are discounted and pushed to the bottom of the pile, and told in a thousand ways they do not matter as much as the others.

The Vincentian Project

The followers of Vincent de Paul, then and today, have gravitated toward education for two reasons. Firstly, education draws out that which is most precious in us, or in New Testament terms, it lets the face of God, given in Jesus, shine more clearly within the human. Secondly, it enhances the humanity of those who tend to be dehumanized, the poor. It does this in educating the poor and also by sensitizing everybody else to their dignity and worth. From the beginning, that has been the Vincentian project. It has not been as clear in some times as it has been in others; it has not burned brightly in every single Vincentian nor Saint John's collaborator. But it has always been present as a kind of pressure, an undercurrent, a magnetic north for the institution.

The Vincentian Values

Flowing out of and back to these fundamental convictions are the clusters of values that have been singled out as distinctive to Vincentian institutions. These values — respect for others, integrity, sensitivity to those on the margins, excellence in education, and service — reflect the belief that people, and in particular poor people, have inestimable God-given worth. To educate them well is a type of prayer, an act of worship, a reverencing of what is best and highest, a way of taking off your shoes in the presence of the Divine, a way to promote the emergence of "Thy Kingdom Come." To stir up a heightened sensitivity to human dignity in both the poor and those who are not is to bring Jesus' message of "Good News to the poor" here to this place and this enterprise, Saint John's University.

Virtue – Developing Capacities to Act

Let me switch to a different track – yet still following Vincent de Paul. He was remembered for his insistence that ideals be delivered. He constantly stressed that God's desires must be translated into tangible, recognizable actions which are felt and measurable in this world. There are many facets to Vincent's emphasis upon the practical. For example, he thought organizationally and expressed impatience with speculation and theorizing that did not result in action. What I wish to highlight here is his emphasis on developing the capacities to act. Vincent would have his followers get to work on the practical competencies needed to deliver on their convictions.

In a modern analogy, Vincent had a special feel for the difference between getting an "A" in the theory of swimming, and jumping in at the deep end of the pool and actually staying afloat. So many of his writings are given over to building these capacities to act. He called them "virtues."

For instance, early on he saw that a high concentration of these valued ones, the poor, lived in prisons. So, Vincent decided to help prisoners. But when he walked through the gates of the jail, he was repulsed by what he found. The smells, the violence, the fear and the futility literally nauseated him. Here we have a clear example of the distance between ideals and follow-through. What did Vincent do? In the words of the Nike advertisement, he "just did it!" Vincent's way of overcoming revulsion was to go into the revolting place, over and over, until the shock wore off. So most everyday, he moved among the prisoners, dressing their wounds, sharing their meals, and teaching them the Gospel. He got used to the conditions. This virtue of conquering initial fears and of delaying gratification he called "death to myself" or "mortification." If you do not desensitize yourself, as we would say today, you will never be able to serve these people.

The Virtue of Transparency

There is one virtue of Vincent I would like to hold up as needed now, and especially in education. This is the virtue of transparency, personal and institutional. Vincent called it simplicity and said on a number of occasions that it was his favorite virtue. For Vincent, it meant learning to be the same on the outside as you are on the inside. Learning to see things as they really are. Being genuine. Staying away from doubletalk and flim-flam. Keeping truth in your packaging.

❖ *Vincent's "simplicity" is... "transparency," squaring up outside appearances with inner attitudes, congruence between the symbol and what is symbolized.*

There are two fundamental reasons why Vincent recommended this virtue and worked on it all of his life. The first reason is that transparency is of God. God is simple and God's Person-in-the-World, Jesus Christ, was spectacularly simple in all His words and dealings. Secondly, to reach the poor, you need to act in this way. On the wrong end of too many schemes, empty promises and con artists all their lives, the poor have a special sense for what is false, for who is the snake oil salesman. They are good at seeing through glitzy claims and are talented in sniffing out a hidden agenda.

As with all virtue, simplicity has to be worked at over a lifetime. One way we can work on simplicity is to simply practice telling the truth. In the thousand times you are tempted to shade things or put a misleading spin on them, resist the temptation. Become aware of all the ways in which you are not simple and work against them. Develop your capacity to be genuine. Do it over and over until it becomes second nature.

Why do I lift out this particular virtue for today? Because in a culture where the smart money seems to say "image is everything," simplicity has fallen on very hard times. What counts is the outside, the surface, how you look. Now, if there is a correspondence to what is inside, all well and good. It is nice if it happens; but it is not really necessary or even important. The trick is to keep the surfaces shiny and sizzling. We know this as spin. The important thing is to keep the proper angle showing, whether or not it mirrors what is going on at the core.

Recently, I heard an engineer use a word to describe what he thinks to be a culturally needed quality in a building. His phrase was "architectonic." By it, he meant transparency in architecture. You should be able to see that the solid appearance of a building on the outside corresponds to a solid structure on the inside. In this era of ungrounded glitz, he believes it is important that a building be "see-through," that there be enough glass to reassure the jaded onlooker that the respectable exterior is being held up not by wire and sky hooks, but by firm interior supports. His word, "architectonic," expresses Vincent's simplicity.

Vincent made the development of simplicity a life-long project. In a 1634 letter to a collaborator he writes:

It is your own trusting heart, which has given me the freedom to speak to you with full confidence, without concealing or disguising anything. And it seems to me that up until now, you have recognized that quality in the ways we have always related. So at this juncture, do you think I am going to fall into the trap of being forced to do or say anything to you that would go against this holy simplicity? God preserve me from this, in any way! Simplicity is the virtue I love the most, the one I pay most attention to in everything I do. And if you will let me boast just a little, I would say it is the one virtue in which, by God's mercy, I have made some progress over the years.³

In a later conference he writes, "Your heart must not think one thing while your mouth says another."⁴ In a letter, "Steer clear of all duplicity, two-facedness, cunning, studied cleverness and double meaning."⁵ And in another letter he confesses to how much consolation he gets by "keeping a conscious intent to say things as they are."⁶

The point? Vincent's simplicity is personal transparency, squaring up outside appearances with inner attitudes, creating congruence between the symbol and what is symbolized. He insisted on it, and said the dignity of other people is not honored unless you treat them with just this simplicity.

Transparency as a Vincentian University Value

❖ *Vincent stands for coherence between appearance and reality.*

Why select this virtue for a university from the other virtues Vincent recommends? For one thing, because Vincentian institutions, like

³ Letter #188, CED 1:284.

⁴ Conference #13, CED 9:81.

⁵ Letter #634, CED 2:340.

⁶ Letter #94, CED 1:144.

all institutions, are under more and more pressure to appear right, to present the image that sells, whether or not it corresponds to what is happening inside. Saint John's, in casting the shadow of Vincent, must constantly keep asking itself the transparency question in this slippery age. Does the voice we project to the outside match the voice we hear on the inside? Vincent stands for coherence between appearance and reality. He would pressure any Vincentian institution to be on the interior what it presents itself to be on the exterior.

There is another reason to highlight transparency, closer to home. This God-like ringing-true should come to mark the people who work within a Vincentian institution. This is not just because Vincent recommended it, but because of the eminently practical reason he gave for living in this way. The people the institution serves, particularly the poor, will not trust if authenticity is not there. They will not believe if there is that scent of double talk, hollow spin, false sizzle coming off the people who staff the institution. Most everyone, but especially those on the bottom economic rungs of society, can sniff out that disconnect, that lack of simplicity.

Further, because Vincent's simplicity is a virtue, it has to be painstakingly developed over time. Only through individual everyday acts of truth-telling, repeated a thousand times across the campus, from the top to the bottom, will the capacity for simplicity take root and blossom. Only when each person at Saint John's University: (1) comes to recognize the heavy cultural pressure of "image is everything" and then, (2) resists that temptation over and over, will this trait be rescued from the half world of ideals and live in the full world of palpable experience.

The Mantle of Saint Vincent de Paul

Telling the Vincentian Story

I have commented on Vincent's thoughts about human worth and on the hard-won capacity, or virtue, to honor that worth in everyday life. I would also like to mention a particularly powerful way these convictions get transfused into the lifeblood of Saint John's – and that is telling the story, the signature Vincentian stories which reveal the life generated by these transfusions.

There are two narratives, an older one and a newly emerging one tied to the first. The older story reads like this. "I received a break and I want to pass it on. It was a two-fold break: Saint John's offered a

chance for an education, which I would not have gotten otherwise. Also, there were certain values I absorbed there, values about reaching back for others who now need a break. These values have made all the difference." Let me quote an active member of the present Saint John's community who is also an alumnus:

People have asked me why, after a long very successful business career, I wanted to get reconnected to Saint John's. It's really quite simple. Many years ago this school gave me a chance, a scholarship that enabled me to go to college so that I might build a better life. The values and skills that this wonderful institution helped me develop and the opportunities it helped me see were perhaps the single largest factor in the success I have enjoyed. I want to help this institution continue to help others to achieve a better future. I'm giving something back, my energy, ideas and the benefit of my experience.⁷

The newer, auxiliary story reads: "Because of what has gone on for me here at Saint John's, I have come to notice the specialness of the down-and-out, the poor. I see them now. I have met them. And they are somebody." This second story is the student who was converted, so to speak, to the world of the poor. This is the young man who caught the conviction about human worth. This is the young woman who had a service-learning component in a course and had her eyes opened to what Vincent saw. (Incidentally, follow-up studies suggest that collegians who do service work are four times more likely to continue to volunteer and help the poor after graduation than those who do not.)

These are the two stories I hear. At a deeper level they carry the whole constellation of Vincentian values.

The Vincentian Challenge to Future Generations

The question I must now pose to all of you is: Who will keep telling this story in the decades ahead? Who is going to keep putting it out there, telling it in their classes, in their administrative styles, in their policy decisions, telling it with their lives? The most effective

⁷ Dean Peter Tobin, "The Enduring Characteristics of Success, Seventy-Fifth Anniversary," *Annual Report of the Peter J. Tobin College of Business* (2002), 6.

answer is – all of you. I am speaking of everybody here at Saint John’s University who, almost by osmosis, communicates that message: “here is what counts and here is who counts.” All of you picking up the mantle Vincent de Paul has placed upon your shoulders, trying in turn to place it upon the shoulders of the incoming Saint John’s generation.

One answer to “who will tell the story,” which touches me directly as Provincial of the Vincentian Priests and Brothers, is the Vincentian Priests and Brothers! As a religious congregation, we started Saint John’s University and poured several generations of work, service and prayer into it. Now in a time of diminishing numbers, we want to continue to do our part in passing down the story of Vincent’s vision and Gospel instincts.

❖ *A good life – actually a wonderful, contributing Gospel directed, fulfilling life... Vincentian priests and brothers.*

This solution raises the problem of our congregation’s diminishing numbers. It is a disconcerting fact that like most other religious congregations in the Western world, we are not replacing ourselves in the numbers we once did. We have young men in our seminary, but not in the quantity that allows the presence at Saint John’s we once had. So I offer two challenges.

More and more often we Vincentian priests and brothers will be depending upon all of you who have picked up Vincent’s special perspective on the world, all of you who live it, to tell the story. We will be looking to you, Vincentians who are not members of the Congregation of the Mission, to pass it on.

I also ask you to help our Congregation to find new members. We are attempting to devote ourselves to this project as we enter this 21st century. Our strategy is not just more and better advertising, but involves inviting people closer in to see what kind of life we lead. We are not saying it is the best life. We are not saying, there are not other wonderful life-styles that can carry Vincent de Paul’s legacy. We are saying this is a good life – actually a wonderful, contributing, Gospel-directed, fulfilling life for those who are inclined to take it up. Vincentian priests and brothers are trying in new ways to spread this word. I ask you, our long-time friends, to help us do just that. Within our Congregation we have been saying to one another that it would be a real loss to the Church in the United States if this way of carrying Vincent’s mantle were to disappear.

Conclusion

As followers of Vincent de Paul, we are People of the Scarred Coin. We are God-touched individuals who have been awakened to the worth of everyone around us – especially the ones who most easily get pushed to the side, the poor. We see their value and respond to it with deep respect. We intuitively know why it makes sense to pick up that disheveled old man. The institutions we staff, in a corporate way, know the same thing, know the treasure on the other side of that scarred coin. Saint John's must continue on its path to be known even more definitively as a university that, in a term of the day, is value-added. That value is the preciousness of people and the face of God in them all.

God has great plans for you, directed toward helping you do what Jesus Christ did when He was on earth. This requires you to resist temptation vigorously, with special confidence in the assistance of His Divine Goodness. Courage then, Monsieur, Be faithful to Him, and the Divine Goodness will be favorable to you.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,
letter 1202, To a Priest of the Mission, In Saintes, 27 March 1650)*