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THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY: RESPONDING TO THE CRY OF THE POOR

Richard McCullen, C.M.

Introduction

The spiritual heritage of Saint Vincent de Paul has been treasured by religious and lay organizations over the past three hundred years. The unifying dynamic of this heritage has been the love and service of the poor. It has manifested itself in many ways and through various agencies. Starting with the Ladies of Charity in the early years of Saint Vincent's priestly life, it progressed through the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission (1625), the founding of the Daughters of Charity (1633) in collaboration with Saint Louise de Marillac, and in more recent times (1832) the establishment of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society which arose through the efforts of Frederic Ozanam. All were motivated by a love of God as manifested through a love of the poor.

Under the theme of "The Cry of the Poor," the Saint Vincent de Paul Society in the United States extended an invitation to the other three associations named above to participate in a joint convention at Notre Dame University in the summer of 1986. It was the first time that these groups had met together in this country. About 1000 delegates assembled to discuss the nature, motives, and means of their mutual activities.

At the convention, the Very Reverend Richard McCullen, C.M., superior general of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, gave the principal address and was the homilist at the Eucharistic liturgy. Following the Notre Dame meeting Father McCullen was scheduled to address the International Plenary Assembly of the Saint Vincent de Paul

Society at Montreal, Canada. Because of the death of his mother in Ireland, he was unable to attend but sent a video-cassette of his talk which was shown at the meeting.

Vincentian Heritage is pleased to print these three talks of Father McCullen, which complement each other in explaining the Vincentian family's response to the cry of the poor.

Homily August 1, 1986

A little over two weeks ago I went into that Chapel in Paris which houses the mortal remains of Saint Vincent de Paul. High above the main altar of the Church is the silver and glass casket that contains the body of Saint Vincent. As I entered the chapel, I noticed in the distance a solitary figure kneeling in front of the glass casket. She was a young lady and she was deep in prayer. She had her two arms raised and resting on the glass of the casket, close to the head of the Saint. I remained some time in the Chapel and, when I left, the lady was still in prayer with her hands resting on the glass, earnestly asking the intercession of the Saint for some particular grace or favor.

What grace, I kept asking myself, is this lady seeking through the intercession of Saint Vincent? The healing of a sick child? The obtaining of employment for her husband? Breaking away from drug addiction? Strength to forgive someone who had injured her? What her prayer was I do not know and did not dare to ask, but the intensity of it was clear and impressive. Clear also was the lady's conviction that the Saint, who has been given so many titles by God's people: Father of the Poor - Apostle of Charity - Protector of Orphans, could by his influence over the mind and heart of God, do something for her. As I watched the lady in prayer, I could only guess what she might have been asking for. I could not

help thinking that she was asking for one single grace. What that grace was remained a secret she shared with God and His servant, Vincent de Paul.

What one grace would you ask from Saint Vincent de Paul this weekend? Perhaps another question should be posed first. Have we sufficient faith in his intercession to ask him for one single grace, or must Our Lord pass the rather sad verdict on us that closes this evening's Gospel?

And Jesus did not work many miracles there
because of their lack of faith. (Mt 13:58)

The name, Vincent de Paul, will echo through the halls of Notre Dame throughout this weekend. How many of us, however, will at the end of it have spoken to the Saint with something of the intensity of that Parisian lady? How earnestly do we talk to him, who is the Patron of us all here, about the poor of our time? Does he, I wonder, find us theorizing much about the poor in a doctrinaire way, and that his name is being used rather than his person being invoked in discussions about the poor and poverty in the world of our time? After all, it was Frederic Ozanam himself who observed that:

A patron saint should not be a mere signboard to a society, like Saint Denis or Saint Nicholas over the door of a tavern. A patron saint should be regarded as a type on which we should try to pattern ourselves as he patterned himself on the Divine Type which is Jesus Christ.

(Quoted in Biography, "Apostle in a Top Hat"

J.P. Derum, p. 112)

Supposing, however, we are convinced of the Saint's power of intercession with God, what one grace would you ask from God through his intercession? Would it echo one of the titles of the excellent topics that are being discussed here at this convention during these days? A greater readiness to respond

to the cries of the poor? An eagerness to collaborate with others in hearing the cries of the poor? A clearer understanding of the Vincentian charism? These are all certainly very valuable graces. Perhaps, however, we would do better if we asked, not what we would like to obtain from God through the intercession of Saint Vincent, but what Saint Vincent himself would like to obtain for us from God. And what might that grace be? It must remain, of course, a matter of conjecture. But if one is to judge from Saint Vincent's voluminous writings, that one grace would not be, I think, more effective service of the poor, nor greater commitment to securing social injustice, nor even a more generous response to the appeals of the Third World. The one grace, I think, would be quite a simple one—a more attentive, sensitive and personal response to what the living God is asking at this moment from each one of us. The formula, "doing the Will of God," may seem to be almost trite. It might even sound in some ears as faintly suggesting an outmoded spirituality. The truth, however, is that Saint Vincent de Paul was led to the poor and was able to lift the poor out of their wretched conditions because he himself lived with a profound consciousness of the importance of doing at every moment what he thought God wanted him to do.

Perhaps the Saint might at this point like to add a word of qualification to what I have just said. "It is true," he might say, "that I did reflect much upon the Will of God and its place in my life and in my work. It would, however, be more accurate to say that after the year 1617, I rarely thought of the Will of God without thinking of Jesus Christ. The reverence and the love which Jesus Christ had for the Will of His Father impressed me profoundly. I began to consciously submerge my plans and projects into the mind of Christ Jesus, to have them x-rayed by Him. Can you think of Jesus Christ without thinking of His reverence at all times, His constant referral of all His activity to the Will of His Father in heaven? Indeed on

one occasion I recall speaking to the community of priests and brothers with whom I live and saying to them:

It is not enough to do what God wants, but I must do it for the love of God. We must do the Will of God according to the Will of God, that is, to do it in the way Our Lord did the Will of His Father when He was on earth.

(Coste XI: 435-436)¹

“The world in which you are living has changed greatly since my time. There are millions more people on the face of the earth than there were three centuries ago. It is a grace of God that you have not allowed yourselves to become discouraged by the sheer numbers of poor who need help, millions more than in my time. Political systems seem so much more complex now than they did in the Europe I knew. My attempts to mediate between politicians of my time were not successful. When we have done everything in our power to mediate between people, we should preserve our tranquility and peace, whether we are successful or not. It is only when we have emptied ourselves of self that God will fill us with Himself. Do not give up in the face of difficulty. ‘The doctrine of Christ’ I remember writing two years before I died, ‘can never deceive, while that of the world is ever deceitful.’ (RC 2:1) Do not lose your nerve, but make sure that you refer all your projects, great or small, to Jesus Christ and to the Will of His Father. Don’t forget that it is the earth which revolves around the sun, not the sun around the earth. Christ is the center, not we,

¹As throughout the rest of these talks, this refers to Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925).

however dazzling our projects may appear. Christ is the light of the world. We must allow that light to penetrate the crevices of our minds so that we may at all times do, as He did, the things that are pleasing to His Father in heaven. I recall some words I spoke towards the end of my life:

Let us galvanize our wills to deal, to say and to accomplish the divine words of Jesus Christ, 'My food is to do the Will of Him Who sent Me and to accomplish His work.' (Jn 4:34) That has been your pleasure, Saviour of the world... Since we cannot do it of ourselves, it is from You that we hope this grace, confidently and with a great desire to follow You. (Coste XII, p.164)

To come back to the chapel in Paris and that silver and glass casket. It was a coincidence that two weeks ago I should have entered that chapel just at a moment when a lady was praying with upraised arms to Saint Vincent de Paul. It is a coincidence today that we should be celebrating Mass with Bishop Murphy in this Church of the Sacred Heart on the First Friday of August, a day that brings to our minds devotion to the heart of Christ, the symbol of God's personal love for each one of us. If Saint Vincent de Paul was able to do so much for the poor of his day, it was because with his mind and heart he had come to know something of the length and breadth, the height and depth of the love of God that reposed in the Heart of Christ Jesus. As children of God, we must constantly be convincing ourselves in prayer of the excessive love with which God has reached out and is still reaching out to us each moment of the day. If we are not convinced that God loves us as we are, even with our frailties, it will be very difficult for us to show the love of God to the poor. It is the work of humble prayer to come to know oneself as a person who is loved by God. It is a work of humble prayer to share that experience with the poor who are God's special friends.

May the thought of God's personal love for each of us, symbolized by the Heart of Christ, give us a new awareness of our value in His eyes. May it stimulate us to go forward and convince the poor that God does care for them. May we ourselves become sacraments of God's love for the poor. It is the love of God that presses us. Amen.

**Address To
National Convention
St. Vincent de Paul Society
August 2, 1986**

About ten years ago in London I saw a large poster of Saint Vincent de Paul cleverly designed in black and white. It looked immediately like a police poster of a wanted man. Underneath was written in large letters: "*This man has a lot to answer for.*" On drawing closer to it, one saw in small print the details of Saint Vincent's life and achievements — the communities he founded, the associations he established or inspired. More than once this weekend I have thought of that poster, as I listened to the description of the great variety of projects for the poor that engages the energies of the four Vincentian groups represented here this weekend.

As I listened to the speakers from our groups, I was reminded of one of those great rivers of your country. A great river has many tributaries. The Vincentian activities for the poor are like a great river with four tributaries — the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. We have this weekend been contemplating together this mighty river of charity, and wondering how its power can be even more effectively harnessed to generate more light and warmth for the poor. That light and warmth, of course, can only come from Jesus Christ — who is, as He said Himself, the light of the

world. One of the greatest fruits of this meeting must be, as has been remarked on a number of occasions, greater collaboration between our four groups. As a result of this meeting Saint Vincent will, hopefully, have even more to answer for than he had before it took place.

Two things, I think, are necessary if there is to be more collaboration at the local level: first of all *vision*,—and we have plenty of evidence that there is growing vision amongst these four groups; secondly, *reconciliation*. When I say reconciliation, I am using the term in its broadest sense. The charism of Saint Vincent has many facets. We must continually try to bring those facets together so that the charism may be seen in its full splendor. If there is to be collaboration there must first be reconciliation, in that each of us acknowledges that the other has also a facet of Saint Vincent's charism. Reconciliation can also mean bringing together people of opposing views. I remember one time someone saying: "*You know, one of the greatest gifts of Saint Vincent de Paul was reconciliation.*" When I pray in Paris before his casket, it is not the features of his face that catch my eyes as much as a tiny little cross that is reposing in his hands. This little cross is the cross that Saint Vincent, when he was invited down to assist the dying King, Louis XIII, held before his eyes. The king was dying and was refusing to eat. No amount of persuasion could bring the king to take some nourishment. Saint Vincent, who was not the king's confessor, was called. Saint Vincent came and he held the little cross before the king's eyes and said that he thought it was the Will of God that he should try to take some nourishment. The king accepted Saint Vincent's advice. When I look at that little cross, I think of the ease with which Saint Vincent could move into the luxury of a royal court and speak to the king about Jesus Christ. Here was a man who could reconcile the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich. He did not polarize the rich against the poor nor the poor against the rich, because he understood and lived the reconci-

liation of Christ's cross.

That gift of reconciliation is evidenced also in his correspondence. No bitter words, no incitement to class struggle is to be found in the 3,000 letters of his which we have today. (He wrote in fact more than 20,000, it is estimated, in his lifetime).

Often the problems of collaboration are those of reconciliation. The experience of these past few days will lead to greater reconciliation amongst us all. Hopefully it will lead to clearer recognition of the fact that we can serve the poor better if we acknowledge each other's gifts. The gifts of each one are the tributaries that must swell that mighty river that sweeps through your land—which flows under the patronage of Saint Vincent de Paul,—the man who has so much to answer for.

These few reflections came to my mind last evening and this morning. Before, however, I left Rome, I jotted down just two small points for I was not sure what exact contribution I was intended to make at this "Business Meeting" this morning.

Firstly, some time ago I received a copy of the third draft of the Bishops' Pastoral letter on "*Economic Justice for All*." I have been deeply impressed by the document, particularly by the section about poverty and the poor in this country, and also by the final chapter of the draft entitled, "*A Commitment to the Future*." One of the observations in that final section of the draft letter stirred and troubled my conscience. I quote:

As disciples of Christ, we must constantly ask ourselves how deeply the biblical and ethical vision of justice and love permeates our thinking. How thoroughly does it influence our way of life? We may hide behind the complexity of the issues or dismiss the significance of our personal contributions; in fact each one has a role to play because every day each one makes economic decisions... . Together we must reflect on our personal and family decisions and curb unnecessary wants in

order to meet the needs of others. There are many questions we must keep asking ourselves: are we able to distinguish between our true needs and those thrust on us by advertising and a society that values consumption more than saving? All of us could well ask ourselves whether as a Christian, prophetic witness, we are not called to adopt a simpler life style in the face of the excessive accumulation of material goods that characterize an affluent society? (Nos. 329-330)

Saint Vincent de Paul could identify and endorse those sentiments of the bishops in the draft of their pastoral letter. He would, I think, very readily realize how easy it is for people in our society of today to feel so powerless in the face of the great forces that control the economies of the world. A sense of powerlessness to change the massive economic structures that control our lives and prevent us from liberating the poor can generate an acute sense of discouragement. The saints, however, are never people to lose confidence in the power of God. They keep passing votes of confidence in God's grace. The Incarnation itself, to which Saint Vincent was so profoundly devoted, is a massive vote of confidence on the part of God in poor, weak,—and so often corrupt,—humanity. Your Bishops' statement that "every day each one makes economic decisions" is at once thought-provoking and challenging. If we decide to buy and sell, it is an economic decision. It has its effects and consequences on the poor of our society. A good starting point for us could very well be a reflection at the end of each day on the quality of the economic decisions, great or small, (in the main they will be small), which we have taken in the course of the day. Most of us are rather like the character in Dicken's novel, Mr. Micawber, who, you will remember, was the ne'er-do-well man who was always waiting in his own phrase "for something to turn up." We are always looking

forward to the big project that we may launch tomorrow for the poor, while overlooking those personal economic decisions we make each day and to which the bishops refer in their letter. I need hardly say that such personal economic decisions must be taken in the light of Christ. They must be referred back, as Saint Vincent de Paul would have us do, to Jesus Christ, who came to bring good news to the poor and who made his simplicity of lifestyle a medium for that message.

The second consideration: starting from the great social encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII, about which Bishop Murphy spoke yesterday morning, there has been in the past hundred years or so a steady development of understanding of Justice in all its dimensions. Sensitivity to the claims of justice has grown notably in the last two decades. It could almost be said that in that time we have come to recognize injustice as the sin of the world. The documents of the Council, Church Synods, Bishops Conferences, have encouraged all Christians to interest themselves in the questions of justice in our world and within the limits of individual vocations, to take appropriate action. Has this development, one might ask, devalued the term “charity?” Has the valuing upwards of justice brought about an imperceptible devaluation of charity? Perhaps it is for that reason that Pope John Paul II in his encyclical “*Dives in Misericordia*” poses the question: “*Is justice enough?*” In answering it he remarks: “*The experience of the past and of our own time demonstrate that justice alone is not enough, that it can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself, if that deeper power, which is love, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions.*” (No. 12).

Enter at this point Saint Vincent de Paul. His name conjures up in our mind the poor, certainly, and also charity. Of justice, however, Saint Vincent has little and almost nothing to say. That need not surprise us, for social justice was not discussed by theologians as it is today, and Saint Vincent was a man of his time. He was also a man of the Church and so he

would have no difficulty in accommodating himself to the Church's insistence today on justice. He will, however, always remain the Apostle of Charity. Perhaps he would not be greatly interested in speculative discussion on the relationship between justice and charity. When the Ladies of Charity felt themselves discouraged before the difficulties of the apostolates they had undertaken for the poor, he said simply to them: "*I will say to you what Saint Paul said: 'Have you given something beyond what you have of surplus? Have you resisted even to the point of pouring out your blood?'*" (Coste XIII, p. 796). And in the same vein he asks: "*But how can we love God, if we do not love that which He loved? There is no difference between loving Him and loving the poor, between serving well the poor and serving Him.*" (Coste XIII, pp. 811-812).

The point I have been making is that a Vincentian in search of justice will never lose sight of the fact that love always holds the primacy. We are realistic enough to recognize that charity at times can conceal an injustice but it must be said also that not all legal justice is objectively just. The Synodal Document of 1971 expresses it clearly: "*The love of the neighbor and justice are inseparable.*" Justice is measured; love is unmeasured. Love is a sign of something that is unmeasured. The Vincentian must be not only one who seeks justice but one who speaks by his life to the world of the boundless fecundity of God's love. He is one who by his activity proclaims to the world not so much that God is just, important though that may be, but that God is love. In the Christian and Vincentian vision of things one cannot practice justice without love. The sin of the world may be injustice. The great commandment of Christ, Who came to take away the sin of the world, is love.

**Address To The
Plenary Assembly of
The Saint Vincent de Paul
Society
Montreal, August 13, 1986**

Let me begin by recounting a delightful little story which is the product of the imagination of someone who lived in the medieval ages. The story recounts how, when Our Lord ascended into heaven, He looked back down on the earth. The great globe of the earth was shrouded in darkness. All was night except for a few points of light in the city of Jerusalem. As Our Lord looked down on the earth, the Angel Gabriel came and joined Him. The little points of light, Our Lord explained, were the Apostles, grouped around the Mother of God, and the light which Our Lord had enkindled would, like a great fire, spread throughout the earth until all nations and all peoples would be glowing with the love of God in their hearts and the entire globe would be enveloped in light. Then the Angel Gabriel said to Our Lord: "And what will you do if this plan fails? There was silence for a moment and then Our Lord replied: "I have no other plan..."

If the Angel Gabriel would appear to us today and throw a glance at this great Assembly, representing so many nations of the globe, he would no longer put the question to Our Lord: "And what if your plan should fail?", because each person here is a point of light which represents hundreds of other points of light on all the continents of the world. Each person here is a point of light that speaks of the charity of the heart of Christ. Each person here not only speaks of the charity of the heart of Christ, but acts with the charity of Christ, for throughout the world the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is the person of Christ. Frederic Ozanam and some of those founding members of the Society may have had fine specula-

tive minds, but their legacy to the Society was a legacy, not of theories and of words, but of truth and love in action.

Communion - Koinonia - Sharing

When just over a month ago I was presented with the title of this talk, my mind fastened on one word: communion. I recall a professor of Scripture who many years ago picked out what he considered to be three of the most important words in the New Testament, and one of those words was the word, communion. It has in recent months become, if I may say so, a vogue word, for at the Synod in Rome last December the Bishops gave particular emphasis to the idea of the Church being a communion. Communion is the English translation of the Greek word, koinonia, which also could be translated by, sharing.

The Christian could almost be described as one who spends his or her life trying to share with others. One of the big mysteries, revealed to us by Jesus Christ, is that the life of God is a shared life. If God is love, then it is love shared mysteriously by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When the Word of God became flesh and dwelt amongst us, He did so because He wished to share our human life. In sharing His life with us, He did so in order that we might fully share His in eternity. Even as we journey on our pilgrimage to eternity, Our Lord wishes to share His life with us. For what are the Eucharist and the other Sacraments but invitations to share even now more deeply in the life of God and in His love?

God's sharing of His life and of His love with us is itself an invitation to us to share with others. A Christian shares with God and God with him, but he also shares with others. I recall a Vincentian priest, who was returning from his first visit to Ethiopia, telling me how impressed he was by the way in which the poor of that country shared the little they had with each other. He was deeply impressed when he saw one poor hungry man sharing a tiny piece of bread with another hungry man. It

is sharing which is at the heart of the Christian experience.

The more we share with others, the more we will receive from God. The forest of charitable works that has grown up around Saint Vincent de Paul owes its origin to the fact that Saint Vincent discovered the truth that the more you give and share with the poor, the more you will receive from God to continue sharing with them. The Saints of the Church, so different in character and temperament, are at one in being generous in sharing what they had with others. Can you think of any canonized Saint or beatified person who was not distinguished by a strong desire to share with others? Saint Vincent de Paul began his life as a priest calculating what he could get from the priesthood. Some twenty years later he came round to the view that the honours and the powers of the priesthood were to be used for and shared with others, especially the poor. Nor was his sharing limited to distributing the vast sums of money that came into his hands. He shared with the poor, and indeed with others, the riches of his faith and his spiritual convictions. He knew, as all authentic Christians know, that man does not live on bread alone, but needs the Word of God to nourish him on his pilgrimage to that city whose maker and builder is God.

Am I right in saying that the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul has in recent decades deepened its appreciation of that word: *communio*? Certainly the Society has tried to share its life with more people. It has admitted women to membership. It has added an ecumenical dimension to its life which had not been there before the second Vatican Council. It has seen in clearer light, along with so many others in the Church, its role of co-responsibility with the hierarchy for the extension of Christ's Kingdom of justice and of love and of peace in the world. The twinning of Conferences, which has become such a feature of the Society, would undoubtedly rejoice the heart of Frederic Ozanam and Monsieur Bailly, those founding members who knew the riches of *Communio*. One of the

results of this Plenary Assembly may very well be a perception of new years, not only of sharing with the poor, but sharing even more widely and deeply with the members of the Society itself.

“As divergent rays emanate from the same center,” observed Frederic Ozanam, “so should our efforts, extending to different points, resolve themselves into the same motive and proceed from the same principle. When we divide, — and I sincerely hope we will, — we must continue to be united in such a way that each Conference strengthens all the others and receives strength in return. We must have frequent communication with each other, so that we may all be stimulated by the individual success of each Conference. We will periodically hold a common meeting and be ruled by guiding principles emanating from a central source. Our division will assure continued growth in every direction, while our organization from the center will assure unity.”

Diaconia - Service

The second key New Testament word is that of diaconia, or service. Can any authentic Christian live without reflecting frequently on Our Lord’s words: “The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve.” (Mk 10:45)? Or can a Christian ever obliterate from his mind the image of what one can call a parable in action: Christ washing the feet of his disciples. The lofty teaching of Our Lord’s farewell talk at the Last Supper was preceded by the humble service of washing the feet of His apostles. For Saint Vincent de Paul corporal and spiritual service of the poor went hand in hand. Giving, however, as he always did, the primacy to the spiritual. I somehow imagine that nowadays he might ply us with ques-

tions about the spiritual dimensions of our work and of our service of the poor. "Who speaks of God to the poor?" he might ask. Who speaks to them of Jesus Christ and His Mother? Would he, I wonder, detect in us a certain hesitancy in the replies we would make to him? Is it, he might ask, that we lack courage to speak to the poor of the eternal truths in the light of which we must live our brief span of years? Saint Vincent de Paul would, of course, be in wholehearted agreement with us that we must respect the consciences of other people. It was always his practice to do so. The religious beliefs of immigrants and those who do not share our Christian faith must never become the subject of polemics. With that penetrating psychological insight, which was one of Monsieur Vincent's many gifts, he might ask us if our reluctance at times to speak to the poor about the great truths of Christianity, springs from motives which are less than supernatural. Could it be that we now speak to the poor less of God and of Jesus Christ and of His Church because our own convictions are a little shallow and have not sunk those deep roots which come from prayer and reflective reading on the truths of our faith?

Perhaps I have digressed a little from the idea of service or diaconia. If I have, it is only to underline that for a Vincentian, service or diaconia must so express itself that it takes account of the whole man who is presently on pilgrimage to that heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, whose maker and builder is God.

Sharing and serving. In the Vincentian vision of things sharing and serving are brother and sister. It is because we wish, like Christ, to share what we serve and like Christ, we serve by sharing.

Kenosis - Self-emptying - Humility

Underpinning our sharing and our serving is something which, until God became man, no pagan philosopher knew nor

could understand. The third great word of the New Testament is: kenosis. It perhaps could best be translated by self-emptying and which we might further describe as humility. That word, kenosis — self-emptying, was used by Saint Paul when he tried to describe who Jesus Christ was. In his letter to the Philippians, Saint Paul remarked that Jesus Christ, although He was God, “emptied Himself” and took the form of a servant and lived amongst us. A Vincentian is one who by the grace of God tries to empty himself and enter into the world of the poor. A Vincentian tries to see the poor through the eyes and the mind of a poor person. Rather I should say that a Vincentian is one who sees the poor through the eyes and mind of Jesus Christ Who Himself, though God, emptied Himself and lived among us as one who was poor.

“I must not consider a poor man nor a poor woman according to their exterior,” said Saint Vincent, “nor according to that which appears in their way of acting. Very often they will hardly have the appearance or the intelligence of reasonable people, so coarse and earthly they may be. But turn the medal and you will see by the light of faith the Son of God Who willed to be poor and Who is represented to us by these poor people.” (Coste XI, p. 32).

A Vincentian is one who is repeatedly turning the medal so that he can see the features of Jesus Christ in the poor and because he sees and respects Jesus Christ in the poor, like Christ at the Last Supper, falls on his knees before them.

In one of his conferences Saint Vincent makes this observation: “However charitable a man may be, if he is not humble, he does not have real charity.” (Coste XI, p. 494). During these last two decades there has been much reflection and discussion about the importance of serving the poor. Undoubtedly there is a greater consciousness amongst us all of the need to seek out the poor in our society and to place our

resource, particularly our material one, at their disposal. However, all this will be of no avail if we have not learned from Jesus Christ to be gentle and humble of heart. We may seem to be doing a lot for the poor, but it could be that our charity is shallow and superficial because we are not humble. It is for that reason that we can see the profundity of Saint Vincent's observation that, however charitable a man may be, if he is not humble, he does not have real charity.

Sharing - Serving

The three New Testament words, about which I have been speaking, — sharing, serving, self-emptying, — are key words for any Christian. Indeed, when you come to think of it, those three words are a portrait of the character of Jesus Christ. It was the sharing and the serving and the self-emptying of Jesus Christ that revealed the intensity of the love of God. It is sharing, serving and self-emptying that are not only a sign of the intensity of God's love for the world, but they are today a sign, wherever they are found, of the communion and the charity of His Church.

"God loved the world so much," wrote Saint John, "that He gave His only Son so that everyone that believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life." (Jn 3:16). That statement lies at the heart of the Christian Gospel. God gave. It was an act, not just a continuing mood of generosity. It was an act at a particular time and place. God so loved that He gave. They are words, I feel, which must have meant much to Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam and, indeed, to any member of your Society. There are millions who watch pictures of poverty on our television screens and feel generous towards the poor. Their reaction so often goes no further than feeling. As members of the Society, you imitate God, our Father, in that you are not content to feel generous, but you show your generosity at a particular time and place. The Saint Vincent de Paul Society has always been recognized for action

that is at once practical and loving and seeks nowadays to lay firmer foundations of that justice in society without which it is difficult to help the poor in the long term.

Sign - Mission - Church

There remain three other concepts which were placed in the title of the talk that was given to me. They are: sign, mission, Church. Allow me to offer a very brief reflection on each.

When you share, serve and bow humbly to the poor, you do so because such was the manner of acting of Jesus Christ. In doing so you become signs of His loving presence in the world. We become signs of His Church, for all of us, — priests or laity, — are in varying degrees of effectiveness signs of the presence of Christ's Church in the world. Each one of us is in a sense the Church. In these years when there has been so much criticism of the institutional Church, it is good for us from time to time to see if in our own lives we reflect those qualities for the lack of which we criticize the Church. Each of us is called to be, in his or her way, to quote Saint Paul reflecting on the Church, "the pillar and the ground of truth." (I Tim. 3:15). In the great welter of opinions that have sprung up in the past twenty years or so on matters of faith and morals, we may feel a little insecure at times. Perhaps there would be less confusion if each of us felt a little less responsible for displaying the whole truth about the Church and rather concentrated on displaying the particular truths we are called to live. What I mean is that we, as members of God's house, are not responsible for the entire house. The Pope has his responsibilities. We should not take them from him. So, too, have Bishops responsibilities. We should not, by our manner of criticism, seem to assume those responsibilities of the laity. To quote from the final Document of the Synod in Rome last December:

"Since Vatican II, a new type of collaboration between lay people and clergy has happily come about in the Church. The spirit of readiness in

which a great number of lay people have offered themselves for the service of the Church must be counted among the best benefits of the Council. In this there is a new experience of the fact that we are all the Church.” (§6).”

Among the words which are most often on the lips of Saint Vincent de Paul was the word, - mission. The text of the New Testament seems to have burned itself deeply into his soul in his adult years. Over and over again he would evoke the scene in the synagogue of Nazareth when Jesus Christ, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, said: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” (Lk 4:18) With unusual clarity Saint Vincent saw Jesus Christ as one who was sent into the world by His Father, who had been given a mission from the Father. It was Jesus Christ in turn who sent the Apostles on mission, who in turn would send others. Behind all the work of organizing relief for the poor, Saint Vincent maintained a deep realization that it was a mission entrusted to him by God through the authority of the Church represented by the Bishops. From the establishment of the first Charities, Saint Vincent showed a marked sensitivity towards the authority of the local bishop. No conference would be established without the approval of the local Bishop who was then seen, not merely as imparting his blessing to the work, but also as giving the association its character of mission.

For Saint Vincent de Paul every Christian, be he bishop, priest or lay person, was one to whom a mission had been entrusted. For him, every Christian was a missionary. If he had not been convinced of this, he would never have done so much to interest and engage so many lay people in his projects following the Gospel and alleviating the sufferings of the poor.

For Saint Vincent there was a variety of ways of being a missionary. What was important for him was that each one follow the vocation to which God had called him. Allow me to quote some lines from a letter which he wrote to a priest of his Community. The advice he gave to this priest could be accepted by any Christian who is following the particular vocation God has given him:

“I am well aware that the Carthusian Order is more perfect in itself, but do not think God is calling you to it, after calling you to the Congregation of the Mission. You have answered and committed yourself to this call and His goodness has favoured you with a very special blessing We must be content with the state in which we are by the disposition of Providence. This is where we get the blessings of God. The child of a woman who is not well off ignores any other mother so as to remain nestling in the bosom of its own So remain steadfast in your present state and ‘walk in the vocation to which you are called’ (Eph 4:1) and ‘do not swerve either to the right or to the left’ (2 Chr 34:2) with the certainty that your present vocation will work out your salvation now and will win you glorification in the end”. (Coste III, pp. 164-166).

The spiritual heritage of Saint Vincent de Paul has been shared by many, not least by Frederic Ozanam and those who, along with him, chose Saint Vincent as principal patron of the Society. They must have admired the ability of Saint Vincent de Paul to marry the task of bringing Jesus Christ to the poor with that of healing their minds and their bodies. It was part of the genius of Saint Vincent de Paul to find and make explicit a formula of action which would achieve the double end of enlightening the minds and the hearts of the poor about Jesus

Christ and his message, while manifesting a very practical concern for the welfare of their bodies. A Vincentian could be said to be like a person who is walking on a tightrope. If he leans too much to one side, he can lose his balance and become so engrossed in social and political action for the poor as to forget that neither rich nor poor have a lasting city here on this earth, but are seeking one that is to come. If we absorb and live the spirituality of Saint Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam, we will keep our balance on the tightrope and by the grace of God make Jesus Christ and His message known to the poor and at the same time give them the practical assistance which the Good Samaritan gave to the wounded man he found on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

In one word, a Vincentian is an illuminated sign in the darkness of this world. He is one who has caught the light from Jesus Christ who is the light of the world and who, by sharing, serving and self-emptying, is passing that light on to others, so that they, too, will no longer walk in the darkness and shadow of death but "share in the inheritance of the saints in light." (Col. 1:12.)



"We see how slow Our Lord was to reproach others. Why should we not be like him?"

Saint Vincent de Paul

"No matter what we may do, people will never believe in us if we do not show love and sympathy to those whom we wish to believe in us."

Saint Vincent de Paul



"Charity is not charity if unaccompanied by justice, or if it allows us to do more than we can reasonably perform."

Saint Vincent de Paul



"I beg you to consider not the distance between us but, rather, that we are closely united with never a possibility of being separated, for the intimate union of holy charity knows no separation."

Saint Louise de Marillac