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Vincentian Spirituality

BY

WILLIAM HARTENBACH, C.M.

I feel more than a little presumptuous standing before you, who have spent good parts of your lives in care and love for those people who are less fortunate than we, in order to discuss the holiness to which we are called as we continue to serve others. However, I was asked to talk with you about “Vincentian Spirituality” as we move toward the third millennium, so that’s what I will do. I hope that what I have to say will give you some food for thought and perhaps be of help to you as you, with the help of God’s grace, continue your commitment of service.

“Vincentian Spirituality” is a concept and has no practical meaning outside of those people in whom it exists. So, the easiest way to begin, I think, is to look at Saint Vincent de Paul for a moment and then at Frederic Ozanam for another moment in order to see how “Vincentian Spirituality” was incarnated in these two men to whom we look for example and guidance. I do not imagine that I will be telling you many things that you do not know, but it is helpful to be reminded on occasion.

Saint Vincent lived in a time of terrible turmoil. France was at war with Austria, there was conflict between the king of France and the French nobility; that conflict occasionally resulted in open warfare. War had devastated parts of France to the extent that some people literally had nothing to live on; at least on occasion they resorted to cannibalism in order to stay alive. Life, except for that of the privileged class, was cheap and easily thrown away.

Vincent’s heart went out to the people who suffered the horrible poverty that was the consequence of the turmoil. In his mercy and compassion, he founded the Vincentian Fathers and Brothers, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, and the Confraternities of Charity; all to care for those people who could not care for themselves. Put very simplistically (I hope to fill this out later), Saint Vincent saw needs and he put every talent he had at the service of the people who had those needs.

Ozanam also lived at a time of great change and social turmoil. During his life France was being industrialized. Along with the industrialization came the philosophies and theories that seem to accompany and underlie economic development whenever and wherever it happens: capitalism and socialism. In one way or another, both of these philosophies tend to look upon workers as simply one element in the process of production. In other words, workers are seen as just one more raw material to be purchased as cheaply as possible and then discarded when they are no longer necessary or useful to the process. Life, except for that of the privileged class, was as cheap as it had been in the time of Saint Vincent.

Like Saint Vincent, Frederic Ozanam was deeply concerned for the well-being of those people who were being oppressed or who had been discarded by the current economic and political systems. Also, as Vincent did, Ozanam saw the needs and gave his talents to the service of those in need. Without applying our own terminology and ideas to Ozanam and to his period of history, I believe that it can safely be said that he involved himself in activities which were directed toward "systemic social change," he was active in politics and was part of a group of Catholic intellectuals who were committed to the democratic ideal. He also committed himself to direct and immediate care for those who were in need. From that commitment flowed the Saint Vincent de Paul Society.

We, too, live in a period of history that is characterized by rapid and radical change. As that change occurs people who are no longer useful or necessary to the economic and political system often find themselves simply discarded. People go from gainful employment to unemployment and can, sometimes, go from there to poverty. In a very real sense, their lives too are cheap. Those who have never been productive members of the economic and social structure find themselves in even a worse situation. They are from their infancies dependent upon the kindness and mercy of society and of individuals. Now, the more useless they seem, the more undeserving they seem and the less likely they are to be the objects of society's compassion and mercy. In their desperation some of them, sometimes, resort to violence and the escape that comes from narcotics or alcohol abuse; then they become dangerous and are fit only to be locked away and forgotten.

In such a world it might be helpful to investigate what led Saint Vincent and Frederic Ozanam to have the deep concern for the poor and abandoned which they did have. It is that which will underlie any

Vincentian Spirituality for the next millennium.

Saint Vincent said, often enough, when he was instructing his followers that they were to see Christ in the poor. It is very important to emphasize that the phrase is not just a way of speaking to make a point. As a matter of fact, we believe that Christ is present in the poor; He is most certainly present in those who have been baptized. Saint Paul says of himself, reflecting on his baptism, "I live now not I but Christ lives in me." Every human being who has been baptized by water, by desire, or by suffering can say the same thing: you can say that, as can I, as can the poor woman or man standing on the street.

In light of the fact of our baptism we can recall the line from Saint Paul which the Daughters of Charity have for their motto. "The Love of Christ impels us." That simple sentence can have two very different meanings. It can mean that the love of Christ whom I see in the other person impels me to be of service to that person. Or, it can mean that the love of Christ in me impels me to be of service to the person to whom Christ was sent. No matter what the meaning, however, the end result is the same. The baptism which makes Christ present impels us to be servants of one another.

Again, in the light of our baptism we are obliged by justice to care for the needs of others. Often when people use the word "justice" they use it as a synonym for "fairness." I do not believe that such a use is really accurate. The classic definition of "justice" is "fidelity to the obligations of one's relationships." That is a formal way of giving the definition that most of us learned from the Baltimore Catechism: justice is giving to each person what is due to him or her.

For example, a mother or father has a very specific relationship to a child. That specific relationship demands that the parent behave toward that child in a very special way, different from the way in which he or she might behave toward any other child. The same is true for wives and husbands, employers and employees, and so on. In the light of relationship, then, each of us is a child of God, our common Father. We are related to one another as brothers and sisters. Again in the light of relationship: by our baptism we were drawn into the one Body of Christ, we are part of the same body. There is a closeness there which is beyond the ability of a human being to grasp, but the impossibility of grasping it does not make it any less real. We are all members of the one Body of Christ; that is a fact. The relationship of our common childhood; the membership we share in the Body of Christ each constructs relationships between and among us. Those relation-

ships demand that we act justly toward one another.

Justice demands in the first place that we treat each person with the dignity that belongs to a human being. That dignity demands at the very least that we never judge another human being to be useless or unnecessary. To make that judgment and to act in accord with it is an act of injustice. Dignity demands that each person have whatever it is that society judges to be necessary for life. And so it certainly means that people, in justice, have a right to food and to shelter. In our society, where education is, for all practical purposes, essential in order to live a life of dignity, it would certainly seem that every person has a right to a good education and everything that that entails.

In the United States today there is a great debate being carried on, it is a debate about justice and human dignity. The words which are used in this debate are: "welfare" and "Medicare." I do not have any need, here, to take sides in that debate but I would like to use it as an example of an occasion to exercise Vincentian spirituality.

Saint Vincent tells his followers to love God in the work of their hands and in the sweat of their brows. That means that any Vincentian spirituality must be active and, I believe, it means that no one who is struggling to live a life of Vincentian spirituality can escape being part of the debate that is being carried on in America. I would suggest that, as part of that debate, you apply the criterion of justice to the discussion. Any proposal which serves to dehumanize human beings is a violation of justice and a desecration of our common baptism. Frederick Ozanam made himself a part of the political dialogue in France; I do not believe that we can do any less.

Spirituality is a way of looking at the world and at our relationships; it is a way of making the judgments that direct our ordinary and extraordinary activities. I believe that Vincentian spirituality calls us to contemplate the God who chose to dwell among us: the Incarnate Word. It calls us to contemplate the reality that in the Incarnation all people are drawn into God and that God shares life with us. It calls us to contemplate that fact in every human being. That contemplation and prayer will give us clear eyes of faith; eyes that will be able to see beyond what is merely apparent to the reality of Christ present among us even in the poorest of the poor. Having seen Christ present, one who has been formed in Vincentian spirituality cannot help but respond to his needs in the poorest of the poor.

I would like to offer you some practical suggestions. Take time for personal, reflective prayer frequently. When you do take the opportu-

nity for some quiet prayer, use your appointment calendar as one of your texts. Consider the persons whom you will see and pray that you will be able to see Christ's presence in each of them. Read part of the newspaper each day, prayerfully. Consider the people who are the subjects of the stories and remind yourself that Christ is present in them.

When you celebrate the Eucharist remember that when the priest says "this is my body" he is not talking about Christ alone but about the entire Body of Christ: you, me, and every human being who is baptized. Consider, then, what that means when you go to communion. We live in one another because we live in Christ.

Your ever increasing awareness of the presence of Christ will help the growth of the virtue of zeal in your lives. As you grow in your appreciation of the fact that Christ is with us in the presence of his poor, the virtues of meekness and gentleness should come more easily.

Finally, the gift that God gave all of humanity in Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam will continue only as we commit and recommit ourselves to living the lives of holiness which they have asked of their followers. This convention is a reminder and an opportunity to pray and pray and pray that we will be, with the help of God's grace, worthy instruments of the compassion and mercy of God to His people.

I must learn to remain hidden in God, desiring to serve him without seeking recognition from others or satisfaction in communicating with them, content that he sees what I am striving to become. To this end, he wants me to give myself to him so that he can form this disposition in me. I did so with the help of his grace.

Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac, A. 8