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MISSION CRITICAL

The Vincentian question
“What Must Be Done” in action
By Abigail Pickus
Photos by Tom Evans
Looking back, Georgina Leal (LAS ’12) remembers the moment that changed the trajectory of her life. It was when she spotted a flyer asking students to volunteer once a week as an English as a Second Language (ESL) tutor.

A first-generation college student whose parents are immigrants from Mexico, Leal struggled her first year at DePaul to find a sense of community on campus. It didn’t help that she commuted from Chicago’s Ashburn neighborhood on the far South Side.

But after several Fridays working at the tutoring site, she realized she had found her place. The program, operated through the DePaul Community Service Association (DCSA) of the Vincentian Community Service Office, brought Leal together with other student tutors, and they quickly became her first friends at DePaul. She ended up tutoring for two years. Before she knew it, she was going on service immersion trips. Then she was leading them.

By her senior year, Leal was a student leader in what was then called the University Ministry Office. “That’s where I learned more about the Vincentian mission,” she says, referring to the legacies of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac.

At DePaul, she also learned that she could be part of creating social change. “I saw a lot of social justice issues growing up, but it just seemed very overwhelming,” she says. “Then I got involved in University Ministry, and I found a sense of community with other students and staff who are asking bigger questions about what are we doing about the issues that we see around us. That really moved me.”

After graduating, Leal got involved in a number of Vincentian service programs until she found herself landing right back where it all began.

Today, Leal is a ministry coordinator in DePaul’s Division of Mission and Ministry, where she oversees service programs within the Chicagoland area, from the ESL tutoring program that launched her journey to a restorative justice project in partnership with Chicago Public Schools called Community Peacemakers. “I applied for this job because of how meaningful my journey at DePaul was in shaping who I am today. My hope is to be able to walk other students through that process,” she says.

It has been more than four centuries since St. Vincent and St. Louise created a new kind of Catholic charity—one that calls upon each of us to serve those on the margins with love, respect and justice, and collectively to shape a more just and compassionate society.

Through the Division of Mission and Ministry and the Irwin W. Steans Center, DePaul students, faculty and staff have a variety of opportunities to live the Vincentian mission by participating in such activities as the annual Vincentian Service Day and a variety of classes where community service is built into the curriculum.

Students and alumni enjoying Vincentian Service Day 2019

Vincentianism in Action

The newly configured Division of Mission and Ministry (formerly the Office of Mission and Values and University Ministry) engages with students, faculty and staff, overseeing DePaul’s community service and religious diversity initiatives, as well as pastoral care.

Siobhan O’Donoghue, director of faculty and staff engagement, who served as the director of the Vincentian Community Service Office in University Ministry for 18 years, calls the new division “a deeper dive into the mission.” During the 2017-18 academic year, this translated into more than 2,000 students and staff engaging in more than 12,000 hours of service.

Vincentian Service Day (VSD) is a shining example of DePaul’s mission in action. Dating back to 1999, when the university marked its centennial with a day devoted to community service, it now draws more than 1,000 members of the DePaul community for a chance to volunteer with 50+ community partners throughout the Chicago area and in locations across the country.

What lends this day of service its unique DePaul stamp is the way the mission is perpetually reinforced. “One of the hallmarks of service from the Vincentian tradition is that it incorporates reflection, which involves posing questions to help people think about the experience, because service without reflection is just work,” says Katie Sullivan, ministry coordinator in Mission and Ministry, who oversees VSD.
While student engagement is front and center, DePaul ensures that faculty and staff also have a chance to reflect on their work at a mission-based institution through programs like the quarterly lunch dialogue program, Lunch with Vincent. Another program, a Day with Vincent, is a service day exclusively for faculty and staff.

“The thing about service, Potosnak discovered, is that it doesn’t stop when the encounter is over. “When you come back and talk to your students, other faculty members or fellow staff, there is this shared sense that by spending a day serving together, we’ve made an impact on people’s lives. If we can use that same consciousness of mission as we teach and serve our students, it makes DePaul a better place for me personally and a much better interaction for everyone I work with,” he says.

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Mark Potosnak, associate professor and chair of environmental science and studies, recalls a memorable Day with Vincent when he visited a senior home run by a Catholic charity. Things as simple as calling bingo and taking time to chat with residents left a deep impression.

“I think you often hear about the mission of DePaul, but it’s a bit abstract,” says Potosnak. “But when you spend a day with different people across the university that is centered around mission and service, you come away with an actual experience built around mission. Then as you go about your daily work, it clicks a lot more.”

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Living the Mission

Delaney Morrison (LAS ’19) started getting involved with the Division of Mission and Ministry during her first year, thanks to a student mentor. But it was her first immersion trip to Tuba City, Ariz., where she spent a week on a Navajo reservation, which truly transformed her.

Living together at a Catholic church on the reservation, the DePaul student group focused on having conversations with indigenous people and learning from them about their triumphs, their struggles and what it’s like to actually live on the reservation, according to Morrison, who graduated in June with a bachelor’s in writing, rhetoric and discourse (WRD) and a minor in women’s and gender studies. She is currently pursuing a master’s in WRD.

Students also met regularly for reflection sessions where they unpacked their experiences. Throughout their stay,
they disconnected from all social media and electronics, including cell phones. “That trip was really eye-opening and really life-changing for me. You’re living in these intentional communities, and you start to have those hard conversations. You really push yourself out of not only your comfort zone, but the way that you think. You come back completely different,” says Morrison.

The core principle of these immersions is what is known as Vincentian personalism, or as Emily LaHood-Olsen (LAS ’12), ministry coordinator for service immersions, puts it, “seeing people who are often stereotyped in our society as people and as human beings with dignity.

“The heart of our Vincentian mission is about bringing to light the dignity of every human story. After students have had this very personal encounter with the dignity of every human person, they then are able to see the world and the people around them in a whole different light,” she says.

It is not a coincidence that these experiences are called “immersions” and not merely “trips.”

“When someone goes on a trip, it means they’ve gone somewhere and they came back and it was just a one-time thing. This idea of immersion is hopefully that you’re immersed in this place for a week, but you come back and you bring the experience home with you and it changes the way you live your life in some way,” says LaHood-Olsen.

The immersions also provide an invaluable learning experience that transcends the classroom.

“We’ve learned through many years of experience that you learn best about other realities not just from textbooks and reading about statistics about poverty and injustice, but by actually building relationships and connecting with those who are living those realities,” says Joyana Jacoby Dvorak (LAS MNM ’13), an associate director in the Division of Mission and Ministry.

“The heart of our Vincentian mission is about bringing to light the dignity of every human story.”

—Emily LaHood-Olsen (LAS ’12)

In fact, immersion participants often find the real experience begins once they come back home.

“Students come back from the immersion experiences with a whole new perspective of our world and of their role within the world,” adds Dvorak. “Sometimes that means they change their major to study something that they feel is going to give them a sense of purpose in our world.
Sometimes that means that they integrate into their daily life opportunities to do regular service. Sometimes that means that it changes who they talk to when they’re walking to the ‘L’ and how they actually respect and honor the dignity of those they may see on the street.”

For Morrison, who led an immersion to Los Angeles’ Skid Row the year after her Tuba City experience, this means shifting her perspective and the perspective of those around her.

“How can I take what I learned and what I experienced and continue to pay it forward?” she asks. “How can we recognize our own privileges while also leveraging that privilege in a way to bring about change? How do we start those conversations with our peers, with our parents, with people who don’t have the opportunity to see these issues and address these issues up close and personal the way that we did?”

On Two Feet

There is a Vincentian notion, rooted in Catholic social teaching, about the two feet of social justice: One foot is direct service, while the other foot is working to change the system. The thinking is that just as you can’t stand without two feet, to truly work for justice, you need to address both the immediate problems and the long-term solutions. Both the Division of Mission and Ministry and the Irwin W. Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning give DePaul students access to both of these feet.

Founded in 1998, the Steans Center began its work for justice to “bridge the mission of the university with curriculum,” says Steans Executive Director Howard Rosing about this unique method of integrating service learning into courses across the university. For example, a psychology student might have the chance to tutor adolescents from an underserved community. Other students can participate in the national Inside-Out Prison Exchange program through the Steans Center to spend some of their classroom hours learning side by side with those who are incarcerated.

The Steans Center’s approach to service learning is circular: what is learned in the classroom is reinforced by work in the community, while the community work reinforces classroom learning. All together, the work benefits the greater community.

In keeping with the Vincentian approach, all community engagement is nonhierarchical. “When you go into a community from outside, you’re thinking, we’re respecting that these people already have talents and skills, associations, ideas and an intellectual framework for change. We’re not going in saying, ‘We have the solutions,’” says Rosing.

The skills and experiences students gain through their work with Steans is unparalleled. “Fundamentally, it helps students get into the workplace. It helps them get into graduate programs. Their understanding of the issues, from projects that they put on their resumes or graduate applications to entry into those spaces post-graduation, has really given them an upper edge on their career.

“And then at the faculty level, Steans really inserts the mission into the classroom. So faculty begin to understand why DePaul is a place that is putting their mission to work,” says Rosing.

What Must Be Done?

In a letter Vincent sent to Louise in 1628, he wrote, “May you be forever a beautiful tree of life bringing forth fruits of love, and I, in that same love.”

In the need for love, 17th-century France is really no different from 21st-century America.

“If you attend DePaul University, get a diploma with its name on it or work here, it is critical that you understand our Catholic, Vincentian mission and heritage and your responsibility to respond to the needs of our world,” says Dvorak. “The stories of Vincent and Louise are absolutely relevant to our times.”