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Committed to Poverty Reduction and Spiritual Growth: Vincentian Communities of Reflection, Action, and Solidarity

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This article explores the history, structure, and practices of Vincentians in Action (VIA), a values-based developmental leadership framework rooted in faith and action. VIA strives to cultivate the Vincentian values of poverty reduction and spiritual growth within a culturally and religiously diverse group of university student leaders. This model is grounded on the understanding that working to reduce poverty from the VIA perspective is about community service and working to bring about systemic change; and that at its very core, it is also a spiritual undertaking which ultimately leads one on a quest to be in solidarity with the poor.

Introduction

Vincentians in Action is a Vincentian values-based developmental leadership model for students engaged in ongoing service and justice work at DePaul University. It provides an interfaith, reflective framework in which to promote, enhance and integrate the values of service, spirituality, community, and civic engagement on behalf of the poor and marginalized. The VIA model emerged five years ago as a pedagogy to develop the leadership skills of student coordinators of the DePaul Community Service Association (DCSA) in University Ministry. Today more than 480 students representing seven curricular and co-curricular DePaul communities are afforded the opportunity to participate.

History

In 2002 the VIA model was piloted to address the formative needs of eighteen student coordinators of DCSA who were engaged in weekly community service and ongoing social justice work. Before VIA was established,
the coordinators were required by University Ministry to meet together to reflect upon their work and on-campus advocacy experiences. However, these monthly reflections rarely included any mention of faith or spirituality. While there may have been many reasons for this, one of the most commonly reported explanations was that students were reticent to speak publicly about their faith or spiritual beliefs for fear of offending peers who might believe differently. Additionally, some students who identified themselves as activists would often demonstrate cynicism or hostility toward any organized religion. Such sentiments inevitably tended to derail or truncate any spiritual reflection. Despite the fact that over the years an increasing number of students who professed a variety of faith commitments became involved in service, the content of service reflections continued to be mostly secular and the link between the Vincentian values of community, spirituality, and poverty reduction was rarely discussed.

This began to change, however, during the 2001-2002 academic year when DePaul’s University Ministry underwent a strategic planning process to ascertain the effectiveness of the department’s service and justice programming. An integral part of this process involved ten focus groups composed of key university stakeholders, including 110 students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community partners. In addition, a random sample of hundreds of students was surveyed and a number of interviews took place. Extensive benchmarking also occurred against colleges and universities with similar programming in order to research best practices.

The central findings of the research identified a need to develop and define more clearly the spiritual component of University Ministry’s service and justice programming. This was particularly significant, since a number of departments in the university were also involved in service and civic engagement.

Given the fact that DePaul’s campus is so culturally and religiously diverse, the goal of enhancing the spiritual component of the programming posed both an opportunity and a challenge. How could one best promote and connect the values of community, spirituality, and poverty reduction on behalf of the poor and marginalized in a language that might appeal to such a diverse audience? How could one create a safe space that would encourage trust and open dialogue?

These questions were addressed by a multi-faith audience that included student leaders, staff, faculty, and community partners, as well as a cadre of committed Daughters of Charity and Vincentian priests. After a lengthy discernment process, the answer finally began to emerge. Why not look to the life of Saint Vincent de Paul, the patron saint and founder of the Vincentians, to examine the values upon which he built his own life?
Saint Vincent de Paul was a man of deep faith who sought to discern the will of God and "find pragmatic solutions to the overwhelming needs of the poor in his era." He demonstrated a preferential love for the poor and "stressed a broad concept of evangelization, including human promotion and liberation from human bondage, or what Vincent calls 'serving the poor both corporally and spiritually.'" Saint Vincent's life, therefore, seemed to be an obvious narrative for DePaul students to consider seeking to integrate the values of spirituality, community, and poverty reduction in their lives. Through looking at the lived experience of Saint Vincent, students could thus explore what wisdom his life of committed service might offer to their own experience as leaders in service and justice work. Through examining his legacy, it soon became increasingly evident how the Vincentian values of community, spirituality, and poverty reduction — which Vincent exhibited in his life through standing in solidarity with the poor — continue to ground many students' experience at DePaul today. Indeed, as clarity began to emerge from the discernment process it seemed that the majority of students involved in service and justice at DePaul, whether or not they identified with a religious faith or spiritual tradition, could relate their involvement at some level to the narrative of Saint Vincent de Paul.

In order to develop the content of the VIA curriculum the obvious first step was to identify the needs of student leaders and examine these in light of the core Vincentian values of community, spirituality, and service to the poor. As a result, key knowledge, skills, and values were identified and developed into a core curriculum. This core curriculum has given DePaul students a Vincentian language to begin to reflect upon how to address global and local poverty issues today. Based upon ongoing needs assessments and yearly evaluations, the curriculum continues to be shaped by University Ministry staff and student leaders.

It was at this juncture in the discernment process that a Vincentian priest from Colombia, Guillermo Campuzano, C.M., became involved in helping University Ministry develop a pedagogy based upon Vincentian values and his lived experience in solidarity with the poor in Latin America. Through conversations, meetings, and presentations he shared his discernment principles, which are rooted in the Gospel, Vincentian spirituality, and a lived option for the poor. Campuzano also introduced staff and student leaders to books, literature, and people steeped in the Vincentian tradition. Together the DCSA Senior Coordinators and University Ministry staff began to develop a

1 Louise Sullivan, D.C., The Core Values of Vincentian Education (Chicago: DePaul University, 1997).
Vincentian framework of reflection that brought a lived experience of solidarity with the poor and one’s own contemporary reality into dialogue with the wisdom of Saint Vincent.

One of the primary sources that Campuzano presented to the staff was an article by Theodore Wiesner, C.M., “Experiencing God in the Poor.” In this article, Wiesner posits three “ways of spiritual life” through which a person of faith passes when engaged in service and social justice commitments. He identifies these three ways as “The Way of Appreciation,” “The Way of Dialogue,” and “The Way of Solidarity.” While Wiesner cautions the reader not to interpret progress from one stage to the next too rigidly, the model suggests that working to reduce poverty from a Vincentian perspective is about more than simply volunteering or working to bring about systemic change; at its very core it is a spiritual undertaking and a quest for solidarity with the poor.

In introducing “Experiencing God in the Poor” to University Ministry’s students, the common experience the student leaders reported was that, while Wiesner’s article is clearly written from a Christian perspective, the pathway of spiritual growth described therein resonates with many faith traditions and spiritual backgrounds. In addition to the spiritual depth of the article, which resonated with DePaul’s discerning student leaders and staff, the “three-way” framework Wiesner describes also lent itself well to the university’s academic structure. Because DePaul operates on a quarter system with students engaging in service and social justice for three quarters each year, Wiesner’s framework of the three ways served as an ideal structure within which to organize the content of the VIA curriculum. All of these factors, when combined, led to “Experiencing God in the Poor” becoming the cornerstone of the pedagogy that eventually came to be known as Vincentians in Action or VIA. Today the VIA curriculum is made available as a compendium organized by the three ways.

Several key institutional factors supported the emergence of VIA. Without these, it would not have been possible for VIA to develop. First, DePaul University has ten learning goals. Three of these goals highlight the development of service-oriented, socially responsible values and an ethical framework; knowledge and respect for individuals and groups who are different from us; and self-reflection and life skills. These learning goals support a nurturing environment for VIA to flourish. Second, DePaul’s Division of Student Affairs encourages the integration of faith, leadership, and civic

4 For more information about the curriculum, please e-mail FACE@depaul.edu.
engagement in the DePaul student experience. Finally, DePaul’s historical commitment to both enhance its Catholic identity and to be a pluralistic and diverse community provided this VIA interfaith reflective framework with a rich, challenging, and appropriate context in which to grow. VIA emerged as a means to enhance a Vincentian way of education: “As a Catholic university, DePaul fosters a community that knows that our diverse beliefs and values help our community to recognize and serve the common good inside and outside the university.”

Structure

Once the core components of the VIA curriculum had been identified, University Ministry staff and student leaders instituted a structure and format for DCSA to participate in VIA. They chose DCSA because of the existing structure of the community, which would potentially correspond well to the VIA experience. While originally there were eighteen student coordinators, today there are thirty-five to forty DCSA student leaders who each receive a Saint Vincent de Paul scholarship of $500 to lead their respective service and justice groups. Each DCSA coordinator commits to recruiting DePaul student members (the DCSA community now consists of more than 550 members each week) and facilitating a weekly service experience with a local community partner in Chicago’s south and west-side neighborhoods. The DePaul coordinators travel with their volunteers to their sites. After the service experience, they facilitate a reflection session with their volunteers.

6 Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Ph.D., About Saint Vincent de Paul and DePaul University’s Vincentian, Catholic, and Urban Identity (Chicago: DePaul University, 2001).
Additionally, the coordinators meet as a group on a weekly basis for a VIA experience: ninety minutes to engage in prayer, interfaith dialogue, critical reflection, and community building. These meetings are led by a team of senior VIA student leaders who partner with University Ministry staff to plan the meetings and discuss how to integrate a designated Vincentian value from the VIA curriculum. Often the format of the meetings will incorporate some of the following components: use of multimedia, lectures, small-group work, literature and research reviews, guest presenters, and interactive reflection exercises. Community building is always modeled and emphasized by the student facilitators of the meetings through the sharing of prayer, food, retreats, social gatherings, and more.

At DCSA’s weekly VIA gatherings Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist student leaders, as well as students from other spiritual backgrounds and those who describe themselves as seekers, take turns beginning the meeting with a prayer and a communal sharing of food. After eating and socializing, a “check-in” follows in which all the students reflect upon their service experience and assess their overall progress. The meeting continues with any business updates and “shout-outs” — announcements about faith, service, or justice opportunities happening that week at DePaul or in greater Chicago. Finally, the meeting ends with a forty-five-minute VIA portion that includes reflection and interfaith dialogue, highlighting themes experienced in Wiesner’s three ways. This portion is led by a senior VIA student leader.

What began five years ago as a weekly DCSA student experience with VIA has grown today to encompass more than 480 students participating in small and large VIA communities through weekly, monthly, or intensive service immersion experiences. These DePaul students encounter VIA through their experiences with the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, DePaul Community Service Association, Political-Activist VIA Engagement, the Steans Center for Community based Service Learning Catholic Schools Initiative course, Alternative Spring and Winter Break Service Immersions, and the DePaul Leadership Scholars program. In the autumn of 2007 a cadre of young DePaul alumni who were involved with VIA as undergraduates created a monthly VIA space for dozens of alumni in the Chicagoland area. Today University Ministry student leaders and staff are increasing the integration of VIA into other curricular and co-curricular community contexts.

**VIA Themes: Addressing Poverty Awareness and Reduction**

VIA underscores the belief that the concrete work of reducing poverty is inextricably linked to understanding the causes of poverty. It strives to create an awareness of the structural causes of poverty and to offer students an opportunity to understand and respond to the reality of poverty through
themes derived from the Wiesner-framed ways of Appreciation, Dialogue, and Solidarity. Core VIA themes include:

**Way of Appreciation**
- What Is Prayer?
- Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac
- Reflective Practice and Facilitation Techniques
- Human Dignity
- Compassion
- Humility and Servant Leadership

**Way of Dialogue**
- Social Analysis: Finding Meaning Beneath the Data
- Simplicity; Simple Living; Stewardship
- Praxis: Integrating Dialogue and Action / Conscientization
- Suffering
- Responding to Misunderstanding

**Way of Solidarity**
- Finding Oneself in Solidarity
- Being vs. Doing
- Forgiveness and Love
- Community and Civic Responsibility

Additional VIA themes that address poverty reduction through the promotion of awareness and action have been created and led by student leaders in the last five years. These themes include Social Problems and Justice Efforts in Africa, Black Liberation Theology, The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Praxis — Integrating Dialogue and Action, Response and Action to Hurricane Katrina, Homelessness Activism, Vincentian Values in Social Justice, Race and Privilege, Agribusiness and Small Farms, and The Story of the Coalition of Immokolee Workers.

Our work with outcomes begins with the Vincentian values of community, spirituality, and service to the poor. Saint Vincent de Paul organized his life around these core Christian values. Through his lifelong commitment to such values, he was able to reach out and care for the poorest of the poor and to raise awareness about poverty issues in seventeenth-century France. In modern-day Chicago, through the framework of VIA, student leaders gather on a weekly basis to reflect upon what motivated and inspired Saint Vincent and the women and men of the Vincentian family to serve people who lived on the margins of their time, and to examine what sustained their efforts.
Through this exploration, students make connections to their own service engagement. VIA thus provides a framework for students to identify and examine the core values that motivate them to engage in service, social responsibility, and a lived option for the poor.

One intended outcome is that by (or through) being encouraged to examine the connection between these rich dimensions in their lives, students will continue an integrated commitment to spiritual growth, service, and social justice long after graduation. Another goal is that students will be able to reflect upon how they create meaning in their lives and where they find a sense of purpose, with an appreciation for the Vincentian calling to reduce poverty in our world. Furthermore, the VIA program is intended to help students develop sound group facilitation skills, gain an appreciation for multi-faith prayer, and cultivate an ability to reflect upon their own life purpose and meaning throughout their lifelong journeys.

**DePaul VIA Graduates: Life Choices Committed to Faith and Action**

For five years the VIA framework has been utilized in multiple curricular and co-curricular settings at DePaul. For each of the last five years, at least one of two graduating seniors who have received the Saint Vincent de Paul Leadership Award — the highest recognition that DePaul bestows upon a student — have also been VIA student leaders. Now young alumni of DePaul, these awardees — whose accomplishments are noted below — have chosen paths in life that exemplify spiritual growth and a dedication to reducing poverty in our world.

Having finished a postgraduate volunteer commitment with the L'Arche community of disabled adults, Scott Jeansonne is now in medical school and desires to work with impoverished populations upon graduation. On completing an eighteen-month service commitment in Duran, Ecuador, with Rostro de Cristo, Meredith Dean was hired by the Illinois Hunger Coalition to coordinate outreach in public schools. Initially serving with the Vincentian Service Corps, Jason Gill continued with full-time volunteer service, teaching with the Inner-City Teaching Corps in a south Chicago elementary school. Jason recently completed graduate studies focusing on the theology of economics. Additional VIA graduates include Salvador Venegas, who helped open a Chicago Public School in the Little Village neighborhood in Chicago and continues to work as a teacher and administrator; Jenan Mohajir, recently recognized by DePaul’s University Ministry with the Young Alumni Award for her ongoing service to an Islamic educational foundation and professional work, who engages religiously diverse young people in dialogue and service-learning as a staff member at the Interfaith Youth Core; Eitan Gordon, who served as the president of Hillel at DePaul; and Ben Meyer,
who finished a postgraduate volunteer commitment with Boys’ Hope and is currently attending law school with an interest in pursuing legal work as an advocate for the poor and marginalized.

**VIA Experiential Reflection: Addressing Poverty Reduction and Spiritual Growth**

VIA is grounded in a Vincentian spirituality, described by Campuzano in the following way: “We are offering three things that are essential to our humanity: spirituality, community life and community service through solidarity. These are not only goals for human life but are essentially the way of fulfillment for human life. This is a countercultural offer of finding meaning for new generations.”

VIA themes challenge students to reflect upon their role in the world, and upon their sense of purpose as socially responsible leaders and global citizens. VIA allows a safe space for students to reflect upon their experiences of working with the poor and the difficulties and personal struggles they encounter when confronted face-to-face with the harsh reality of poverty.

During the Way of Dialogue, one of the VIA themes which students are often invited to consider is when working with the poor and striving to bring about poverty reduction, how do they deal with the suffering they encounter both personally and in the lives of those whom they are serving? In recent years, this theme has been addressed by two guest speakers in very different contexts. The first guest speaker, Siobhan O’Donoghue, the Associate Director of Community Service in University Ministry, spoke from a Catholic perspective and based her talk on the theology of Saint Louise de Marillac. The second guest speaker was Gihad Ali, graduate intern for Muslim student life in University Ministry, who shared her experience, within the context of her Muslim faith, of the suffering she witnessed and experienced in Palestine and upon the death of her mother.

During Siobhan’s presentation, students were invited to reflect upon the theology of Saint Louise de Marillac — particularly upon Louise’s understanding of the words of Christ as he was being crucified: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Such discussion prompted several students who had recently returned from service trips to share their thoughts about their growing sense of isolation, anger, and frustration as they became increasingly aware of the structural causes of poverty. Part of this struggle they attributed to being forced to come to terms with their own privilege and complicity in oppression. In identifying and naming the alienation they

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experienced through their attempts to bring about a more just world, the students reflected upon how, on their return to their homes, they had felt misunderstood and estranged by their peers and family who failed to understand their impassioned desires and renewed sense of urgency to earnestly work for the reduction of poverty and violence in our world.

At this juncture, Siobhan was able to validate the students' experience by referencing the pain Saint Vincent had himself experienced after his return from his successful sermon in Folleville, and his subsequent preaching trips to the surrounding rural villages. "It was painful for Vincent, after these intensely experienced weeks, to return to the Paris mansion of the Gondis. The magnificent surroundings of a house devoted to show, worldliness, and parties were stifling for Vincent now." 8

According to Wiesner, such experiences are an inevitable part of the struggle involved in working to alleviate poverty. Once we begin to become aware of the systemic nature of poverty, as Wiesner states, some of us:

...also become engaged in the struggle for social change. This usually leads to involvement in such things as protests, boycotts, demonstrations, actions of resistance, even civil disobedience, arrest, imprisonment. We often become part of what is sometimes called a resistance community, a network of persons with similar ideals and goals. As a result of this involvement, we experience the fact that others—friends, relatives, family, members of our family simply do not comprehend what we are about. We feel misunderstood, alienated, criticized, even persecuted. 9

Understanding that students sometimes experience these struggles of alienation because of their deepened involvement in social-change work, the VIA process provides an ongoing safe space for students to share and support one another.

Poignantly framing her discussion within the context of her Muslim faith, Gihad Ali also led students through a powerful examination of alienation, suffering, and privilege. In connecting her own experience of witnessing the oppression of the Palestinian people in occupied Palestine to her own inner pain in losing her mother to cancer, Gihad spoke from her heart of the difficulties she had faced in her own quest for justice. Gihad thus alerted her

peers to the reality that as they seek to examine and critique the root causes of oppression and address the inequitable structures that keep those on the margins, students will need to be willing to come to terms with the poverty that exists in their own lives. As Gihad so eloquently made clear, the journey to poverty reduction in our world will also inevitably entail having to identify, wrestle with, and eventually acknowledge one’s own inner poverty, in addition to the poverty students see in the lives of “the other” and in the world around them.

Gihad then invited the students to confront their privilege to see how it affected them in their quest for justice and identity. Gihad explained how it was difficult for her to accept her privilege and that she was conscious of “abusing” it. Eventually she had to come to terms with the fact that it was this very privilege that she needed to “use” (not “abuse”). Her privilege allowed her to help those who had been oppressed by the very same system and structure that had given her privilege and yet oppressed her in other ways. Gihad’s VIA presentation illuminated how this journey calls us to embrace our own privilege and weakness and to use it as a way of connecting with the oppressed and suffering. As Gihad conveyed, this self-examination is often a difficult and painful process, yet it is in using our privilege to work against systems of injustice that we can find hope.

Through a community such as VIA, students can learn to share their vulnerabilities with one another and gain strength from a cohesive sense of communal support. Consequently, community members can validate, normalize, and help one another overcome the alienation they may sometimes encounter when working toward the reduction of poverty.

A student participant in VIA, Ecuador, 2006. 
*Photo courtesy of the authors*
**Conclusion**

After five years of engagement with DePaul student communities, this Vincentian framework underscores the inextricable connection between the values of spiritual growth and a sustained commitment to poverty reduction.

Student leaders who participate in VIA attribute the success of the program to the fact that the regular meetings allow them to reflect on questions of faith and meaning with trusted peers in a safe space. It is their unique time, away from their service and advocacy commitments and the pressures of their academic, work, and social lives, to enter into dialectic between their social action involvements and Vincentian values. As the student leaders reflect on these themes with one another, they begin to develop a shared narrative, while at the same time deepening their understanding of their own unique motivation for service and justice. It is through such regular structured interactions that the struggles and successes involved in reducing poverty locally and globally are shared, and questions of meaning examined. Simultaneously, community is developed and trust is built. Ultimately, VIA invites students to journey together, towards a lifelong commitment to poverty reduction rooted in spiritual growth, community, and solidarity.