Spring 2008

Saint Vincent de Paul's Response to Poverty of Spirit

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol28/iss2/23

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Poverty of spirit involves much more than a lack of material possessions or even power. Rather, it encompasses such elements as human weakness, dependence, and defenselessness. This article examines the concept of poverty of spirit, and discusses how my own personal and professional callings and experiences have led me to try to emulate the model of Saint Vincent de Paul in dealing with the poor. Also, how have Vincentian values been incorporated in the classroom, and how have others been touched by the example of Saint Vincent in the process?

Introduction

On joining the faculty at St. John’s University, established by the Vincentians in 1870, I received an orientation on Saint Vincent de Paul. Through additional research I gradually learned more about this humble servant, who was persistent and passionate in his mission to attend to the needs of the poor at all levels. Unlike many people in his time and in the present, Saint Vincent did not view the poor with disdain and fear; neither did he see them as inferior, to be avoided and overlooked. Instead, he loved the poor and valued them, and ultimately his compassion moved him to take action. Through his life Saint Vincent modeled a simple yet compelling message: that we should reach out and help the poor, the needy, and those in jeopardy. So strong was his compassion for the poor that he saw Jesus Christ in each of their faces.

Saint Vincent inspired others to share in his mission. In 1617 he founded the Ladies of Charity, a community of women who agreed to band together and work diligently for the poor. Then, in 1633, he and a widow, Louise de Marillac, established the Daughters of Charity to serve the poor. It has been said of Saint Vincent that he “...had the reputation of doing wonders wherever he went, and in his wake he brought together people of good will, drawn into action by his example, working to comfort the miserable who suf-

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fered in body and soul."²

I am left to reflect, how have I been inspired by the vision of Saint Vincent to passionately and enthusiastically cultivate his spirit and pursue his mission through my own work with the poor, and through my professional mission in the classroom? To answer this I will address poverty of the human spirit and discuss what Saint Vincent’s life and works have to say, and further describe how I dealt with this particular form of poverty in my university classes, research, and personal service.

**Poverty of the Human Spirit**

When the word _poverty_ comes to mind, one typically thinks of the financial inability to secure basic necessities, be they food, clothing, or shelter. Emaciated children in immediate need of food and medical care are images frequently seen on television that shape our understanding of global poverty. While Saint Vincent’s goals and works addressed this form of poverty, however, there is another type to which he also gave much attention: _poverty of the human spirit._

_Poverty of spirit_ is granted a wide variety of definitions and applications in Holy Scripture. The first of the eight beatitudes given in the Sermon on the Mount, “blessed are the poor in spirit,” presents a glimpse of a form of poverty not necessarily connected to material possessions. Here “poor” is linked to “spirit,” implying such meanings as destitution, oppression, defenselessness, affliction, misery, selfishness, indifference, weakness, dependence and social inferiority.³ Thus, those who are poor in spirit can span the entire socioeconomic spectrum.

At least three groups can be identified as falling within this type of poverty. In the first group are people who recognize their utter helplessness in what life has dealt them. The words “the poor” in this context might conjure a graphic image of persons crouching or cowering in helplessness.⁴ A second comprises individuals who may not be materially poor and may not have suffered disasters — people who may even enjoy the blessings of the privileged. They have become poor in spirit even while maintaining material wealth. Sad and unforeseeable life circumstances have befallen them, causing them to lose hope, sometimes even in spite of their monetary advantages.

In the third group are those who intentionally care little about other human beings. They make choices that serve only their individual needs and

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⁴ Ritenbaugh, “Beatitudes.”
not the common good. They may be haughty, self-assertive, or indifferent. They may feel they owe no one anything and take a nonchalant or “hands-off” approach to helping others, living only to please themselves. Since they did not create the misery in the world, they feel no responsibility for eliminating it. These people are also poor in human spirit. They are impoverished, even in the midst of their material success and blessings. They may be likened to the rich man who passed by the injured man on the street (Luke 10:25-37), or to the self-reliant Pharisee (Luke 18:10-14). Saint Vincent vehemently speaks out against these kinds of people: “He who allows himself to be ruled or guided by the lower and animal part of his nature, deserves to be called a beast rather than a man.”

However, for the purposes of this article, the phrase poverty of the human spirit will be used to describe the wretched condition of those whose pride and souls have been devastated by their material circumstances or living conditions. These individuals may or may not have brought their suffering on themselves. In either case, society sends them a clear message that they are outcasts, thus stripping them of their human dignity. The resulting poverty of spirit may manifest itself in a lack of such vital elements as self-confidence, self-esteem, or inner strength. There are also emotional and psychological struggles that result from the inability to change one’s destiny.

The poor in spirit may reside in a perpetual state of despair, surrounded by constant hardships, sometimes even including starvation and disease. These individuals were not forgotten by Saint Vincent. He realized that although poverty can take many forms, each form needed to be recognized and addressed — and he was responsive to all kinds of poverty.

A person who is spiritually impoverished has a self-characterization marked by desperation and feelings of insignificance. The look can often be seen in the faces of immigrants who feel isolated and hopeless, of the elderly who live in nursing facilities, and of others who simply lack that spiritual star to guide them through life. Following the example of Saint Vincent, one is compelled to act. “Blessed are the poor” is a call to action.

**Personal Service**

*Service to the elderly*

In my experience working with people who are poor in spirit, the words of Saint Vincent have always steered me in the right direction and helped

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6 Pujo, *Vincent de Paul*, 251.

me to bring aid and comfort to many who suffer in silence. For example, I regularly perform volunteer service for elderly residents at a nursing home, many of whom are ninety years old or older. In some cases, their families are unable to visit them regularly, and most of the friends who knew them best have died. These people are not in need of food, clothing, or shelter. Their surroundings are beautiful and clean. Daily social activities and holiday festivities are provided to keep them physically and emotionally active and alert. Yet when I visit them I sense their poverty of spirit, and their need to be uplifted. So I do what Saint Vincent would do. I listen — just listen. One of the core values that the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul holds sacred is friendship, a person-to-person service that encompasses listening. The Society — founded in 1833 by Frederick Ozanam, a French lawyer and professor at the Sorbonne, was inspired by Saint Vincent and dedicated to assisting the poor of Paris. Ozanam always made people feel at home as he listened to them attentively and respected their opinions.8

Vincent de Paul's call to action, “Blessed are the poor.”
Image Collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

While there is a time to instruct, Saint Vincent also modeled good listening skills and was known for his ability to acquire all kinds of friends.9 It is said that “he received all who came to him, never hurrying anyone, giving his whole attention to each alike, whether rich or poor, great or small; always ready to listen to all they had to say, without showing weariness or annoy-

9 Pujo, Vincent de Paul, 50.
He knew that understanding people meant listening to them as well as taking note of their external needs. I attempt to follow this example by listening to the elderly as they recount the stories of their lives and reminisce from their wheelchairs or beds. I often sit attentively on the edge of my seat (just as I believe Saint Vincent would have done), learn about them as individuals, and relish the rays of light that emanate from their faces as they talk. I draw strength from the fountain of wisdom that reposes within their souls. In these moments I become their student and they my teachers — or, as Saint Vincent put it, they become “our lords and masters.” He bestowed such regal titles on the frail and fragile because he believed that they are special people who should be attended to and served.

Saint Vincent was about restoring hope and offering new life to others, irrespective of age. When I visit my elderly “teachers” I often ask questions so that our encounters become conversations rather than mere monologues. Having others listen to their stories means a lot to these men and women; it energizes, restores hope, and makes them happy that others find value in their lives. In my service to the elderly, I endeavor to give purpose to those who are poor in spirit, to enhance their sense of self-worth and to give them back hope and joy of life.

Parents of immigrant children

Imagine what it must be like to pick up your family, leave the only life you have known, and come to a new country where everything is foreign: the people, the language, and the culture. Immigrants of all ages come to the United States knowing that to advance socioeconomically they will have to learn English. Yet this is no easy task, especially for older learners, who find themselves lost in a sea of unfamiliar sounds and new expressions. Adding to the complexity of the linguistic challenge, many immigrants are non-literate in their own languages and have been relegated to low-status jobs in their native countries. As a result, they are not only poor materially but also exhibit signs of dependence, fragility, and distress or poverty of spirit. Living in a new country does not automatically alleviate this problem since they typically have to start their working lives anew despite the language barrier.

Some immigrant parents are fortunate to find jobs as low-paid workers in factories, restaurants, or hotels. They may have to work several jobs to survive. Their responsibilities consume a great deal of time and energy, both physical and emotional, and their problems may seem insurmountable. In some cases

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12 Ibid.
they have no voice and must depend on others to advocate for them.  

Many immigrant mothers stay at home to care for their families, but some seek opportunities to learn English through free programs while their children are at school. I volunteer my services in such a community-outreach program, teaching forty immigrant parents who seek to learn English so that they can assist their children with homework and communicate with their children’s teachers. Ninety percent of the parents are from Mexico or South America and are non-literate. Many have school-aged children, while others bring their preschoolers to class because they cannot afford a babysitter. As a result, our class is also a nursery in which babies are breastfed and their diapers quietly changed in a designated corner.

When these young immigrant parents enter the classroom, one senses the poverty of spirit in their faces and in the way that they walk and talk. They are uncertain and tentative. Can they learn English, even though all odds seem to be against them? They look to me, the instructor, to make a difference in their lives. Here I am reminded of Saint Vincent’s commitment “to deal kindly with all... to take care of the poor, console them, help them, support their cause... to be stirred by our neighbors’ worries and distress.”

As a result, my English classes are lively. I instruct my students in ways that take into consideration their skills and abilities, and I create a bond with them by allowing them to share their stories. I use my imperfect Spanish to show them that I myself am not perfect, that I too make mistakes. I create a classroom in which acceptance, acknowledgement, and approval reign. The students are allowed to cry, laugh, and talk about their experiences. After class I make myself available for any questions they may have. The questions are not always class-related; they may concern such issues as immigration, jobs, and children. As Saint Vincent went above and beyond his assigned duties, responding to each individual’s needs, I am compelled to do the same. Saint Vincent’s example tells us that if we want to serve those who are poor in spirit, what matters most is time spent with them, living close to them.

Research

My experience in training teachers has led to my research focus on teacher sensitivity and methods of educating teachers on second language learners. This focus is consistent with, and grounded in, the Vincentian mission of meeting the emotional and psychological needs of immigrant children.

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14 Jones, “Vincent de Paul.”
15 Wilson, Life of St. Vincent, 210-19.
before trying to meet their linguistic needs. It is also reflected in DePaul University’s core belief that “respect for the individual, service to the needy, human solidarity, and adherence to the belief that giving of one’s self helps make the world a better place.”

Through articles, conference presentations, and workshops at home and abroad, I bring issues of teacher sensitivity to the forefront in order to promote greater insight and understanding among educators who teach culturally and linguistically diverse students. Hopefully, my research will lead to the advancement of institutional sensitivity and to the promotion of spiritual wealth for students and teachers.

**In the Classroom**

Because immigrant children have not mastered the English language at the time they enroll in school, they often feel helpless and vulnerable in the classroom. Many of their parents experience similar feelings, since their own lack of English language skills prevents them from helping with homework, communicating with teachers, and otherwise participating in their children’s education.

As a Professor of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), this is where I interject Vincentian goals and values into my own classes. Such values as respect, human dignity, sensitivity, and social responsibility easily find a place in pedagogy and in the TESOL curriculum. Not only do my students learn about the importance of instructing their immigrant students effectively, but they also see what caring involves. I do this through readings and discussions of immigrant case studies, and by assigning projects in which students are asked, for example, to interview people who work with immigrants in various educational settings. Sometimes students are also assigned works of fiction that help sensitize them as teachers in training or as in-service teachers. At times I even integrate children’s literature into my classes when I believe that it will encourage linguistic and cultural sensitivity.

Gradually, my students begin to realize that teaching is not only about grades. Just as Saint Vincent cared about the whole person, my students learn that each immigrant student must be seen holistically as a whole being. For example, one of my students, upon learning that her student lived with her eighty-three-year-old grandmother who knew no English, committed

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17 St. John’s University Website: http://www.stjohns.edu/about/vincentian.

herself to coming to school forty-five minutes earlier each school day to assist the young girl with her homework. In this way she implemented Vincentian traditions in her class. She went above and beyond what was required of her. Saint Vincent would support knowing the immigrant students’ home environment, and being willing to make accommodations in assisting them. It demonstrates charity and care — doing whatever it takes to help students reach the levels of English-language proficiency needed to succeed academically and to become productive world citizens.

This is the Vincentian way. Educating immigrant children is much more than just a job; it is about making them feel welcome in a new community. It is about empathizing with them and their parents, and finding ways to help them adjust to their new world as painlessly as possible. It is about embracing their cultures and identities. It is about being willing to show one’s vulnerability and awkwardness in meeting new people from unfamiliar countries, cultures, and languages.

In practice a Vincentian-rich elementary classroom might look like this: a welcome sign on the door with names and/or photos of each student, words and artifacts from the students’ native languages and cultures, students’ work displayed in the classroom, and posters describing Vincentian values with such phrases as “We listen to one another,” “We take care of one another,” and “We respect one another.” A teacher trained in a Vincentian approach would use supportive comments such as “Great job,” “I knew you could do it,” “We respect everyone in this classroom,” “Everyone has the ability to succeed,” “There is a lot of talent in this classroom,” and “Juan, Peng-Li just came to the United States three days ago, would you be willing to be a buddy?” The Vincentian classroom would feel safe, warm, and comfortable. Teachers would not yell or show signs of disappointment when their immigrant students have not begun speaking English or have not shown substantial progress after two months. Rather, they remain encouraging, positive, and optimistic. They would realize that their students need positive attitudes to grow and to take risks.

To expose my students to Vincentian core values, I engage them in activities that lead to an experiential understanding of what it is like to live in a new culture. I have them approach books in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Japanese, for example, which are not read from left to right like English books. They also copy Chinese, Korean, or Arabic script by hand, in order to encounter an entirely new orthographic system. A discussion inevitably follows in which they voice their frustrations at reading and writing in an unfamiliar language, and this is very helpful in assisting teachers to empathize with their second-language students and better understand their life experiences. Throughout his life, Saint Vincent exemplified the importance of sharing the
lives and experiences of those to whom we minister. It is my desire that my students will not only remember Vincentian principles but apply them enthusiastically and responsibly in their own classrooms.

In some of my classes, students are asked to keep journals to monitor their own growth and reflect on issues that emerge as the semester progresses. At the end of the semester I collect the journals and read them to see whether the students' attitudes have changed. Are my students leaving with more enlightened perspectives? Are they more aware of teacher sensitivity? Are they willing to model Vincentian values in their own classrooms? These are some comments from three students' journal entries:

In class we were asked to think about our views on error correction... A person learning a new language is in a very special situation. Each person is different, and each person has to be treated differently... I think it's all about being aware of what the person is going through and being sensitive to their specific needs.

It became crystal clear to me in our class discussion today that people who are not in a position of power do not get respect. I never thought about it before. I never had to. So, I thought about my immigrant students and their parents and figured out why they do not get much respect in my school by teachers, staff, and administrators. Because they do not know English, they are voiceless. I realize now that I need to become the voice of my students and their parents.

As teachers work to continuously affirm students' languages in the classroom, we, teachers, not only foster the construction of their knowledge, but we also give ourselves the chance to learn about each individual student that sits before us in the classroom, allowing us to also learn from them so that learning truly does become an experience that calls on human collaboration. I will remember this in the classroom.

It is apparent that by the end of the course my students have evolved and developed into more sensitive teachers. For example, when they explain that they become angry when they see immigrant children being mistreated by their teachers, and that they have begun to speak out and advocate for the children at faculty meetings, parent-teacher association meetings, and other
such forums, it is clear that the Vincentian seeds planted in my classroom have taken root. Time will reveal what those seeds will yield and how they will touch these young people’s lives and the lives of their students. When conducting professional development workshops and observing classrooms throughout New York City, I often stumble across my former students and am delighted to see them demonstrating Vincentian ways of caring and showing empathy in their work. Saint Vincent has placed his imprint in their classrooms.

Conclusion

Many people in our world suffer from poverty of spirit. Their hearts and their lives are broken. They are of different ages, different socioeconomic positions, and different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These people cross our paths all the time, yet we may not recognize them because they are materially wealthy and well dressed, and may even wear broad smiles. On the surface everything may appear fine, but on the inside are spirits that have been ravished by circumstance. They may have been ignored and disregarded.

In responding to this form of poverty we are sharing a vision of Saint Vincent de Paul, who reminds us that these people, though poor in spirit, are also a part of the body and kingdom of Christ. Our service to these people must reflect this important fact. As we serve the poor in spirit, whether in eldercare facilities or in educational institutions, we are reminded to embrace the little people, the marginal, the hurting, and the lonely. They are to be elevated. In so doing, we address a form of poverty less obvious, but ultimately just as dangerous, as material destitution. Let us, then, address it with guidance from our own hearts and from the spirit of Saint Vincent, who taught that “true charity does not consist only of distributing alms, but of helping the abject to regain their dignity and independence.”

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19 Pujo, Vincent de Paul, 251.