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“Learning Not to Despair of Our Own Age”: The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in This Time of Pandemic

Timothy P. Williams

BIO

TIMOTHY P. WILLIAMS is the national formation director for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States. He is a graduate of Marquette University, a longtime software industry executive, and a former US Army officer. Before joining the Society’s staff full-time, he led formation for the Society in North Texas and was a member of the National Formation Committee. He has presented on Vincentian spirituality, formation, and heritage at numerous diocesan, regional, and national assemblies. Most importantly, as longtime members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, he and his wife have made hundreds of home visits, serving Christ in the person of the poor.

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Susana Gonzalez, adjunct faculty in the College Science and Health, teaches the class Introduction to the Art and Science of Nursing. September 24, 2020, in the 990 Fullerton building on the Lincoln Park Campus.

Courtesy DePaul University/Jeff Carrion

The year 2020, like the proverbial month of March, came in like a lion amid a roar of political turmoil, with a global pandemic following closely behind.¹ Through a summer and fall of escalating social unrest, violence, and the economic fallout of the coronavirus, the lion hardly seemed to have calmed by the end of the year.

Last year also marked the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in the United States (1845). Today, the Society boasts numerous special works, including thrift stores, disaster services, prisoner re-entry programs, and much more. The vast majority of the Society's work, serving more than 5 million people each year, is carried out by nearly 100,000 members nationwide who continue the tradition established by our founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, of visiting our neighbors in need in their homes.² There, we listen to them, we pray with them, and we try to help in the best way possible, always keeping in mind our maxim that "no work of charity is foreign to the Society."³

1 The title of this article is drawn from an 1848 lecture by Frédéric Ozanam, quoted by Monsignor Louis Baunard, *Ozanam in His Correspondence* (Wexford, Ireland: John English, 1923), 323:

“We shall learn not to despair of our own age, when we have examined more menacing periods, during which violence seemed supreme, despising truth and detesting law. Knowing that civilisation cannot perish, we shall also learn that it can win through better by the pen than by the sword, by charity better than by justice’: and further on: ‘Face to face with our decadence, which is too obvious, we must not ignore the progress which is not so obvious. Let us remember, in our moments of discouragement, that our Christianity has survived worse times. Let us say, as Aeneas said to his despondent companions, that we have passed through too many trials not to see, with God’s help, the end of this : *passi graviora, dabit Deus his quoque finem!*”

2 To learn more about the Society's activities in the US, visit <https://ssvpusa.org>.

3 *Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul*, (St. Louis: Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, 2018) Part I, 1.3.

Members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul normally meet frequently, “in Conferences that are genuine communities of faith and love,”⁴ and we are committed not only to serve, but to “see the suffering Christ” in those that we serve. Suddenly, as businesses were shuttered, and “shelter in place” orders rolled across the country throughout the late winter and into spring, we needed to adapt to a world in which our person-to-person meetings, with the poor and with each other, were proscribed by public health mandates. And that was just the beginning of 2020.

It seemed to us a year like no other, but as the Book of Ecclesiastes reminds us, “There is nothing new under the sun.”⁵ Historically, the Vincentian Family has not only faced similar challenges but was born in the very midst of them. The Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity both were founded during the Thirty Years’ War and grew in the midst of frequent outbreaks of the plague in seventeenth-century France. Like the present pandemic, the plague “suspended all business matters because the Pope forbade all sorts of meetings—even High Masses—to avoid the danger of contagion,” as Vincent wrote during one such outbreak in 1656.⁶

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, in turn, was founded in 1833 in a century of almost constant revolution in France, along with periodic cholera epidemics. During 1848 in particular, the fledgling Society faced a cholera epidemic that killed nearly 20,000 people in Paris; a revolution that chased King Louis-Philippe from the throne; a second uprising that challenged the new republic; and an economic collapse that left thousands desperately impoverished.

We recall these examples not to shame ourselves for feeling overwhelmed. After all, we can only live in our own time, only face the challenges before us today. Rather, we are comforted in the knowledge that this, too, shall pass. We are inspired by the example of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, just as he was inspired by Saint Vincent, whom he called “a model one must strive to imitate, as he himself imitated the model of Jesus Christ.”⁷

“Faithful to the spirit of its founders,” our Rule states, “the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions.”⁸

4 *Ibid.*, Part I, 3.3.

5 *Eccles.* 1:9.

6 Letter 2147, “To Jacques Desclaux, Bishop of Dax,” 24 September 1656, in *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al., Vols. 1–14 (New York: New City Press, 1985–2014), 6:106.

7 Letter 175, “To François Lallier,” 17 May 1838, in *Frédéric Ozanam, A Life in Letters*, ed. and trans. Joseph I. Dirvin, CM, (St. Louis: Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, 1986), 143, hereinafter *Letters*.

8 *Rule*, Part I, 1.6.



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Disposal masks are made available to students, staff, and faculty in the Lewis Center. September 9, 2020, on the Loop Campus.

Courtesy DePaul University/Randall Spriggs

The Face of Christ Behind a Mask

Unlike previous generations that were forced to forgo meetings entirely, our Conferences have been able to keep connected first by email and then by telephone. Conferences with the technical knowledge and resources were able to stay in contact by online videoconferencing, using tools such as Zoom. Although the gap between Zoom and real life is great, we cannot help but to be deeply grateful for the blessings of modern technology that enable meetings, however diminished, to continue. At the same time, there remains uneasiness at what we've lost and a hunger to again gather in person. We may see each other's faces, but there are no little conversations on the side; no handshakes as we enter and leave; no bag for the traditional secret collection is passed; and when we offer our group prayers, it is only after that now standard reminder for everybody to "please mute yourselves."

Visits with the neighbor, in which we are called to see Christ's face, seemed even more daunting. How can you see Christ's face on the phone, where you see no face at all? How do you establish "relationships based on trust and friendship" when meeting for the first time over remote connections? After all, Blessed Frédéric taught us that "Help ... becomes honorable, because it may become mutual ... because the hand that you clasp clasps yours in return."⁹

But there were no hands to clasp; not by phone, not by Zoom, and not at a "social distance." During the rare occasions when we could meet in person, the face of Christ was

⁹ Kathleen O'Meara, *Frédéric Ozanam, Professor at the Sorbonne* (Edmonston & Douglas, 1876), 229.



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DePaul student Brian Mada rides his bike through the Lincoln Park Campus. November 4, 2020.

Courtesy DePaul University/Jeff Carrion

hidden behind a mask. On one visit, I can recall realizing only after letting it go on too long just how difficult it was for one neighbor to tell her story loudly enough to be heard through the muffling of her mask. It's tough to share your sadness, and tougher still when you have to nearly shout it. Offering comforting words through the filter of masks or phones is also challenging.

Of course, technology cannot replace the home visit, but the choice we faced was not between a loaf and half a loaf; it was between half a loaf or nothing at all. Home visits with our neighbors in need continued with both technology and creativity. Members, still in pairs, spoke by phone, by video conference, and where possible, on front porches or front yards to listen, to pray, and to assist those in need in any way that they could.

It is always true that our presence and our love are more important than all the material assistance we can offer, and it is even more true in this pandemic. We are all in this together, we reassure each other, even as we each remain alone in our homes. Relieving the isolation that afflicts our neighbors in this time of great uncertainty becomes the highest priority, even when we, too, are uncertain. As important as our physical presence and the literal “clasping of hands” may be, nothing is greater than our Vincentian ideal to serve our neighbors “for love alone.”

Indeed, as Blessed Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity who mentored the first members of the Society, once said, our neighbors “will appreciate [our] kindness and [our] love more than all else [we] bring them.”¹⁰ So, while we look forward to the day we can resume our regular home visits, we have learned that even half a loaf can feed multitudes.

¹⁰ James Derum, *Apostle in a Top Hat* (Fidelity Publishing, 1995), 57.

It wasn't just our meetings that took a pause. Mass itself, as in Vincent's day, was no longer offered in person. Our Conferences are funded primarily by parishioners' donations, and we worried about having funds sufficient to the anticipated increase of need. We should have known better. As Blessed Frédéric once said, "To do works of charity, it is never necessary to worry about pecuniary resources, they always come."¹¹ Our fellow parishioners continued their generous support, and our communities came to us not only with donations, but as volunteers, helping to staff our food pantries, now busier than ever.

Growing in Unity Amid Division

Then came the summer. Just as we thought we were adapting to COVID-19, the very fabric of our society seemed about to unravel. Perhaps we should not have been surprised. History informs us that great social unrest, even to the point of revolution, often coincides with epidemics. When a cholera epidemic struck Paris in the spring of 1832, less than a year before the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul was founded, Blessed Frédéric noted that "few wealthy people [had] been struck down," because they had the means to quarantine or flee. The poor working people, though, could not afford to shelter at home, much less leave Paris altogether. In their desperation, Frédéric saw, they would form mobs, even threatening revolution. "Business is down," he observed, "strange rumors circulate everywhere."¹²

By June of 1832, the scattered riots and uprisings occurring across France culminated in the quickly suppressed June Rebellion. So it also was in 2020, as thousands marched in the streets following the death of George Floyd in the custody of Minneapolis police. Over the summer, nationwide protests grew, some of them violent. In January of the new year, we saw a quickly suppressed insurrection in the nation's Capitol Building.

How did we all become so disconnected from each other, so unaware of the anguish deeply felt by our neighbors, especially in the midst of a great trial in which we'd constantly declared our solidarity, repeating that we were "all in this together"? For the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, our response began with self-examination, grounded in our spirituality and in our obligations to each other as Christians. To understand the faults we perceive in society, we must have the humility to examine and accept our own faults.

To that end, we offered a series of webinars titled "Hope in the Face of Racism," beginning with a discussion of the pastoral letter from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Open Wide Our Hearts*. Throughout the webinar series, we asked individual members to share personal stories that illustrated the issues we were examining, such as economic discrimination, crime, and violence. We followed up on a more personal level

11 Letter 121, "To his mother," 23 July 1836, *Letters*, 76.

12 Letter 45, "To his mother," 8 April 1832, *ibid.*, 23–25.

with what we termed “Spiritual Twinning Retreats,” which paired Conferences of different races to reflect and share their experiences. Speaking freely and without fear in the spirit of Vincentian friendship, we worked to remove barriers, deepen our understanding of each other, and better equip ourselves to serve all of our neighbors.

The Society might not quite be ready to “cast ourselves between these two enemy armies,”¹³ as Blessed Frédéric put it, but we can at least strive to be “that loving reconciler.”¹⁴ We can bring a new depth of empathy to our home visits, seek to understand the neighbor more fully; listen not just to the words, but to the whole person; and make each act of charity also an act of justice.

Uncertainty can be frustrating. As 2020 demonstrated, it can even be frightening. Often, what we fear most is not the uncertainty itself, but the realization that we are not in control. But while we are not in control, God is, and in a year of great uncertainty, that knowledge is neither frustrating nor frightening, but comforting. We left 2020 with greater humility, deeper trust in Providence, and undimmed commitment to serve in hope. And when future years come in like lions, may the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul meet them with hope and with confidence in the Lamb.

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13 Letter 137, “To Louis Janmot,” 13 November 1836, *ibid.*, 97.

14 Letter 243, “To Ferdinand Velay,” 12 July 1840, *ibid.*, 193.



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