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THE PRESENCE AND PRESENT RELEVANCE OF THE SOCIETY OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL

Amin A. de Tarrazi

A Prophetic Intuition

"The question which divides the people of today is no longer one about political structures, but a social question. It is to find out which will win, the spirit of egoism or the spirit of sacrifice. Is society to be just a huge exploitation for the profit of the strongest, or a dedication of each person to the benefit of all, and especially to the protection of the weak? There are many people who have too much, and who want still more. There are very many more who do not have sufficient, who have nothing and who want to take if people won't give. A struggle is starting between these two types of people. This struggle threatens to be a terrible one. On one side is the power of gold, on the other the power of despair. We must jump in between these opposing armies, if not to prevent at least to soften the encounter. And the fact that we are young middle-class people makes it easier for us to fulfill the role of mediator, to which our title of Christian obliges us. That is why our Society of St Vincent de Paul is useful".

If you had not got to the end of that quotation you might well have wondered from which contemporary writer it came.

It comes, in fact, from the generous heart and intuitive intelligence of a young man named Frédéric Ozanam who already more than a century and a half ago, by 1836, had had this prophetic vision which permitted a foretaste of the great social struggles and, altering the planetary scale, the tensions between the third world and the industrial world.

From Dream to Reality

Anticipating that human relationships were running the risk of being more and more reduced to manifestations of force, he romantically dreamt "that all young people of generosity and spirit would unite in some charitable work...."

On 23 April 1833 this dream became reality at the first meeting of the "Conference of Charity," placed under the patronage of St Vincent de Paul. Six students, including Ozanam who was just 20, gathered round Emmanuel Bailly, much older than themselves.

An On-going Expansion

Ozanam liked to recall the "humble origins" of the Society which, however, was to experience a lightning surge through France, Europe and the world.

In 1860 it already had 2,500 Conferences, with more than 50,000 members.

After a particularly difficult period during the Second Empire, when the Society was sometimes seen as an association outside the control of authority (in the circular letter of Duke Victor Fialin de Persigny, Interior Minister, to the French Prefects, 1861), its irresistible onward march resumed after the Franco-Prussian War.

That is how the number of groups had risen to 8,000 with 133,000 members by the start of the First World War.

In the centenary year, 1933, 12,000 conferences had more than 200,000 members, while by 1983, the 150th anniversary of the foundation, the number of Vincentians reached 750,000, with 38,500 conferences in 107 countries. In 1995 there are some 875,000 members spread among 46,600 teams in 130 countries on five continents.

Most of the groups are mixed, comprising men, women, boys and girls, and they work within the framework of city or country parishes, city districts, large groupings, schools or universities, professional or cultural associations.

A Universal Fraternity

But let us put aside history and statistics and look at the essentials, namely the spirit, aims and means.

The Society of St Vincent de Paul, one of the oldest charitable, social and humanitarian organizations, is seen today as a huge international movement of the apostolate of charity and social action. Thanks to the spiritual bonding and human formation of its members it wants to witness to the fraternal love of Christ among the poorest.

In collaboration with them and with others it tries to help them to overcome their various types of need. In all the countries of the world it appeals to men, women and young people, from every background and every level of society, who want to live out their faith in the giving of themselves, radiating around them their hope and joy.

Right from the start the aim of universality was stated in Ozanam's enthusiastic hope: "I want to wrap up the whole world in a network of charity." In 1835 there were weeks of animated discussion, sometimes rather heated, ending with a decision on 17 February to divide up the founding Conference into different sections. With this decision the members of the fledgling Society showed that they wanted their movement to spread outside the borders of their parish, their city, their country, even their continent, in order to take root in all regions.

As happened with the Church itself, the richness of this dynamic association of fervent Christians had, in the future, to lie in its diversity. Its unity had to be forged in plurality and difference.

A Spiritual Search

If Frédéric Ozanam and his original companions were worried about human and social matters as they set up the Society of St Vincent de Paul, if their on-going care was to bring relief to the needs of their day, at the same time they felt the need and urgency of a solid spiritual formation as the only possible foundation for their vocation and mission.

The harmonious balance between prayer and activity which Vincent de Paul achieved struck them early on as the unchangeable element in Vincentian commitment. It draws its inspiration, strength and fidelity from a life of faith.

Some members of the Society, deepening their original spiritual initiative, go on further to the gift of themselves in the religious life, diaconate or priesthood.

Every year there are men, women and young people in the Society who make this more radical choice for the service of the Church.

A Commitment for Social Justice

In the middle of "The Great Century," whose splendour did not hide its harshness from either his eyes or his heart, Vincent de Paul stated: "There is no charity which is not alongside justice."

Thinking along the same lines Ozanam, who wished "charity to do what justice cannot do on its own," underlined the shortcomings of justice, the impersonal nature of which needs to be completed and humanised by sensitivity and kindness, something freely given: "Order in society is founded on two virtues, justice and charity. But justice already presupposes a lot of love, for one must love a person a lot if one is to respect his rights, which border one's own rights, and his freedom

which limits one's own freedom! Justice, however, has limits; charity knows none."

It was this need which, in the 1930s, gave Emile Romanet, a member of a Conference in Grenoble, the revolutionary idea of family allowances. Following his Vincentian vocation, as defined above by Ozanam, he had understood that there was no charity worthy of the name that did not do something to bring about greater equity. The Council Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity reminded us of this when it said: "The needs of justice must first be met, so that what is due in justice may not be offered as a gift of charity" (chapter II N_ 8). The Society of St Vincent de Paul, therefore, with all its available human and material resources, and in close collaboration with public bodies and local groups, shares in the common effort to remedy the causes of these social evils and to bring about development in the institutional structures.

A Personal Contact with the Suffering

But if a Vincentian thinks this struggle for justice is primary, he still won't find the fulfillment of his vocation unless he personally, directly and constantly serves the most deprived, following the example of Monsieur Vincent whom the members of the Conference chose as their patron saint. They try to "live, as he himself did, according to the divine example of Jesus Christ."

Sister Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity, understood the generous and burning zeal of Ozanam and his friends. She had already shown this by her effective and timely work among the poor in the Mouffetard area of Paris. Guided by her instinctive sensitivity she led them along the way of charity to the have-nots among whom they did their apprenticeship in real love of the poor.

Didn't Paul VI, who had been a member of the Society of St Vincent de Paul himself when he was a student, call Vincentians "the friends and servants of the poor"?

Varied Activity and Constant Adaptation

This is the framework within which all the operations of the Society of St Vincent de Paul are carried out for the benefit of those whom the world wounds, oppresses, isolates, rejects, marginalises:

- Help for children and young people.
- Education - Professional, technical and agricultural training - Educational grants.

- Initiatives to help the unemployed and their families.
- Job-finding and creating new jobs.
- Moral and practical support for the lonely, and for families with problems.
- Initiatives to help unmarried mothers and abandoned women.
- Help for senior citizens: home visits, home help, clubs, holiday centres, retirement homes.
- Health work: visiting the sick, the physically and mentally handicapped, the blind. Home care. Setting up hospitals, dispensaries, medical centres.
- Help for alcoholics, drug-addicts, the seriously ill.
- Prison visiting and after-care.
- Rehabilitating the marginalised.
- Help for seamen. Seamen's hostels.
- Help for itinerants - Halting sites.
- Help for immigrants: Welcome, orientation help, teaching literacy, in conformity with their identity, culture and traditions.
- Housing programmes and improvement of living conditions.
- Food.
- Development projects, especially in the areas of agriculture, stock-breeding and fishing.
- Animating more than 5,000 twinnings between teams in the developed and developing countries.
- Help for refugees and the stateless.
- Solidarity campaigns.
- Cultural animation - Libraries - Leisure activities - Sports - Holiday camps.
- Legal, administrative and social consultations.

- Catechesis - Liturgical animation - Marriage preparation.

The common denominator of all these initiatives, activities and undertakings is the desire to help the lost and the have-nots by listening, friendship, spiritual, moral and material support; to give them back their dignity, to ensure their personal development, to give them back hope and, if possible, the joy of life.

A Church Association with a Lay Character

This is one of the ways in which the Society of St Vincent de Paul is innovative. The innovative element, which was daring at the time of Ozanam and his friends, was to have insisted that the destiny of their dear Society, essentially ecclesial and deeply attached to religious authority, should be in the hands of lay people who regarded themselves as totally mature and responsible.

One hundred and thirty years before the Second Vatican Council these young men had foreseen the importance, even the need, for a dynamic, imaginative lay apostolate in the midst of the "people of God."

The Society of St Vincent de Paul was officially recognised by Church authorities in Gregory XVI's briefs of 10 January and 12 August 1845, and has been confirmed by succeeding popes. It has always faithfully retained its lay status, the essential immutable element which characterises it.

At the Service of the Church and the City

Though born in the heart of the Church the Society of St Vincent de Paul is at the service of the city. Under the inspiration of the gospel message, attentive to the teaching of the magisterium, it operates in the midst of the human community and regards it as its duty to bring about "being better," over and above "being more."

Isn't faith without works dead? That, anyway, is what the Fathers of the Council appropriately remind us of in "Gaudium et Spes" ("The Church in the Modern World," N_ 43), when they urge "Christians as citizens of both cities to carry out their tasks in this world under the guidance of the gospel. They are far from the truth who, knowing that we have not here a lasting city but are heading towards the future one, neglect their human tasks, not realising that the faith itself, taking into account each one's vocation, makes this a more urgent duty. But they are equally in error who, on the other hand, think that they can devote themselves totally to the affairs of this world as if they had no connection with their religious life. They regard the latter as being confined to taking part in worship and obeying certain fixed moral obligations. This dichotomy between the faith which is

professed by a large number and their daily behaviour is to be counted among the greatest errors of our day."

If the Church expects from us an authentic witness to faith and spirituality it also invites us to be totally present to this deeply-changing world which is suffering, struggling and looking for itself.

The vocation to the Society of St Vincent de Paul makes it a definite duty for each member to be involved in the human tapestry where the struggle for a better and more just world is being carried on.

Vincentians are aware of the various problems caused by the different forms of spiritual, moral, cultural, physical and material poverty, so their clear aim is to give back hope to those who have lost it, bringing to a questioning and searching humanity that "additional element of soul" which the great French philosopher Henri Bergson used to talk about.

Thanks to a flexible structure, reduced to essentials and which does not cost much, and above all made up of willing people, technical and material human means can be rapidly mobilised, set up and adapted to circumstances of time and place.

Also, the existence of indigenous teams in most countries of the world allows as rational, economic and disciplined action as possible, with regard to local conditions.

This organisation and these methods have proved their worth in the midst of the human dramas and natural disasters which afflict our world from time to time.

The Vincentian Vocation: an Attempt at Unity of Life

The Vincentian vocation, then, sees itself in this 20th century of science, technology and efficiency as a humble, yet authentic, witness to fraternal charity and social initiative.

It invites its members to service, to sharing and to the total giving of self: having, being, knowing, in order to better respond to the anguished appeal of so many today, sidelined by a progress which does not help the weakest.

It is a real social school, especially for the young, which by means of personal contact makes them aware of the poorest people and the biggest problems of our time. An act of one-to-one love does not in any way shut out reality but rather

opens the heart and the mind to the world-wide dimension of suffering, to the demands of justice, and the rights of human dignity.

The Vincentian vocation is not an artificial veneer. When it is accepted in its totality it leads one to a fundamental unity of life, bringing thought, word and action into harmony. A harmony between faith and work in service of the neighbour is the ideal which the heirs of St Vincent de Paul and Frédéric Ozanam seek with patience, going beyond their weakness and insufficiency.

Looking to the future with determination, far from the glare of footlights and the artificialities of the media, they hold this thought of their founder deep in their own hearts:

"Charity must never look backwards, but always forwards. What it achieved in the past is small in quantity; present and future needs which it has to meet are infinite."

(Thomas Davitt CM, translator)