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Presentation of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul

by Franck Provence
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1. History

“Enfold the world in a network of charity,” such was the ambition of a handful of young men of the Romantic Period. It was the time when Victor Hugo dreamed of turning the page of classical theater, when Chateaubriand pursued his apologetics on Christianity and when the youth of France were in a seething frenzy with ideas and intellectual debates. For the young men of this time, who were rather well read and were arriving from their provinces, discovering the world as they discovered Paris, this hotbed of culture born from the uproar within the university as much as the frequenting of the elite, was obviously exhilarating.

Frederick Ozanam and his friends were no exception to the rule. They, no less than others, had a taste for romantic quarrels and rhetorical jousts, with the exception that they received a Christian education, which perhaps prepared them better than others to measure the vanity of endless struggles, the childishness of literary debates that were rich in ideas at the start, but ended too quickly in defending the idea for the idea, then, when all was said and done, defending the idea for its author. Ozanam was already permeated, from the first years of his adolescence, with questions of the higher realm pertaining to God. It was in this way, first of all, that this group of 19th-century young men contrasted sharply with their generation. Their battle would not be the *Battle of Hernani* but that of defending the faith. And, as action is better than a verbal argument, which can certainly convince but prove nothing, their theater would not be the Comédie Française, but would be the neighborhoods of the poor. “The blessing of the poor is that of God ... Let us go to the poor!” cried Ozanam.

At the start of the turbulent 1830s they were seven young men and only one was older than 20. Distraught by a world that, little by little, renounced Christianity, they came together with the desire to support each other in their faith and to grow together in their faith. But how does one shine forth with only words taken from the gospel while living in a dechristianized society? They quickly saw the need to translate their faith into action.

2. Vincentian Spirit

It was thus that in April 1833, the first Conference of Charity was born. Its principle was simple: a group of young Christian men gathering to pray, reflect and

work together to bring relief to the poor. Quickly the work grew with new members. Soon the group placed themselves under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul. What could be more natural than to place oneself under the protection of a saint who knew so well how to join prayer and action in fervent charity? St. Vincent de Paul united in his person all the characteristics that should pertain to a Conference: prayer, first of all, because he said, "I can do all things in him who supports and comforts me;" then action, which invites us, through his example and words, to "do more" unceasingly so as to bring relief to the poor, all the poor, without distinction, and in considering again that one must be forgiven for the good that one does for them; finally, by the intellectual concern, which animated Monsieur Vincent in many directions, but always with the desire that humanity grow in goodness. Thus he encouraged better formation for priests; he applied himself to the building of hospices and other works that humanized, after a fashion, the conditions of the poor; he turned his influence of being close to the "greats" of society to, slowly but surely, bring the government, and thus society, to be concerned with the fate of the poor and to provide more relief to them. Finally, Monsieur Vincent was not content to just pray and act alongside the poorest, he also reflected on the causes of the evils of poverty in order to eventually attempt to turn them around.

The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul had no other ambition than to walk in the steps of their patron: to pray, reflect and act. That is why, throughout the world, groups of Christians come together guided by the founding desire to "serve Christ in the poor." Assembled together in lay communities, the Vincentians have no other ambition than to proclaim the Word of God by their actions and words. Nevertheless, these small communities do not lose sight of the fact that, in order to shine forth from without, joy must reign from within. Friendship towards all and caring for one another, therefore, constitute the foundations of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul.

3. Growth

It is this spirit that has guided the Society of St. Vincent de Paul from its origins in 1833. First, from a number of seven, the young men quickly gained widespread acceptance. Coming together as lay people to pray together and organize home visits to the poor in their neighborhood, they were joined by a growing number of young men of their age in the first months. Quickly the group numbered about 100 members and the crucial moment had arrived where they had to divide the group. This was the start of the expansion. In creating a second group, the followers of St. Vincent opened a door that would never again be closed. As of 1834, there were numerous Conferences not only in Paris but also in other places in France and Europe and, by 1860, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul had 2,500 Conferences and 50,000 members in many countries.

Today, in 2002, the Conferences number 47,000 throughout the world and bring together more than 600,000 active members in 132 countries on all five continents. If family home visits remain a fundamental activity of the Conference members, it is now complemented by multiple specialized works such as emergency food and lodging assistance and the development of various structures in other areas: schools and hospitals for the poor, retirement homes for the elderly, orphanages, summer camps, etc. For, according to Ozanam, “no work of charity should be foreign to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.”

4. Organization

In all parts of the world, Vincentians work in the same fashion, through small teams of 10 to 20 persons called Conferences, always directed by the laity but, whenever possible, accompanied by a priest or religious. It is in this way that the Conferences express, with regard to the Church, both their desired hierarchical independence and their deep filial attachment.

The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul are linked together through a vast network that directs the Councils at the regional level (Diocesan and Local Councils), country level (National Councils) and at the global level (International General Council). The fundamental principle of the entire organization is subsidiarity: each hierarchical level has only the competencies that those on the lower level cannot assume. This greatly fosters a spirit of initiative at the levels closest to the needs, especially since the functioning is entirely democratic: Conference presidents are elected by their team members and the presidents in turn elect the members of the Council upon whom they depend. In the same way, all Council members are elected by the representatives in the level directly below, all the way to the General Council.

In every diocese, the Conferences work in direct collaboration with the Church at the parish and various institutional levels. More especially throughout the world, close ties unite the St. Vincent de Paul Conferences with other Vincentian Family organizations, notably the Daughters of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission and the AIC, as well as the Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul. Many activities are accomplished in this close collaboration, and in a harmony which is most often complementary.

5. Current global strategy

Born out of the initiative of some young men, armed simply with their good will, and later built little by little, then expanded by larger groups of volunteers, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has always functioned with little means of structure. Yet, in recent decades, all charitable associations have felt the need to modernize themselves and to develop their professional administrative abilities in order to

provide more solid support to the work of the volunteers and to organize more efficiently their activity in the service to the poor. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, for its part, is equipped, in countries where it has the means, with modern and efficient organizational frameworks. On the international level, this evolution is more delayed. The current ambition of the International General Council is therefore to modernize its structure looking forward to “having the Society enter the 21st century.” It wants to assure for the St. Vincent de Paul Conferences a better representation within international organizations (UN, UNESCO, European Union, etc.) on the one hand; but also to provide better service to the National Councils of less-developed countries, supporting them through all means in their development and encouraging especially sharing of all types among Vincentians in developed countries and Vincentians in poorer countries. It also concerns encouraging Vincentians around the world to globally reflect on the causes of poverty, without being content just to bandage the wounds it inflicts. Finally, the General Council would like to give a great thrust towards the development of the formation of Conference members on the Vincentian level (the Vincentian spirit and its most important principles, the knowledge of its principal figures: Vincent de Paul, Frederick Ozanam, Louise de Marillac), as well as the level of Christian fundamentals and, lastly, of understanding poverty under its different aspects.

6. Strengths and weaknesses: perspectives

The situation of the St. Vincent de Paul Conferences today, very different according to country and scope, poses some questions, like all movements, about the future. These questions are principally coming from two recognizable areas: the first is the lack of visibility of the Conference’s activities, not only on the world level, but often on the national and local levels as well. The second is the aging of the members, particularly in Europe, and in a general way in all the countries with older establishments. More and more these concerns are being addressed by an awareness on the part of the National Councils, but for a while now also on the part of the International General Council, which is pursuing the development of an active policy to remedy these shortcomings.

In fact, one must see in these two problems an evolutionary phenomenon that is not irreparable but nevertheless very logical: the lack of visibility of the movement is due to its very type of organization, founded on the principle of subsidiarity, a resolutely modern principle that today inspires all democratic organizations (thus the development of the European Union at present). In this way 47,000 work groups that labor in the whole world each have a great deal of autonomy, that perhaps hinders the cohesiveness of the whole, but above all brings a profound ability for initiative closer to the local reality.

Regarding the problem of aging in countries where the Conferences have been established for a long time, it is, in fact, inherent for older organizations to

need a new breath of fresh air at a given point in time. It is this new breath that the International General Council is currently undertaking to give to the entire St. Vincent de Paul Society, at the same time as it is leading a strategy of movement consolidation, destined, among others, to give it a new visibility.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has always been young and will continue to be so. When it ages here, it is born elsewhere; and it is reborn here when it runs out of steam elsewhere. It seems that the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, on the Old Continent where they saw the light of the day and where their deep foundations are engraved, are now moving towards a new dawn filled with promise. For the young men and women of Europe this could be a formidable opportunity. Serving, in friendship, the Church and the poor at the same time, this is what the young people of the new century are not going to miss dreaming about, if they are able to hope. We are already seeing the signs. It is up to us, Vincentians of today, to be capable of welcoming this momentum and of accompanying it into tomorrow.

There is no longer need of a great revolution for this. What suffices is to always have these words of Frederick Ozanam in our hearts: “The first human need, the first need of the Society, are religious ideas: the heart thirsts for the infinite.”

(Translation: TRANSLATION CENTER – DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, Paris)