Vincent de Paul and Saul Alinsky: Community Organizers

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Chicago —
the windy city,
home of the Bulls and the Bears,
home of DePaul University, the largest Catholic University in the United States,
birthplace of Saul Alinsky.

The fact that DePaul University was founded in the city of Chicago;
the fact that Saul Alinsky was born in Chicago in 1909 and established the Industrial Areas Foundation here in 1940;
the fact that I have been involved in some type of community organizing for the past twenty-three years;
the fact that I am a member of the Congregation of the Mission founded by Saint Vincent de Paul —
all of these realities have led me to reflect on the theme of today’s presentation: Vincent de Paul and Saul Alinsky: community organizers.

To place these two individuals side by side can seem rather strange. To say the least they were not contemporaries. Vincent first saw the light of day in 1581, in a little village near Dax, France, which now bears his name but which was then called Pouy. Saul Alinsky was born in Chicago in 1909.

What could these two very different individuals possibly have in common?

First of all, Saul Alinsky and Vincent de Paul questioned the status quo, questioned the existing societal and ecclesiastical structures of their day. They asked difficult questions and were moved to take bold steps. Both of these men were very practical and action oriented. They also reflected on and evaluated their actions and this process of action/reflection/evaluation led them to explore uncharted territory for
further action. This in turn led them to take even bolder steps.

The genius of Vincent and Saul Alinsky is found in their ability to establish relationships with persons from all walks of life, from the various social classes, and to enlist their resources in the realization of the mission.

Saul Alinsky would define the mission as: regaining identity as a citizen, restoring faith in oneself and in one's power to direct and write history, the embracing of laughter, beauty, love and the chance to create. For Alinsky mission involves hard work, empathy, listening, more hard work.

Vincent de Paul stated the mission most clearly when he spoke to his followers and said: "How happy are we to take on the very mission of Jesus — the mission of proclaiming Good News to the poor. Indeed, we should assist the poor in every way. We should assist them in their material needs. We should assist them in their spiritual needs. We should assist them by ourselves and with the help of others. To do this is to preach the gospel by word and by work." For Vincent the
mission involves hard work, empathy, listening, more hard work.

Both of these men saw the mission in terms of empowering others through relationships and they labored tirelessly on behalf of the abandoned, the outcasts, the forgotten ones of society. They gave a voice to the voiceless and empowered those who felt powerless.

Above all Vincent de Paul and Saul Alinsky recognized the world as it is — with all its promise and hope, with all its problems and intrigue. I highlight this point because we are constantly tempted to view the world as we would like it to be — the world of our dreams and fantasy where good always overcomes and triumphs in the struggle with evil; where harmony and peace and understanding reign supreme. Our dream world, our fantasy land, however, leads to escapism and indifference and inertia. It invites us to fold our arms and watch the world pass by. It invites us to seek our own comfort and ease and pleasure.

A side note here: Vincent had those moments when he attempted to live in the world of his own fantasy and dreams. As a newly ordained priest he sought social advancement through some wealthy benefactor who would enable him to retire honorably and live a life of ease. Unable to find such a person and faced with mounting debts he disappears from the scene. When he reappears, he tells this great story of being captured by sea pirates, sold into slavery in Tunis, forced to live in captivity, serving first a fisherman, then a chemist and finally a farmer. After the conversion of his last master, he escapes in a small boat and returns to France — two years later. I have often thought that I would love to talk with Vincent sometime to know what he really did. It seems to me that this was probably a two year walk on the wild side, one last fling before getting serious.

Back to the world as it is. The world as it is, is quite different from the world of our fantasies.

The world as it is, is an arena of power politics moved primarily by perceived and immediate self-interest. The common good and human rights form part of the political dialogue, but often remain on the level of nice ideas, politically correct sounding words which are

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quickly and swiftly set aside for reasons of national security and economic interest.

The world as it is, is a world of angles not angels; a world where people speak of moral principles and act on power principles; a world where reconciliation often means one side wins and the other side must become reconciled to that fact.

The world as it is, is a world where religious institutions often support and justify the status quo, forgetting the radical challenge of Jesus’ words and actions.

The world as it is, is a world where the solution of one problem inevitably creates a new problem; a world where there are no permanent happy or sad endings; a world where life is a battle and this planet earth the battlefield; a world where everything is interrelated and interdependent; where for every positive there is a negative and for every negative there is a positive; a world where there are no permanent allies and no permanent enemies.

Viewing the world as it is makes a difference. In Saint Vincent’s case, this perspective enabled him to respond to the victims of war, famine and plague, and assist them by establishing soup kitchens which provided the poor with food, clothing and medical assistance. He met these immediate short term needs. But he saw the bigger picture and tried to mediate peace between the warring factions. This effort failed and caused him to be removed from a high level commission set up to govern the French Church. It is important to note here, however, that both the short term needs and the long term solution to eventually eradicate the short term needs became the focus of Vincent’s effort.

Vincent structured new ways for women to contribute to the church’s mission and welcomed them as co-workers in the evangelization process with the poor. Throughout France, Confraternities of the Ladies of Charity were founded to assist the poor in their time of need. Later, to give greater stability to this effort, the Daughters of Charity were founded. By Constitution these women presented a new way of living vowed religious life. They lived in houses not convents, their cloister was the city streets, their enclosure was their commitment to God and service to the poor. This way of living religious life was unheard of, considered revolutionary and could not be imagined by the Church of 17th Century France. But Vincent asked the question: “Why can’t women participate in the fullest way in carrying out the mission of the Church?” And then he acted to make his vision come alive.
Vincent saw the sad state of the Church and also asked: “Why can’t there be competent priests who will serve the people, especially the poor?” “Why can’t there be competent bishops who will feed and nourish those who hunger for a knowledge of God?”

So through his influence, on-going education programs were established for the clergy, and then seminaries were established to insure that future priests could be trained and formed to exercise their pastoral and liturgical functions. Vincent was also influential in the naming of bishops who were appointed only after demonstrating their ability to work with and care for the people of the diocese.

Vincent saw the cruel and inhuman state of the galley slaves, and as their chaplain obtained for them a more dignified treatment. Then he successfully obtained the construction of more humane prisons and set up an organization to extend help to the families of the prisoners.

Yes, Vincent’s decision to view the world as it is made a difference to the people of France in the 17th Century. Vincent was able to bring relief to immediate short term needs, to situations that demanded quick action. Yet Vincent was not satisfied with addressing the short term needs, rather he sought ways to restructure institutions so that the root causes of injustice that created these needs could be eliminated.

As testimony to his work, hear the words of the preacher at his funeral: “The face of France has been changed by the work and labor of this man Vincent de Paul.”

In the case of Saul Alinsky, his decision to view the world as it is also made a difference.

Look at the way his efforts changed life for the Back-of-the-Yards area in Chicago (the subject of Upton Sinclair’s book The Jungle). He entered the world of the laborer and then was able to obtain long term changes in the working conditions of these people.

Look at the way he challenged Eastman Kodak and the University of Rochester in New York over the question of racism. Thereafter, to say the least, he was not welcomed in New York and there was a campaign in the newspapers to discredit him. Yet Saul Alinsky, rather than attack his adversaries, ridiculed them and held them up to laughter before the world. His tactics opened up new work and educational opportunities for African-Americans in that city.

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1 From the eulogy delivered by Bishop Henri de Maupas du Tour soon after the death of Vincent de Paul, September 1660.
The same thing happened when he organized the Mexican-Americans in the barrios of California.

To his tribute, the Industrial Areas Foundation which he founded in 1940 is still growing, still dedicated to its mission, still giving voice and power to the voiceless and powerless, still changing the attitude of "business as usual" in government and corporate circles.

Today all community organizers are indebted to the genius and insights and strategies of Saul Alinsky. Indeed, the words community organizing and Saul Alinsky have become synonymous.

Recognizing the world as it is. In 1997 our very existence depends on our internalization of this principle. Only when we view the world as it is, with all its contradictions, with all its complimentarity, only then are we able to confront the issues at hand and together bring about change that will truly impact the lives of the great masses of society.

Organizing people and empowering men and women is truly a Vincentian method of evangelizing. Today more than ever before, organizing with the poor and empowering them to be Good News is the essential element of our evangelization process, of our mission.

If we take our calling seriously — and all of us are called to opt in a preferential way for the poor — then coalition building is the only way in which the structures that oppress and enslave others can be confronted, torn down, demolished. Coalition building with the poor is the only way in which the voices and the cries of the poor can receive a forum, the only way in which they can write history.

My own experience of community organizing has led me to the belief that no one person, no one group of people, no one institution has the resources or the power to effectively confront and bring about the necessary change that will ultimately enable people to live with greater dignity, to live as children of God, created in the image and likeness of God.

Since no one group can do this, coalitions must be built. But to build coalitions takes hours and hours and days and days and months and months. Coalition building involves a process of one-on-one dialogues, listening to the stories, the dreams, the hopes, the fears of others. Think of how rare it is that we, you and I, have a chance to tell our story to someone who is willing to listen — think of how much more rare is the opportunity for the poor to tell their story. This element of telling the story is essential to coalition building, for in the telling of and the listening to the story, power emerges and new stories are created.
A second element in coalition building is selecting the issue for action. These issues often emerge from the stories that have been told, or they emerge from the threats to the life of the poor. As issues for battle are decided upon, research becomes vital. Questions must be asked: Who are our potential enemies? Who are our potential allies? What resources do we have? Who has the power to bring about the desired change? Where and how can pressure be put upon the power base to change the current situation? How can a win-win situation be created? (We do not attempt to destroy and vanquish the enemy but create situations where all sides can win.) These questions and others will serve as a guide for any group of people who organize themselves to confront specific issues that effect their lives as a community.

Some examples might illustrate this point.

In 1975, I was involved in a union organizing effort of 1,000 workers on the government banana farms in the Republic of Panama. In the initial stages of organizing it became obvious that we would need the support and backing of other groups if this effort were to succeed. It was not enough to simply present our petition for union recognition to the Labor Department. Rather the petition would need to be supported by groups of people who were willing to enter into solidarity with and take action on behalf of the banana farm workers.

So during the months before the declaration of the strike, talks were held with the transportation unions of the major cities in Panama; other dialogues were conducted with the workers of the independent banana plantations and the workers of the United Brands plantation. Further talks were held with the bishop of Chiriqui. All of these groups agreed to support the strike and the union organization effort. On the day of the strike, when the banana workers walked off their jobs and took over the plantation, it was absolutely beautiful to see and hear that transportation had come to a standstill in the capital and other cities throughout the country; it was beautiful to see the farm workers of United Brands and the Independent Farms walk off their jobs; it was beautiful to hear the voice of the Bishop on the radio announcing his support for the strikers; it was beautiful to see men and women carrying food and coffee to the strikers and their families.

It was even more beautiful when on the following day the Supreme Court of Panama declared the strike legal and ordered the government to enter into negotiations of a work contract. This was the first time in the history of Panama that a strike had been declared legal. The union, the dream and hope of the workers, became a reality.
As I have reflected on this event I am convinced that the union would never have come into existence without the support of the other groups who became our allies in this struggle.

Another example, closer to home.

In many cities there is a movement to pass "living wage" legislation. I know that last year this issue was raised here in Chicago and taken off the table because of a lack of support.

In New York, at a General Assembly of the New York Metro Industrial Areas Foundation in February 1995, a working document was presented to one of the city council members who committed himself to presenting this legislation to the full council. A group of workers traveled from Baltimore to New York to share with the assembly their own struggle to pass living wage legislation in Baltimore (the first city in the United States to enact such legislation). There was much enthusiasm and great excitement and I can still remember clearly the words of one of the workers from Baltimore, "It took a year to pass this legislation in Baltimore; here in New York, be prepared for a struggle of at least 18 months." His words proved to be prophetic.

In August of 1996, 19 months later, the living wage legislation was passed by the City Council of New York with a 2/3 majority that enabled them to over-ride the veto of Mayor Guiliani. In this effort, besides the several thousands of people involved in the Industrial Areas Foundation, dialogues were held with organized labor, with the churches, with the non-profit sector, with city contractors. Every city council member was visited personally (not just once, but several times during this campaign), compromises were made and endless hours were spent talking about strategies and planning next actions. In 1995 we were told this legislation would never reach the floor of the city council. Today, it is law.

Was it easy? No way!

There were many moments when it truly seemed that the issue would go down to defeat. But again the collective voice and the coalition building that had taken place enabled us to truly celebrate in August of 1996 when this legislation became law.

I have told you about two success stories. Yes there have also been failures and frustrations. Three separate efforts to organize the sugar cane cutters in Panama ended in dismal failure each time, and an early housing development program in Brooklyn turned out to be disastrous.

However, over the course of years, the moments of celebration and joy far outnumber the moments of disappointment and tears.
During my years in Brooklyn I saw vacant lots cleaned up, abandoned buildings boarded up and others converted into low-income housing, repairs made in public housing projects, more police protection provided, phase one and two of the Nehemiah Housing Project (a housing project for low income families to become home owners), a recycling plant opened, drug houses closed, playgrounds built, people receiving job training and job placement, a credit union established. Yes, the moments of celebration were many.

All of this was accomplished because a people, once afraid to dream and hope, became organized and felt empowered to write their own history rather than have someone else write history for them.

All of this was accomplished by men and women who were convinced to the very depths of their souls that in their unity, and in their organization, there was real power, and together they had learned how to exercise that power on behalf of the common good and thus wrote new chapters in our history books.

Some final comments. Paul VI in his letter on “Evangelization” states: “The primary and immediate task of the laity is not to establish and develop the ecclesial community — this is the specific role of the pastors — (the) field of evangelizing activity (for the laity) is the vast and complicated world of politics, society, and economics, . . . the world of culture, the sciences and the arts, the world of international life and the mass media, . . . the world of human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work . . . .”

I am saddened at the lack of resources, the lack of training, the lack of support that is given to men and women to exercise their primary evangelizing activity as described in the words of Paul VI.

We seem to do a good job of training liturgical ministers, lectors, Eucharistic ministers, choirs, ministers of hospitality, etc. We seem to do a good job of training catechetical ministers. But in my opinion we seem to do a poor job of training people to confront the critical issues they face as they attempt to build community, as they attempt to create a new heaven and a new earth. Our greatest challenge lies here in this area.

In your mission statement you have declared “… that as an urban university, De Paul is deeply involved in the life of a community that

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3Pope Paul VI, Evangelii Nuntiandi, On Evangelization in the Modern World (Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness, promulgated on December 8, 1975), no 70.
is rapidly becoming global." You also speak of "... developing service
partnerships with other institutions and agencies, and of a special
concern for the deprived members of society."

You set a great challenge for yourselves. May these words of your
mission statement continue to inspire all of you at DePaul University.
May this, your mission, continue to motivate you to take that collabor­
ative action so that the powerless and the voiceless of this city may
turn to you and say in gratitude: you, DePaul University, have been
at our side in our struggle; you, DePaul University, have empowered
us and given us a voice; you, DePaul University have enabled us to
write a new chapter in the history of Chicago.

Let me close by paraphrasing the words of Saul Alinsky about his
personal philosophy and community organizing:

[Organizing is a struggle. But it is a struggle that is waged
with optimism.] Optimism brings with it hope; optimism
brings with it a purpose; optimism brings with it a will to
fight for a better world. Without this optimism there is no
need to carry on. If we think of the struggle as a climb up
a mountain, then we must visualize a mountain with no
top. We see a top, but when we finally reach it, the overcast
rises and we find ourselves merely on a bluff. The mountain
continues up. Now we see the real 'top' ahead of us and
strive for it only to find we have reached another bluff, the
top still above us. [Thus we are involved in a perpetual
quest from plateau to plateau].

Let us climb with optimism up the mountain.
Let us rejoice and celebrate and sing and dance when we reach a
new plateau.

But then, let us again put on our climbing gear and move forward
up the mountain and write a new chapter of history here at DePaul
University.

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