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Occasional Paper Number 57

THE VOCATION OF CARERS – TALK TO THE SOCIETY OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL

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The Society of St Vincent De Paul exists within the Church in order to help people and specifically to help people live in ways which embody the values of the Kingdom preached by Jesus. By origin and repeated confirmations of that origin the St Vincent De Paul Society must work with people in the world as it is, in order to try to form a world as it could be - a world of peace, of justice, of love. Another expression for helping people is of empowering the Gospel to enter into practical decisions of all aspects of human life. Therefore it is important to plan to make all that we do effective in the days and years to come so that we can continue to help people live the Gospel values in everyday life.

The work of the Society of St Vincent De Paul is a continuation of the missionary activity of the apostles sent by Jesus to preach the Good News to all peoples everywhere. This commitment developed a style of life and labor which is marked by the ability to adapt to circumstances and to the real needs of people, by a freedom of spirit to create new structures, and by a willingness to go wherever the need is most great. This highly adaptable, creative and mobile missionary ideal is to be family centered in the life and work of the Church.

Your service is a creative colleagueship with God in a world which is threatened by individual and corporate sinfulness. Realities like enmity, greed, racial hatred, political corruption, dishonesty and betrayal, form a network of hostility to God's call to the human family to make the gift of Creation a place of peace, justice and love. The rescue of what is good in Creation from all that is evil describes the ministry of Jesus. Jesus identified with those people who most needed rescue - the poor, the outsider, the diseased, the sinner with nowhere to turn. Jesus' confrontation with those people's lives enlivens the commitment to help people. Your motivation is founded on the recurring call to love.

You are painfully aware that the struggle between good and evil will cease only in the fullness of God's Kingdom. You know the pilgrimage character of human existence. You walk that pilgrimage as people of profound hope in the future. You are idealists - you have to be. As you attempt to live and to explain the richness of God's love, you have to find ways to articulate that love which both sustain its authenticity and convince an inquiring but distrustful generation of its value. Today the very ability to believe is questioned. Those who claim to be God's spokespersons often speak at such a distance from the human experience of

struggling to live in a threatened world that they find their credibility profoundly questioned.

We live in a society where opportunity is not equally distributed, where burdens and benefits are borne unequally, where accidents of history make some 'haves' and others 'the have nots', where "but for God go I" means some are 'the helpers' and others the 'helped'. Those who seek to serve must serve in a way that draws on the wellsprings of your faith. Yours is a service of helping the human spirit find freedom.

As I recall St Vincent De Paul himself once said, "You must not give to the poor without the poor being able to see the love in your eyes". Your service is not simple good management or overseeing the efficient management of an operation - although that does demand capacious talent, vitality and dedication. However if you are to continue to empower those you serve, you must draw on your own faith, realizing the privilege and grace you have been given, to be associated with people who can still feel the risk of God's future. Your service comes out of collaboration with those in need rather than out of charity or paternalism to those in need.

The Christian call to holiness is for all the membership. Inherent in every Christian baptism is the vocation to serve the interest of the Kingdom preached by Jesus. This two-fold vocation to holiness and to service - which has to characterize every Christian's life.

So we come to the poor with some humility. We attempt to collaborate with the poor, to share their vision, to have a mutual involvement in the process of understanding what is happening to them. If we come with our way of doing things, without understanding their way of doing things, then we are not simply managerially wrong but we are ultimately unChristian because we are distrusting both the good will and the experience of the poor. In the Christial1 enterprise no one of good will is the outsider or the stranger. The kinds of problems that face our world cannot be resolved by intensifying the isolation of each other. Collaboration involves learning how to work together to resolve the common problems of the human family. Collaboration also has to become an international skill or there will be no world worth saving but that perhaps is another story.

This is not to say that the poor are perfect. Those who are poor or dispossessed are not spared original sin. Chances are that some of them will be acting largely out of their own self-interest.

In the Catholic tradition we speak of "the preferential option for the poor". This is not concerned with simply how we dedicate our time and expertise to the provision of service to those in need. It is not about the grocer approach to the law of supply and demand. Rather it is about loving those we are with. Some of us can become weighed do with the concerns of social justice and so absorbed with future strategies that love of the person present to us, becomes secondary. Justice becomes cold when removed from love. When this happens, those committed to social change even in the name of those who are poor or marginalised, can be persons like business tycoons who are concerned to exercise power. They may even need to exercise power for their own purposes, even for their owl1 psychic health.

Those who try to serve without love may become burnt out - they lose their appetite for those they are helping, they develop a cynicism about the needs of the poor. When this occurs it is

time for people to take a break. It is a common experience for helpers and important they recognise it and take action before they hurt themselves or the poor. Renewal is not a once and for all phenomenon. It is a constant adaptation to changing times and needs. To not renew, is to die. But this renewal is not just good stress management but pre-eminently Christian dedication. The faith that promotes justice urges us to engage in corporate reflection about what really helps people attain enduring peace and love.

There are many stages of development in caring for others and in a concern to bring about a just world. Initially we may feel compassion and seek contact with those who are suffering. We may want to take action to help them. So we reach out in kindness - a gesture that, at worst, may make people in need, victims of our good will. We may even take up their plight as our special cause. Others are likely to affirm us in this behaviour by the interest they take in what we say and do. However their attention, like ours, remains narrowly focussed, and the needy remain needy.

The next stage is connected with our feelings of indignation about the plight of the needy. This can be a time of emotional crying out for others. We begil1 to allow the pain of the person or the injustice of the situation to touch us. These encounters lead US to question our lifestyle. We get angry that these things are allowed to happen. We are angry that others are so malicious or insensitive. We are angry that those who suffered most were often unable to handle the pain or injustice. We are angry that we did not do more. We are angry at governments or the Church for allowing this to occur. We may become angry at God - why is God passive amidst this suffering?

These feelings are often channeled into sheer hard work. Our commitment and dedication is impressive but we may not allow space to care for ourselves and replenish our resources. We may get tired and make harsh judgements about others including those for whom we care. This can lead to doubt about ourselves because we seem no longer to be caring for those with whom we have set out to share our life.

The stage beyond indignation is when we discover the gift of the other. We are impressed by the strength of the person suffering. We marvel at the resilience of the human spirit. We are humbled at how suffering people put us in touch with values that liberate. They become God's chosen instruments for transforming our world. They show us the way forward to save ourselves from the madness of the world. We realize that they are helping us, rather than we helping them. They become our heroes. What they say becomes magical. At this stage we are romanticizing the poor.

In time however, we come to experience solidarity. We realize that needy people are as human and as flawed as anyone. We see them as all are to be seen - with gifts and failures. We feel solidarity with the human family. At this stage we are invited into a long struggle. We begin to love all just as they are, and as well as we can. We love people with all the dignity they have, with all the dignity we have. At times this leads to a deep bonding. No longer do we need to accuse or condemn: rather we learn to encourage and understand both the oppressor and the oppressed. We discover we are all both crucified and crucifier. There may be room for shame here but never guilt. This long struggle continues and often involves a struggle with reality - the reality of ourselves and of the world. We are confronted by our rigidity and indecisiveness. A way forward may be to surrender to the ambiguity. Loyalty to

this struggle draws into an alliance with the poor so that we no longer align ourselves with the oppressor but begin to withdraw from instruments of power. Yet power itself can become an idol - even in our efforts to withdraw from it. Our key focus should not be on instruments of power but on our love of the poor.

At different times we find ourselves caught in a struggle for ultimate answers "Who am 1? What am I here for? Where am I going? Who is `with me?" The content of each person's struggle is different but the process is similar. The suffering person simply has more raw material. In this search for answers we try to return to what gives us life - the experience of love. The God who calls us from the point we are, becomes an anchor. We encounter a God who has plans for us - plans of hope, not of harm. We look to a God who has dreams for us - dreams for a future.

Finally, as in any relationship we come in open hearted and open handed dependence. In the words of another, "When power meets power there you find people wrestling for control. When power meets vulnerability, there you have alienation. When vulnerability meets vulnerability, there you find intimacy". Our patience, our listening to each person happens because we think each person is important. We respect their dignity. This patience, this listening, tells us and other people about the way we are with God. The people we serve will be important in our eyes. We show we think they are important because we are patient and we are listening with them. Our life sheds light on the lives of those we serve - mainly it's about how important we and they are as companions of each other and as companions of God.