

“Our good will and honest efforts.”¹

Vincentian Perspectives on Poverty Reduction Efforts

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Introduction

If you were to have asked Saint Vincent de Paul what motivated him to serve those in need with such tireless devotion, he would have replied without a moment’s hesitation that his sole motivation was his desire to imitate Jesus Christ in doing God’s will in all things, at all times, in all places, and towards all people. “May His Will be done always in us, and in all that concerns us.”²

Vincent de Paul believed God revealed that it was His will, and thus the standard and obligation of justice, that every poor person whom you providentially encountered was first to be recognized and embraced as being a brother or sister in Christ, and then served as Christ himself would have served them with an abiding love, respect, and efficacy.³

¹ *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Etienne Blatiron, Superior, in Genoa, 21 June 1647, in Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-10, 13a & 13b (New York: New City Press, 1997), 3:206. Hereinafter cited as CCD. The French edition, 15 vols., will hereinafter be cited as CED.*

² *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Pierre Cabel, Superior, in Sedan, 2 October 1658, CCD, 3:206.*

³ For a discussion of Vincent de Paul’s distinctive Christological vision see, Robert P. Maloney, C.M., “The Christ of Vincent de Paul,” in *The Way of Vincent de Paul: A Contemporary Spirituality in Service of the Poor* (New York: New City Press, 1992), 19-36. Hereinafter cited as *Way of Vincent*.

Everywhere that Vincent turned in the crowded streets of Paris, or in the rural countryside, he saw unprecedented numbers of people who were suffering from the effects of multiple and interlinked forms of poverty. He ‘saw’ these people because he was looking for them with a keen, if not preferential, eye. We cannot take this ‘seeing’ of Vincent for granted, for it was a defining act of personal holiness emerging from a profound conversion experience.⁴

Everyone in his society could have looked around and ‘seen’ people who were poor in the same way that Vincent ‘saw’ them; but not everyone did. Very often people in Vincent’s age – and indeed the government itself – unjustly treated poor people at best as problems, and at worst as threats to the peace and stability of the state.⁵

Vincent also observed that Christ’s service was always impelled by a sense of urgency that reflected the urgency of observable human need, as measured by the scope of observable human suffering, moving a human heart to action out of the selfless love that is authentic charity.⁶

⁴ Contemporary Vincentian scholarship makes it very difficult to hold to traditional Vincentian mythology about Vincent’s service to the poor emerging from a vow made to God as a result of his alleged, “Temptation against Faith.” See, Stafford Poole, C.M., and Douglas Slawson, “A New Look At An Old Temptation: Saint Vincent de Paul’s Temptation against Faith and Resolution to Serve the Poor,” *Vincentian Heritage* 11:2 (1990): 125-42.

⁵ Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Ph.D., “‘Caritas Christi Urget Nos’: The Urgent Challenges of Charity in Seventeenth Century France,” *Vincentian Heritage* 12:2 (1991): 85-104.

⁶ See, for example, the *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Antoine Fleury, in Saintes*, 6 November 1658, *CCD*, 7:356.

Oh! What a happiness for you to work at doing what He did! He came to bring the good news to the poor, and that is your lot and your occupation, too. If perfection lies in charity, as is certain, there is none greater than to give oneself for them as Jesus Christ did. This is what you are called to do, Monsieur, and you are ready to respond to it, thank God.

It is not by mere coincidence that Louise de Marillac chose the motto “Caritas Christi Urget Nos,” with the editorial addition of “the charity of Jesus Christ *crucified* urges us” to guide the efforts of the Daughters of Charity.⁷

What does God ask of us?

Vincent believed that God never required any response from us that (with the assistance of his grace) was “unreasonable.”⁸ In fact Vincent was very specific about what he believed God did require of us in general, and specifically with regards to our poverty reduction efforts, “our good will and honest efforts.”⁹

Vincent once noted that “God asks first for your heart, and only then for your work.”¹⁰ What he meant by this was the insight – based on his own experience – that a person could consistently perform Christ-like actions only after first freely accepting the gift of faith and desiring to conform oneself into being Christ-like, in this case like Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor.¹¹

Vincent famously observed that a core set of five virtues, or values, needed to be personally and corporately appropriated – through one’s best efforts – by anyone who wished to

⁷ See, Kathryn B. LaFleur, S.P., *Louise de Marillac, A Light in the Darkness. A Woman of Yesteryear; A Saint and Model for Today* (New York: New City Press, 1996), 148.

⁸ *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Jacques Pesnelle, Superior, in Genoa*, 13 August 1660, *CCD*, 8:442.

⁹ *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Etienne Blatiron, Superior, in Genoa*, 21 June 1647, *Ibid.*, 3:206.

¹⁰ *Conference of Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, “On the end of the Company,” 10 October 1650, *Ibid.*, 10:108.

¹¹ *Way of Vincent*, 22-23.

serve like Christ.¹² In the past I have referred to these traditional Vincentian “virtues” or values as the Vincentian “transcendental imperatives”: be humble, be meek, be mortified, be zealous, and be simple. However, I prefer to use what I consider to be their more compelling contemporary translations: be realistic, be approachable, be self-disciplined, be hard-working, and be honest.¹³

In order to serve as Christ served, we must be honest – which means we must fearlessly seek the truth wherever it is to be found, recognize the truth when we find it, witness to the truth by our words, and live the truth to the best of our ability by our actions as they relate to our own selves, our neighbors, our world, and our God.

Vincent testified that “simplicity” – or as I have translated it, “honesty” – was the virtue that he valued most. He went so far as to describe it as his “gospel.”¹⁴ The transparent strength of this value, in the end, determines the relative strength and effectiveness of the other values.

To serve as Christ served, we must be approachable – which means we must make ourselves personally available in relationships that are authentic and thus inviting, inclusive, accepting, and loving.

To serve as Christ served, we must be self-disciplined – which means we must be absolutely clear about what we believe, what we value, and what are the priorities in our lives.

¹² For a discussion of the “Five Characteristic Virtues,” see *Ibid.*, 37-69.

¹³ For a discussion of the contemporary translation of Vincentian values, see Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Ph.D., *Vincent’s Values: A Spiritual Perspective*, podcast of 21 November 2006, <http://mission.depaul.edu/podcast/podcastarchive.asp> (Chicago: DePaul University, Office of Mission and Values, 2006).

¹⁴ *Conference of Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, “The Spirit of the Company,” 24 February 1653, *CCD*, 9:476.

We must then impose upon ourselves the self-discipline that will enable us to live these values in a integrated and effective manner.

To serve as Christ served, we must be realistic – which means we must always creatively balance the inherent tensions between pessimism and optimism knowing full well what we and other human beings are capable of, and not capable, and gratefully relying on God’s grace and providence as the sustaining force of our lives, and indeed of all salvation history.

To serve as Christ served, we must be hard working. There is always much to be done in the Kingdom of God, and what remains to be done is not easily accomplished without laboring “with the strength of our arms, and the sweat of our brows.”¹⁵

“What must be done?”

Vincent’s own vocation, and thus the Vincentian age, dawned with a simple but haunting question. In January 1617, Madame de Gondi turned to her faithful chaplain Vincent de Paul and asked the question, “What must be done?”¹⁶ What she meant by this question was: What must be done about the deplorable conditions you and I have witnessed, and which we know are at odds with the good news of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus Christ? What must I do? What must you do? What must we do? The “must” found at the heart of this question makes the question, and its answer, a call to action and a matter of unavoidable responsibility and conscience.¹⁷

¹⁵ Vincent de Paul, undated fragment of a conference entitled, “Sur l’amour de Dieu,” *CED*, 11:41.

¹⁶ Vincent de Paul, undated fragment of a conference, “Sur la vocation de missionnaire,” *Ibid.*, 11:1.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the “Vincentian Question,” see, Edward R. Udovic, C.M., *The Vincentian Question*, podcast of 23 April 2007, <http://mission.depaul.edu/podcast/podcastarchive.asp> (Chicago: DePaul University, Office of Mission and Values, 2007).

We have already seen that for Vincent de Paul, what “must” be done at any given point in salvation history is always God’s will, and God’s revealed will is that people in need must always be recognized, respected, and well-served. The conjunction of a personal faith commitment to do God’s sovereign will as described above, and a personal recognition of the existential opportunities, with God’s grace, to fulfill this commitment, explains Vincent’s insistence on discerning and following the dictates of divine providence rather than the dangerous alternative of trusting in one’s own, or society’s, standards of self-sufficient judgment and action.¹⁸

The prayerful discernment that is necessary to guide Vincentian service seeks to discern God’s providential will revealed in the people, places, and events that surround us. In answering the question “What must be done?” Vincentian discernment first seeks to determine what could

¹⁸ See, for example, the *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Bernard Codoing, Superior, in Rome*, 16 March 1644, *CCD*, 2:499:

Grace has its moments. Let us abandon ourselves to the Providence of God and be on our guard against anticipating it. If Our Lord is pleased to give me any consolation in our vocation, it is this:

I think it seems to me that we have tried to follow Divine Providence in all things and to put our feet only in the place It has marked out for us.

See also, the *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Guillaume Desdames, Superior, in Warsaw*, 25 April 1659, *Ibid.*, 7:531.

God’s works are not governed according to our views and wishes... The spirit of the world is restless and tries to do everything. Let us leave it as it is. We do not want to choose our own ways but to walk in those it will please God to set down for us... He wants nothing more. If He desires results, they are His and not ours. Let us open wide our hearts and wills in His presence, not deciding to do this or that until God has spoken.

be done, leading to a judgment about what should be done, leading to a decision about what must be done, leading finally to action.¹⁹ Guiding this discernment is a commitment in the end to carefully choose a course of action that is within our power²⁰ and has the highest chances of success, given what is at stake.²¹

Vincentian poverty reduction efforts

For Vincent, the first moral obligation we have towards those in need is to organize and provide the triage services required to feed the hungry, house the homeless, rescue abandoned infants, provide health care for the abandoned sick, and provide needed spiritual consolation and healing to accompany proffered physical and material consolations.

Vincent realized that the sheer numbers of people in need of triage services warranted a response that had to be institutionalized to endure. These institutionalized responses required resources, organization, rules, planning, assessment, and trained personnel. Vincent's brilliance as an organizer and as a manager of people and resources is demonstrated through his groundbreaking institutionalization of charity.²²

¹⁹ See undated *Letter of Vincent de Paul to a priest of the Mission, Ibid.*, 5:462. "All that remains now is for you to make a firm resolution and put your hand seriously to the work."

²⁰ See *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Anne-Marguerite Guerin, Superior of the Second Visitation Monastery in Paris*, 20 July 1659, *Ibid.*, 8:47.

²¹ For Vincent de Paul, the material and spiritual consolations given to people who were poor were in the end a matter of life and death. See, for example, his comment in an extract from a *Conference*, "Sur La Mission Donnée à Folleville: En 1617," *CED*, 11:4.

²² For the genius of Vincent de Paul's institutionalization of charity see, for example, the numerous examples in the two volumes of documents in *CCD*, 13a and 13b.

The need for service to be efficacious is expressed in Vincent's quotation, "On your part, do purely and simply whatever depends on you to make things go well."²³ This efficacy demands a careful balancing of humanism and professionalism in one's service in which neither goal is ever achieved at the expense of the other – which is to say at the expense of the people being served.

From this perspective, each act of charity rendered under these triage conditions is a morally necessary and endlessly repeatable act of poverty reduction, albeit a short-term or even momentary one. These types of triage services, whether rendered to a single individual or countless thousands, are always the beginning point of Vincentian service and the touchstone of Vincentian poverty reduction efforts, but they must and do lead elsewhere.

As Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, and those first-generation members of the Confraternities of Charity, Ladies of Charity, Congregation of the Mission, and Daughters of Charity organized to provide the services described above at the scale they were needed, they all understood the underlying political, economic, social, religious, cultural, and personal factors that combined to create the poverty, and the scale of poverty, that afflicted those who stood before them and countless others yet uncounted and unseen.

In our own post-modern information age, in the midst of the growth of globalism, environmental change, and the terrifying threat of terrorism in all its forms, contemporary Vincentian poverty reduction efforts require an ongoing study of how this age is creating and supporting traditional and new forms of poverty, as well as a knowledge of exactly who is paying its increasingly high and deadly price, and how, where, and why that price is being paid around the world.

²³ *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Jacques Pesnelle, Superior, in Genoa, 13 June 1659, CCD, 7:612.*

An understanding of the ways in which poverty is created and sustained is the key to developing ‘ingenious’ or ‘inventive’ proposals to achieve its avoidance or reduction.²⁴ There is an obvious and important role to be played today by Vincentian colleges and universities.²⁵

Whether in the seventeenth or twenty-first centuries, Vincentians have understood that some form of organized local, national, and international political advocacy for specific systemic poverty reduction efforts has to be incorporated into their efforts. Vincentians also understand that in the absence of these efforts, there is little hope of stemming an inevitable and exponential increase in the number of people who are poor, the depth of their poverty, and thus the depth of their suffering.²⁶

Utopia vs. the Kingdom of God

On this basis, Vincentian poverty reduction efforts in any age can never be aimed at achieving some socioeconomic, geopolitical, or ideologically based model of a just and perfect

²⁴ *Letter of Vincent de Paul to René Almérás, Superior, in Rome, 3 January 1651, CCD, 4:139.* See also, Vincent de Paul, “Exhortation A Un Frère Mourant,” *CED*, 11:146.

²⁵ See, Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M., and Edward R. Udovic, C.M., *The Vincentian Higher Education Apostolate in the United States* (Chicago: DePaul University, 2003), 6.

²⁶ Maloney, *Way of Vincent*, 24; has noted:

While Vincent was very aware of the need to meet the social problems of his day with structured, institutionalized solutions (e.g., through the societies he founded), he was, nonetheless, like most of his contemporaries largely unaware of what today we might call ‘sinful social structures.’ For the most part he accepted the existing political and social order as it was..... Still, within that context, he saw the need for political action as he addressed the needs of the poor and used his influence in court and on the Council of Conscience to that end.

society. The tragic and bloody fates of these misconceived utopian dreams litter the pages of human history.

Rather, Vincentian poverty reduction efforts are zealous, grace-assisted, intelligent, loving, pragmatic, ongoing, reasonable attempts to live in the kingdom of God that exists here and now within the ultimate mystery of the ‘already but not yet.’ In this kingdom where God’s will is sovereign, we are called to formulate and pursue strategic efforts of triaged and systemic poverty reduction that push and pull us and our world out of any complacent acceptance of an unjust and sinful status quo imposed upon our brothers and sisters who are poor. Vincentian efforts framed in this way²⁷ do lead “gradually and almost imperceptibly” to their goal: the measurable reduction or containment of poverty in our world.²⁸

Prayer and Vincentian poverty reduction efforts

The activist nature of Vincentian poverty reduction efforts belies the nature of these efforts as Vincentian prayer.²⁹ Since, according to Vincent, our efforts “must be firm in the end

²⁷ See, for example, the *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Louis Rivet, Superior, in Saintes*, 17 September 1656, *CCD*, 6:97.

As for the rest, Monsieur, regardless of its sources, and no matter what may happen, do not allow yourself to be upset, but, disregarding all that, remain at peace. You will suffer no harm from it, if God does not will it; and if He does, it will be for the good, for to those who serve Him all things work together for good.

²⁸ *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Bernard Codoing, Superior, in Annecy*, 9 February 1642, *Ibid.*, 2:255.

²⁹ As Rev. Maloney notes: “Vincent is utterly convinced of the importance of the union of action and contemplation that he sees in Christ. He tells his followers that vocational stability and the ongoing vitality of their works depends on prayer. See, *Way of Vincent*, 32.

and gentle in the means” and be guided by a faith-filled and grace-assisted discernment, they do shape a unique form of Vincentian prayer expressing confidence and trust in God’s providence.³⁰

This is not to say that all Vincentian prayer is expressed in action. We do have the words of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac that guide and inspire us still. We also have the words that capture the memory, and history, of past Vincentian efforts across four centuries. Words are sometimes inadequate as prayer, but sometimes they are more than adequate.

One such prayer, filled with words that reflect the Vincentian faith and experience of poverty reduction efforts, was written not by Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, or anyone who consciously identified themselves by the adjective “Vincentian.” Rather they are words composed by the late Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, and offered as “a prayer remembering Archbishop Oscar Romero.”³¹ They are words that, whatever their original context or purpose, prayerfully remind us of the faith that underlies the contemporary Vincentian question, “What must be done to reduce poverty in our world?” as well as its answer.

³⁰ *Letter of Vincent de Paul to Pierre Cabel, Superior, in Sedan, 17 November 1657, Op Cit., 6:623.*

³¹ “Oscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, in El Salvador, was assassinated, 24 March 1980, while celebrating Mass in the chapel of a cancer hospital where he lived. He had always been close to his people, preached a prophetic gospel, denouncing the injustice in his country and supporting the development of popular and mass organizations. He became the voice of the Salvadoran people when all other channels of expression had been crushed by repression. The following prayer was composed by Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw (Michigan), drafted for a homily by Cardinal John Dearden in November 1979 for a celebration of departed priests. As a reflection on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Bishop Romero, Bishop Untener included in a reflection book a passage titled ‘The mystery of the Romero Prayer.’ The mystery is that the words of the prayer are attributed to Oscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him.” See, http://www.xaviermissionaries.org/m_Life/NL_Archives/2003_Lett/Romero_Prayer.htm

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing that we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No program accomplishes the church's mission.

No set of strategic goals and objectives includes everything.

That is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces the effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,

an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference

between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen.