

Christ's universal call to build a civilization of love is inherent in the mission of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Day by day, person by person, Vincentians seek to bring that magnificent concept closer to reality.

The Rule of the Society, the document which guides our work, reflects the dream of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, to establish a network of charity and social justice encircling the world: "Affirming the dignity of each human being as created in God's image, and Jesus' particular identification with those who are excluded by society, Vincentians envision a more just society in which the rights, responsibilities and development of all people are promoted."

Frederic learned about the needs of the poor from visiting in their homes and assisting them, much as Vincentians do today. His vision for those who would follow him was that they would share what they learned, and through that sharing open the eyes, minds and hearts of others.

Vincentians know that one of the major reasons people become poor in this country is divorce – usually a woman raising children on her own, trying to make it but unable to do so. We know that most of the poor in America are women and children. We know, because we see firsthand, the myriad life situations which trap and overwhelm the poor. We know there is a new type of poverty in this country where people work full-time jobs and still cannot afford housing, food and health care all at the same time, and so must choose. Above all, we simply know that if we help, lives are changed for the better, including our own. Happily, there are no quotas for caring and compassion.

We also know that the poor are human beings, with hopes and dreams, difficulties and challenges. They all have stories to tell if someone is willing to listen. Vincentians are good listeners and we do not judge. And we know what our patron, St. Vincent de Paul, and Blessed Frederic Ozanam knew: If you look through the eyes of faith, you can see the image of God in them.

Frederic told his fellow Vincentians they should fall at the feet of the poor and say, “You are for us the sacred images of that God whom we do not see, and not knowing how to love Him otherwise, shall we not love Him in your persons?” Seeing Christ in the poor is the essence of Vincentian spirituality.

And while feeding, clothing, housing and helping the poor with other needs, we seek more permanent solutions so that they can help themselves – exactly what our founder had in mind.

Vincent and Frederic asked their followers to join them in an alternative world, one where the poor are the masters and we are their servants. It is a particular view of the world to which Jesus invites us, a world where the last are first and the first are last. It is a world which, in some ways, is upside down, where values which have great importance to many – wealth, power, popularity – occupy a very different position.

Enriching our souls and our hearts through loving and serving the poor is what St. Vincent and Blessed Frederic were all about. The blessing of God – seeing Christ in them – that comes to us from those we serve makes all the difference in my life. And I like to think that the smiles on their faces when they see our love for them are accompanied by a smile on the face of Jesus Christ himself. I cannot imagine a happier thought – or a more motivating one.

The vision of a civilization of love no doubt strikes some as fanciful or far-fetched. I beg to differ. Because I do know this: Every day many loving, caring people – of all faiths and from all walks of life – are doing many wonderful things to help those in need and, not incidentally, help move us closer to that noble goal. And Jesus Christ, Who is love, is cheering us on and clearing our path.

After all, where there is a Divine Will, there is always a way.

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