

SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW

An Interview with Fr. Wolfgang Pucher, C.M.

Member of Province of Austria



John T. Maher, C.M.,
with Wolfgang Pucher, C.M.

Editor's Note

Father Wolfgang Pucher, C.M., Province of Austria, has graciously agreed to be interviewed for *Vincentiana*. Well-known in Austria for his advocacy and service to the poor, Fr. Wolfgang is seventy-five years old. He was received into the Congregation in 1958 and ordained in 1963, and has served in both Austria and Istanbul. For twenty-three years, he has been the founder and guiding force behind “Vinzi-Werke”, an organization providing a variety of services to the poor, specifically the homeless and mentally ill, groups often neglected. From a small start, “Vinzi-Works” has grown to a multi-service agency, with outreach in Graz, Vienna, and Salzburg. Like St. Vincent, Fr. Wolfgang found himself drawn into service to the poor by the events of the day, including an experience of the poor, and pleas from those wishing to help them. His journey in coming to a deeper awareness of living the Vincentian charism and helping other to do the same is an inspiring and instructive one.

Can you speak about your early life and how you came to the Congregation?

Well sure. I was born here in Graz (Austria) as the oldest of three children. My family was very poor. I was born during and grew up with World War II, a time of much suffering. We lived in a house with no

electricity or indoor plumbing. My mother raised us, and she did all kinds of work to make ends meet. However, we were very poor, to the point where she would send us into the forest to get food. Once a week, we got a 'sweet treat', usually a piece of fruit. What I noticed from an early age was that as poor as we were, when a beggar came to our door, my mother always found something to share, whether it was an apple or a piece of bread. She never turned anyone away. That made a deep impression on me, and it has always stayed with me. I think her virtuous generosity was what first inspired me to put the needs of others before mine.

When I was ten years old, my mother asked me what I thought I wanted to be when I grew up, and I said, "A carpenter". I liked the idea of working with my hands and making things people could use. But my mother said, "You can do better", so I thought for a while. I enjoyed being an altar boy, so I decided to enter the diocesan minor seminary. It was a disaster! I think I was their worst student ever! I was probably too young. There were over 300 of us in this place. After I flunked out, I sat in the parish church crying. An older priest came over to ask me what was wrong. I told him what had happened, and he said, "Why don't you try the Apostolic School run by the Lazarists over at their parish?". So I did. I struggled. My ability to memorize has never been good, but I was able to graduate. Eventually, I was received into the novitiate. So it was through this kindly diocesan parish priest that I came to the Congregation!

What was your seminary formation years like?

Well, I actually enjoyed my novitiate, strange as it might sound. It was there that I first really got acquainted with St. Vincent and our charism. I was confused at first, as I could not figure out the difference between Lazarists and diocesan priests. But when I read the third volume in a series on religion, "The Coming of Mysticism" by Henri Bremond, I saw what he wrote about St. Vincent. It had an enormous effect on me. (*Ed. Note: The actual title of the series is A Literary History of Religious Thought in France. Fr. Wolfgang still has a well-worn copy of the book in his possession.*) It was life changing, because it gave me the philosophical and intellectual knowledge I needed to understand and embrace our charism. Henri Bremond was truly my first teacher in understanding St. Vincent de Paul. Fifty-five years later, I still refer to this book. Even today, I think all our seminarians in formation should study this work. After novitiate, I completed my seminary training and took final vows. On July 7, 1963, I was ordained a Vincentian priest. Overall, my seminary formation was traditional, very typical of that era.



As you were ordained in the time of Vatican II, what were your first assignments like?

Well, it was quite an exciting time, as the Council was in full swing. When I was ordained, Pope John XXIII had just died and Paul VI was newly elected, so there was much anticipation about what the Council would do. My first assignment was in Graz at the parish located near the Apostolic School where I had started by journey to the Congregation. It was a very joy-filled time, perhaps one of my happiest times ever. The confreres worked together, and we had a great group of young people who truly wanted to serve. I was able to do activities with them, and we had over 300 young people involved in the parish.

In 1969, I went to St. George, our school in Istanbul, where I remained for four years. It was truly a life-changing experience. I had never really lived outside my country or language group, and there I was in Istanbul, in the minority in my faith, language, and culture. However, what also struck me was that it was the first time I really experienced other Christian groups outside of Catholicism, which is the prevalent faith in Austria. I learned about Greek Orthodox and the Protestant faiths, and had the opportunity to expand my horizons. However, it was a different world from the one I had known. Outside the walls of St. George's, there was a much poverty and misery in Istanbul. I recall there were over 10,000 homeless people, and this was in the early 1970's before there was a homeless crisis. It was quite an eye-opening time in my life. One of the German confreres there said it best, "One year in Istanbul is like two years in Germany!"

From these experiences, how did you become involved so deeply in service to the poor?

It was very simple. In 1973, I returned to Austria to the parish in Graz (Eggenberg), in an area of growing poverty. Whole sections of the parish were quite poor. In fact, an area of two streets in a slum developed such a bad reputation that if you mentioned the name of the street, people just shook their heads and walked away. Many in the parish shunned the people who lived there. Therefore, one Sunday I got up in the pulpit, held up a map of the area, and said, "When I get to heaven, I will ask God the Father why this street was so named. Then I will ask if it was his eternal plan that those who just happen to live there should be so discriminated against".

Four families came forward and offered to help, so we went to the mayor and town council to ask that the street name be abolished and that it be given a new name. It took time, but we got it done. Some parishioners actually objected, saying that if this street was no longer so named, it would be harder to tell which people were from there. I said, "That's the idea!". I don't think they liked my response, but too bad. I also decided that since the parish had a tradition every Christmas of doing an outdoor Nativity play (with live animals, etc.), that year, we would move it to the "newly named" slum section that everyone avoided. There was quite an uproar from some in the parish. I told them "Christ is not only present in this beautiful Church; he also lives in this community. And if he were to be born in Austria today, I have no doubt this is where Mary and Joseph would probably have ended up!" And you know something? It is forty years after all this started, and that parish living Nativity play is still held there every year!

How did you get into your current apostolate "Vinzi-Werke" and how did it develop?

Like many things in life, it was an accidental start. I wanted to expand the St. Vincent de Paul Society in the parish by inviting in some young people to join. The parish had traditional devotional and parish organizations, but no new ideas or practices. When I tried to bring youth into the Society, the older members balked. Then, the younger ones told me they didn't to be part of a group of "old men giving old people old clothes". It was a little harsh, but that was the right description! So I gathered a group of these young people and I started a "junior conference" of the Society in the parish. That kept everyone happy! We decided upon two initial types of service to the poor: visiting prisoners in the local jail, and helping the homeless population in Graz. When we discovered that the homeless could not get any food in the evening, we decided to provide them with an evening meal.

They were spread out all over Graz, so a family of a group member gave us the use of an old van. We called it the “Filling Station of Human Warmth” and traveled around, giving food. Twenty- three years later, our first “Vinzi-Bus” is still going!

In 1991, after the break-up of Yugoslavia occurred, civil wars broke out in various countries, and Graz was crowded with refugees from Bosnia. It started with deserting Bosnian soldiers who camped at the local train station, and soon others arrived. As they were from countries not fully established, and refused to recognize one another’s sovereignty, these people were stuck in Graz. The Austrian government and the city government of Graz didn’t want them there, but there was no place to send them. So the homeless population increased dramatically in a short time. The young people in our St. Vincent de Paul junior conference told me, “You have to do something to help them!”. I saw how limited our parish funds and resources were, and said, “I don’t know what, if anything I can do”. But they came back at me and said, “You have to do something!”.

So I went out, bought nine large tents, and pitched them on our parish soccer field. We invited refugees to come, and fed and housed them temporarily. Parishioners helped with their care. More refugees came, and we were inundated with so many people desperately in need of food, shelter, and medical care. We were constantly over capacity. Other people in the parish were annoyed at this ‘refugee situation’, and made their feelings known, to the refugees and to me. The head of the parish SVDP Society quit in protest. Then real problems began. The tents were vandalized when people slept, electric generators were broken, and nasty graffiti was scrawled at the site. Local merchants put signs in their store windows: “No Tent People Allowed”. Parishioners wrote the Visitor and Bishop to complain of the refugees. One letter I saw held a most interesting comment: “Fr. Pucher is destroying the pastoral work of this parish!”.

So this was how “Viki-Works’ began, in the midst of all this conflict?

Yes, I guess you could say so. We persevered. I spoke to my Visitor and to the Bishop. The Mayor of Graz was supportive. I went to the shops with ‘non-welcome’ signs in their windows and said, “If you exclude these, the least of my brothers, you exclude me, and I will never return”. One Sunday at Mass I spoke about all that had happened, and how divided the parish had become over our “tent city”. I asked them point-blank, “Are you for or against me?”. I received the biggest ovation in that church that day that I have ever gotten. It was truly amazing. I told them “If you are ready to risk, you can accomplish great things...”. Gradually people saw this situation for what it was: a chance to serve those most in need, Christ in our midst.

As the number of refugees and homeless people continued to grow, so too did the need to help them and provide basic services. We already had the “Vinzi-Bus” to feed the homeless. Now we began to establish other ways to assist them, by providing basic services to lift them out of poverty and to assist those unable to do so. In time, the number of “Tent City” people began to diminish. Some integrated into the community; some relocated, and some even returned to their native lands after the fighting ended. Still, there were so many poor! Graz is the second largest city in Austria, so we had more than our share of people in need. I decided to use our name to promote these works as an extension of the Vincentian charism. Besides “Vinzi-Bus”, we had “Vinci-Med” to provide health care; “Vinzi-Haus” a shelter, “Vinzi-Nest” a place to protect abused women; “Vinzi-Help” a day-care center; “Vinzi-Shop” a low-cost clothing store; “Vinzi-Market”, a food store with fresh produce and good prices; “Vinzi-Dorf”, a small community setting for homeless people with mental health problems; and other services as well. All were designed to assist the poor and provide care consistent with our charism. Many of the volunteers and donors were outside the parish, nor even Catholic. Yet, they found in the Vincentian charism a profound way to serve the poor in their midst, and to make a difference in the lives of people.

What is the current situation of “Vinzi-Works” today?

Well, as I said, we grew due to the Providence of God and help from so many fine people. Today, we have twelve places in Graz providing the services I just mentioned: food, lodging, medical treatment, respite care, and so forth. We have expanded into Vienna, where we have four active “Vinzi-Work” sites, and to Salzburg, where we opened a new site. In 2012, we were awarded a significant grant by the European Union (1 million Euro) to provide sustainable housing for the homeless in Salzburg. These funds are a great help, but they only serve to remind us we have so much more to do. Overall, “Vinzi-Werke” has over 400 volunteers and 15 on staff.

From your rich, intense life of service to the poor in the Vincentian charism, what advice would you give your confreres who wish to serve the poor?

I guess you have to end this by asking me that type of question, don’t you? (He sighs). You know, there is one thing I didn’t mention, but I have to say. I learned when you serve the poor, you have to be sure to take into account their feelings and opinions, even when you don’t want to, or if it complicates matters. When I spoke earlier about how we changed the name of the slum street near the parish, some of the opposition came from the people living there. I was surprised, because I

thought I was helping them. But one family said, “Well, why didn’t you as us first?”. From this, I learned that in working with a poor person, you must first ask them what they need. Don’t presume. Maybe that is why Vincent told us to consider the poor “our Lords and Masters.”

Another thing I learned is that it takes the mind and heart of a mystic (like St. Vincent) to truly see and love the poor as those who reveal Christ to us. St. Vincent told us, “If you go to the poor, you meet God. If you go to the hospital bed or prison chamber, you meet God”. It takes the mind of a mystic to believe and live that, and Vincent was truly a “mystic of charity” as Henri Bremond wrote almost a century ago. As I reflect on St. Vincent’s life, I believe he was one of the first people to break down the barriers between the people and institutions of his day. Rich and poor, royalty and ragged poor, clergy and laity-Vincent found ways to bring them together in Christ for the common good. I always say to my people, “It is not important, nor even possible to have a perfect life. What is truly important is that you meet Christ everywhere. And to do this, you must devote yourself to achieving oneness with Christ in the poor. The test of all Christian discipleship is contained in the simple section of Matthew 25:40: “*Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me*”.

To learn more about “Vinzi-Works”, go to: <http://www.vinzi.at/>



When the city of Graz tried to ban beggars from all city streets, Fr. Wolfgang became a beggar himself to remind the city officials that problems of poverty and homelessness do not go away by making the poor invisible to the public.