

A Passion for Justice¹

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Superior General

God is passionate about justice. Sound surprising? Well, look no farther than the prophet Micah 6:8. Here is a text that speaks for the heart of God. In Micah 6:1-7, we find a scene where God puts Israel on trial for forgetting the divine liberation from slavery in Egypt (6:4), and for forgetting what such liberation requires of God's people. Like many of us, I suppose, Israel tries to plea-bargain. Can they buy off "the Prosecutor" by increasing their sacrificial offerings? Maybe God could be persuaded to look the other way if they sacrifice a better quality of calf or ram. Israel even offers God the unspeakable — its own firstborn.

In response, God addresses Israel and all humankind as well: "This is what God asks of you, only this: that you act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with your God" (6:8).

Note that these are not three separate commands. They are a unity. A right relationship with God requires justice, love, and faith. Or, to sum it up in another way, God expects from us faith that does justice with love. Nothing else will do.

The person of Jesus shows us just how passionate God is about justice. In a foundational text from St. Luke's gospel (4:16-21), we witness Jesus on a Sabbath day in his hometown. "As was his custom," Jesus came to the synagogue for worship. Obviously a "regular" in his local faith community, Jesus was invited to read. He took the scroll of Isaiah the prophet, searched out its mighty missionary text (61:1-2) and proclaimed: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, and to proclaim God's year of favor." Then, after a dramatic pause, Jesus made the astonishing announcement: "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21).

¹ Conference pronounced by Fr. G. Gregory Gay, Superior General, in the St. John's University Convocation, Jamaica, New York, USA, 26 January 2005.

Here we have a passionate social justice text which Jesus deliberately chose to launch his work. So passionate was Jesus about justice and God's Kingdom, that he wanted the heavenly harvest to begin right here on earth, in and through him.

The importance of the Kingdom of God for Jesus is underlined by the earliest gospel, Mark. The first words from Jesus are about the Kingdom of God: "Now after John the Baptizer was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying: 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14-15).

When Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God, his hearers would have noticed an important contrast. They lived under other kingdoms, the kingdom of Herod and the kingdom of Caesar. They knew what these kingdoms were like; they suffered poverty and oppression every day under these kingdoms. What was different about what Jesus was announcing? In a sentence, Jesus was proclaiming a Kingdom that showed what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers of this world were not. God's Kingdom is about God's justice; as such, it is in stark opposition to the systemic injustice of the kingdoms and domination systems of this world.

Significantly, the Kingdom of God for Jesus was something for the earth, something for the right here and right now. Perhaps we have often lost sight of this. Maybe we have even forged a false divide between our spiritual quest for holiness and the promotion of justice. But the coming of the Kingdom of God is for this earth of ours. So it is not surprising that the Lord's Prayer we recite so often contains this petition: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." Heaven's doing fine; earth is where we have got work to do.

The Kingdom of God is what life would be like on earth if God were in charge. It is God's dream, God's passion. Jesus was so passionate about fulfilling God's dream that he lived and died for it. It is *the* dream for this earth of ours.

Down through the centuries, countless women and men have latched on to the dream. They sensed that the dream required them not only to seek the holiness of a right relationship with God, but also to pursue and promote justice with passionate hearts. They were jolted into the consciousness that more was demanded than personal honesty and private charity. They needed to participate in the struggle to change whatever it was that caused people to be hungry or homeless, oppressed or victimized, in the first place. These men and women, our heroes and heroines in the faith, could not do everything, but they did something, and did it well. Yes, and did it passionately.

Vincent de Paul, one of the saints of the Kingdom of God on earth, is an enduring model and guide for us, and not only during Founder's Week at St. John's University. His passion for justice and his preferential option for the poor still call out to us. We often think of Vincent as a man of action, and indeed he was. No poor person was invisible to him; no organizational detail on behalf of justice escaped his notice; no avenue of remedy was left unexplored. If one door was closed to him, he always seemed to find another that was open. He literally transformed the face of France in the 17th century and he continues to inspire countless imitators and friends in the Vincentian Family even today.

What sometimes escapes our notice, however, is that Vincent was as passionate about his prayer as he was about his activity. It seemed that his prayer energized his service and his service gave shape to his prayer. Although it is somewhat risky to peek into Vincent's mind, allow me to cite but one example of how Vincent might have linked his prayer to his passion for justice.

You may know that Vincent de Paul had a special devotion to the Trinity. Here is what he said in a conference on May 23, 1659: "What is it that produces unity and community in God? Is it not the equality and distinction of the Three Persons? What produces their mutual love, if not their perfect resemblance? If they did not possess mutual love, what would be lovable in them? Unanimity, therefore, exists in the blessed Trinity; what the Father wills, the Son wills; what the Holy Spirit does, the Father and the Son do; they act in the same manner; they have but one and the same power, one and the same operation. Behold then the beginning of perfection and our model."

Our own Vincentian Constitutions pick up this same theme in Article 20: "The Church finds the ultimate source of its life and action in the Trinity. The Congregation of the Mission, within the Church, does the same."

What is instructive here is that the symbol of the Trinity — for so many of us a doctrine on the sidelines, and not very well attended to — was for St. Vincent not only an object for contemplation but a warrant for social justice. For if the inner life of the Godhead is a right and loving relationship, then people made in God's image must be allowed to live in like manner with each other. And if these right and just relationships are out of sync, someone must endeavor to put these relationships right, so that God's will might be done on earth just as it is in heaven.

All of us know how challenging it is to "keep on keeping on" in a faith that does justice. It is hard not to feel overwhelmed by the sheer size and seeming intractability of the problems of social injustice. How is it possible, for example, that there are millions of Americans living below the poverty line and going hungry? Is it impossible for

us to come up with a plan to provide health insurance for all Americans? Are we owners of the earth or stewards who manage what belongs to somebody else? Is it really true that a rising tide raises all boats? How difficult is it for a superpower to be wise, gentle, and compassionate? Are we really as welcoming to immigrants as we once were? In the face of hard questions like these, there is a temptation to run for cover, to shelve away our faith and keep it utterly private. We must not do this. Faith and justice cannot, must not, be separated. And yet, it is hard to maintain this linkage, especially in our country.

After all, our American culture is dominated by an ethos of individualism. It is the air we breathe, a core cultural value. Although there is much that is good about individualism, it often leads to a way of seeing life that obscures the enormous effects of social systems on the lives of people. The notion of the “self-made person” is the coin of the realm. According to this way of thinking, we, as individuals, get what we deserve. And yet, to think that we are primarily the products of our own individual efforts is to blithely ignore the web of relationships and circumstances that deeply affect our lives. Understanding God’s passion for justice and becoming a willing partner with Jesus and Vincent in making present the Kingdom of God on earth require a different way of thinking and doing. And here is where St. John’s University comes into the picture.

Since 1870, St. John’s has consciously put higher education at the service of the poor. By educating first generation college students, many from immigrant families, by instilling in all students an affective and an effective love for those in need, by searching out the causes of poverty and advocating for justice through short and long-term solutions, St. John’s University has demonstrated that a large institution can be vigorously academic, Catholic, and Vincentian. It is a very unique, distinctive, and attractive mix. I applaud it and endorse it enthusiastically. While continuing to provide educational opportunities for the poor and to a very diverse student body, St. John’s has made education for justice, charity, service, and advocacy a hallmark of its identity and a focus for its institutional force.

What remains to be done? Two things, I think

First, the challenge to “act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God” underscores the necessity of bringing a Vincentian spirituality to bear on our passion for justice. The ability to “keep on keeping on,” even in the face of insurmountable odds, is grounded in the realization that achieving social-justice goals and building the Kingdom of God do not depend solely on our efforts. Justice is a partnership of God’s grace and human effort. Vincent’s spirituality

and life's activity must continue to fuel our own lives and our quest for holiness.

The second challenge is to engage the future with hope and a clear sense of who we are and who we want to continue to be. St. John's University is distinctly Catholic and distinctly Vincentian. Can it, will it, remain so in the future, especially with the rapid diminishment of Vincentian priests and brothers, as well as Daughters of Charity, available for this kind of apostolate? Are we effectively, as a Vincentian presence, passing on that wonderful tradition that Vincent has given us? What goals and standards are we willing to articulate together, concrete and specific enough, so that we would be able to know whether we had failed or succeeded in meeting them?

Vincentians who are not members of the Congregation of the Mission or Daughters of Charity are called to carry the mantle of St. Vincent de Paul at St. John's. Where are these Vincentians to be found? I am convinced that they are in our midst, people like those whom the University is honoring today. Are there others who have the sensitivities and the skills to foster a Catholic identity with a distinctively Vincentian flavor here at the University? I am convinced that there are, for how would it be possible that a Vincentian or Daughter of Charity could work day in and day out side-by-side with other colleagues and not have that charism of Vincent "rub off" and live within the hearts of their fellow workers? Let their presence be recognized. Let us promote together the passion of Vincent. Let us share his charism as a Family.

We are all called, my brothers and sisters, to reflect a passion for justice which comes from a passion for Jesus and a passion for Jesus' poor.

May St. Vincent de Paul inspire us and all those who come after us with this spirit and may God grace us with love so that we might be faithful to the call.