

Vincent de Paul and the Organization of Charity

“There Is Great Charity, But...”

by Thomas G. Fuechtmann, Ph.D.¹

Vincent and Organization

For those acquainted with Vincent de Paul, several images are familiar. There is Vincent holding a baby — one of the foundlings that he saved from death, or possibly from a destitute life worse than death. There is Vincent caring for the sick man, poor and alone. And Vincent as chaplain caring for the spiritual needs of the convicts condemned to row the French galleys. There is also the gently smiling Vincent in the pictures pervading the halls of DePaul University in Chicago, the university with “his name on the door,” as one of the trustees likes to say.

These images tell a truth: Vincent was responsible for an immense out-pouring of charitable care for the poor and the sick, for abandoned infants, for those people of 17th century France on the edges of society, outside the circle of concern. But the images also hide an important truth that we need to uncover to understand Vincent himself, and to grasp the relevance of his enduring mission in the 21st century.

There is no doubt that Vincent instigated, and was the inspiration for, a vast amount of charitable service. “Almost ten thousand children were rescued from certain death. Hundreds of thousands of poor people were helped.”² “In Paris, at Saint-Lazare, soup was

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² ANDRE DODIN, C.M., *Vincent de Paul and Charity: A Contemporary Portrait of His Life and Apostolic Spirit* (New York: New City Press, 1993), 47.

distributed to thousands of poor twice a day.”³ Religious evangelization organized by Vincent transformed the Catholic Church, especially through the formation of priests.

Between 1628 and 1660, thirteen or fourteen thousand ordinands attended the ordination retreats. The house of Saint-Lazare alone gave more than one thousand missions. Twenty thousand retreatants were housed at Saint-Lazare and the College des Bons-Enfants.⁴

The image is true. Vincent accomplished miracles. But he clearly did not do it alone. Anyone the least bit familiar with operational detail knows that the key to such outstanding results is organization. While Vincent clearly initiated and participated in preaching and direct charitable work, it has become apparent that he did not personally spend many hours cradling infants in his arms or serving in soup kitchens. As founder and director of major organizational enterprises, Vincent’s day was filled with the sort of activities we would — in our time — associate more with a managing director than a saintly priest. He carried on a vast correspondence (some 30,000 letters over his lifetime), chaired or participated in countless meetings, spent hours dealing with personnel issues, and managed a complex financial conglomerate supporting the work of the Vincentian organizational family.

Vincent’s biographers typically highlight one week in his life as a key episode in discovering the mission of charity to the poor. It began on Sunday, 20 August 1617. After spending six months as an itinerant preacher in the French countryside, Vincent arrived at Châtillon-les-Dombes on 1 August to serve as a small town parish priest. While vesting for Mass on Sunday morning, he was told that a family living some distance into the countryside was suffering from severe health problems and in desperate need of care. Vincent preached on the family’s need at Mass. Later that afternoon, he himself (typically practicing what he preached) set out on the road to visit the poor family. As the story goes, he discovered a veritable procession of people from the parish also on the way to provide assistance. Vincent quickly took stock of the situation: “There is great charity,” he said, “but it is badly organized.”⁵

³ *Like a Great Fire*, Edward Udovic, C.M., ed., English edition (Strasbourg: Editions du Signe, 1995), 16.

⁴ DODIN, *Vincent de Paul*, 47.

⁵ *Like a Great Fire*, 17.

Vincent's quick assessment led to an emergent organization. He identified nine women (including the châtelaine) willing to provide assistance. They agreed to take turns, one day at a time, filling in for one another's absence. This event is seen as paradigmatic: "Thus was born the Vincentian style of charity."⁶ Before the end of the year, in December 1617, the Confraternity of Charity was officially established in Châtillon, with a celebratory visit from the vicar of Laon marking the event. The incident at Châtillon laid the groundwork for the Confraternities of Charity throughout France — a network of grassroots organizational initiatives that channeled individual good will into effective service of the poor.

The Chatillon story, brief as it is, bears careful scrutiny. It is important in understanding the link between Vincent the inspiring preacher and personal caregiver, and the Vincentian family of organizations devoted to the same mission nearly four centuries later. What really happened at Chatillon, and why can it be considered as paradigmatic for Vincent's approach to the organization of charity?

I see four separate moments in the story. First is the moment of *inspiration*: Vincent's preaching identified the problem and communicated it to a larger group. Second is the moment of *response*: the outpouring of charitable activity that spontaneously set in motion the procession of aid to the poor family. Third is the moment of *assessment*: Vincent's realization that the "great charity" that suddenly materialized needed some structure in order to be more effective, and to last beyond that Sunday itself. Fourth is the moment of *organization*: Vincent taking the people's impetus to serve a step further, and creating the simple but effective organization that within weeks was patterned into the Confraternity of Charity model. That parish-based model for lay action in the service of the poor revolutionized the provision of welfare in 17th century France.

Vincent's early biographers were impressed with his "prodigious activity." According to Dodin's 20th century interpretation of Vincent (first published in French in 1960), early writers were "unable to escape the magnetic field of Vincent's ceaseless energy. Vincent's activity continued to overshadow his inferiority."⁷ With the recovery of Vincent's papers, particularly the publication of thousands of letters from his voluminous correspondence, scholarship on Vincent has focused on the man himself and the driving motivation for his

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ DODIN, *Vincent de Paul*, 50.

work.⁸ Thus Hugh O'Donnell, C.M., Dodin's English translator, was impressed with the realization that "Vincent did not have a spirituality. He had a spiritual way." According to O'Donnell, the slim Dodin volume "reveals Vincent's inferiority in relation to history, circumstances and events."⁹

In recent decades the focus on Vincent's "spiritual way" has been important, both for understanding the man himself, and for his personal contribution to Christian spirituality. But the key to understanding Vincent is always (again in the words of Dodin) that: "He reties the knot between religion and action."¹⁰ The first "precept" for understanding Vincent's spiritual way is, "Life must expand constantly through action."¹¹

The principle underlying Vincent's organizational activity — important as it is — became clearer to the English-speaking world in 2003 with the publication of the English translation of Vincent's papers dealing with the organizations he founded.¹² Volumes 13a and 13b of *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* include 725 pages of documents on organizational matters pertaining to the Congregation of the Mission, the Confraternities of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, and the Ladies of Charity. These documents are of particular interest in focusing on how Vincent's inspiring message actually became translated into organized action. In these documents, Vincent is revealed, from the viewpoint of the modern study of structure and management of nonprofit organizations, as an innovative genius. Nowhere is Vincent's practical wisdom more evident than in the study of these pages. They answer the compelling question: Why and how was Vincent so successful in producing results?

⁸ According to Dodin, this thrust in research "started from the letters and conferences of Vincent, which were first published for the general public in 1881. The definitive edition of letters, conferences and documents by Pierre Coste in 1920-1925 set off a new wave of research, writing and reflection" (Ibid.) The English translation of Vincent's papers has progressed to include volumes 1-8, along with 13a and b. *Vincent De Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Marie Poole, D.C., trans. and ed., et al., Vols. 1-8, 13a & b (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1985-2003). Hereinafter cited as CCD.

⁹ HUGH O'DONNELL, "Preface," in DODIN, *Vincent de Paul*, 7.

¹⁰ DODIN, *Vincent de Paul*, 73.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² CCD 13a and 13b.

Profile of the Charitable Organization in Vincent's Practice

In the United States, the past two decades have seen an explosion of interest in the study of nonprofit organizations. This literature is helpful as a background to reading the Vincentian documents. The student of today's nonprofit organization will quickly notice organizational themes in Vincent's practical rules that exemplify the advice of modern critics. The organizational viewpoint here is particularly informed by the writings of John Carver, who is responsible for a virtual revolution in the understanding of governance of nonprofit organizations in America.¹³ Carver's theory focuses especially on organizational features that produce *results*, those that make a difference in achieving the organization's mission. A reading of Vincentian organizational documents from this perspective helps to identify important features that explain both why Vincent was such a successful organizer in his own time, and why the organizational thrust he inspired has lasted for centuries.

What are some features in Vincent's practice that modern nonprofit organizational theory would recognize as key for success?

Modern nonprofit organization theory would recognize three features in Vincent's practice: the attention Vincent paid to the organization's foundation, mission, and structure.

1. Foundation

A major difference between an informal social group and a formal organization is a legally recognizable charter of incorporation. The founding document of the Daughters of Charity provides a good example. What began as an informal group of women dedicated to the "spiritual way" articulated and practiced by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac became a formal, corporate organization recognized in civil law through the instrument of Letters Patent from "Louis, by the grace of God king of France and Navarre" in November 1657.¹⁴ This royal charter of incorporation was approved by the French Parlement, 16 December 1658. Several features of the Letters Patent are of particular interest.

a) *Legal incorporation.* The royal document identifies the reason for formal incorporation: "It usually happens that works involving the service of God die out with those who have begun them...."¹⁵

¹³ JOHN CARVER, *Boards that Make a Difference* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); and *Reinventing Your Board* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

¹⁴ CCD 13b, 230-235.

¹⁵ CCD 13b, 232.

To assure the continuance of the organization and its service to the poor, the document notes that the King's father has already endowed the organization with revenue from a royal estate, and confirms an additional annual revenue from the profits of a Rouen coach line.¹⁶ The King authorizes and entrusts the organization to the guidance of the "dearly beloved Vincent de Paul for so long as it might please God to preserve his life, and, after him, to his successors as Superiors General." "By these letters signed in our own hand," the King "approves, confirms and authorizes the organization" so that it "may remain firm and stable, now and for the future."¹⁷

b) *Protected status.* The Letters Patent places under royal protection both the persons and the property of the organization, "very expressly prohibiting and forbidding all persons, whatever rank or position they hold, to conspire against or introduce anything that may be harmful to the Confraternity"¹⁸

c) *Property.* The Letters Patent confer the right to receive and hold property, "both movable and immovable," by donations *inter vivos* or by will because of death.¹⁹

d) *Tax-free status.* The Letters Patent confirm the tax-free status of property owned by the community. The organization is not obliged to pay us or our successors the Kings any taxes, sales, rights of repurchase, frank-fees, or new acquests; to hand over money in hand to someone appointed by the court; nor to pay any financial charges or compensation.²⁰

2. Mission

According to Carver, nothing is more important for an organization than a clear and concise mission statement, or (in his more technical language) a "global ends statement."²¹ Such a statement, preferably in one sentence, should identify the organization's purpose and how it proposes to make a difference. This sounds simple, but for many organizations (even universities) the task is deceptively difficult. The Vincentian documents provide a variety of examples of Vincent's clear thinking about mission.

¹⁶ CCD 13b, 231.

¹⁷ CCD 13b, 233.

¹⁸ CCD 13b, 234.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ CARVER, *Reinventing Your Board*, 135-156.

In Vincent's initial organization at Châtillon, the founding document clearly articulates an interconnected two-part mission:

(T)hey propose two aims, namely to assist body and soul: the body by nourishing it and tending to its ailments, the soul by preparing those who seem to be tending toward death to die well, and preparing those who will recover to live a good life.²²

In this first organizational effort, Vincent achieves a lucidity in the "global ends statement" that may be considered a model for any organization.

In the General Regulations for the Charities of Women, this mission statement has become even more concise, but has a more inclusive spiritual dimension: "(1) To honor the love Our Lord has for those who are poor; (2) To assist poor persons corporally and spiritually."²³ For Vincent, these two elements are inseparable.

In Vincent's approach the mission, or ends, statement is the first principle of good management. In a Council of the Daughters of Charity, 19 June 1647, Vincent stated: "Sisters, to teach you how to do business, I will tell you that, when matters are proposed, before everything else consider the purpose."²⁴ The same clarity and simplicity informs the job description of the Sister Servant (chief administrator) at the Foundling Hospital in Paris:

It is the responsibility of the Sister Servant of the Foundlings to see that the Sisters and the wet nurses do their duties well and that the children are raised and assisted, corporally and spiritually, in the way the Rules prescribe.²⁵

3. Organizational structure

The Vincentian documents provide numerous examples of Vincent's expertise in organizational design and management. In particular, Vincent prescribed a participatory, even democratic, style of organizational structure and dynamics. He dealt in very specific terms with such organizational issues as the number and duties of officers, election of officers and term limits, membership, the conduct of meetings, personnel administration, and operational details. As to these issues, the General Rules for Charities of Women are instructive.

²² CCD 13b, 3.

²³ CCD 13b, 1.

²⁴ CCD 13b, 271.

²⁵ CCD 13b, 216.

Consider the example afforded by the organization of local chapters of women volunteering to serve the poor at the parish level:

I. *Officers.* Every organization needs to identify leaders responsible for specific organizational tasks. Vincent specifies four officers, the first three chosen by the women themselves. (1) The Superioress or Directress has the general task and responsibility of “seeing that regulations are observed and all do their duty well.” (2) The Treasurer or First Assistant is to manage the organization’s finances. She is instructed to keep the money in a strongbox with two locks (she has one key, the Directress the other) — a principle predating the modern organizational practice of having checks signed by two officers. Vincent also instructs that some petty cash always be available. (3) The Supervisor of Furnishings (or Second Assistant) is responsible for managing the linen and other furnishings, and seeing that the clothes are washed. (4) The Procurator is the only male officer, a man chosen by the group to manage legal affairs. This concession to gender roles of seventeenth-century France is compensated for by the fact that the Procurator serves at the will of the Confraternity.²⁶

II. *Election and term limits.* The Directress and First and Second Assistants serve a one year term. The rules for the Confraternity specify that these three officers “will leave office on the Wednesday after the holy feast of Pentecost, and a new election will take place on the same day by a plurality of votes of the entire confraternity.”²⁷ The officers may not be re-elected or continue in office.

III. *Membership.* Membership in a confraternity is limited to women, with the permission of their husbands or parents. (Vincent evidently found the men of his time pretty useless for the purposes of the confraternity, but bowed again to the gender mores that limited women’s roles outside the home). The membership in a single confraternity was also limited to twenty, evidently based on the experience of managing such a group efficiently.

IV. *Meetings.* Vincent had a lot to say about meetings, probably because they took such a large amount of his own time. His thinking is really based on the principle that meetings are important for sharing information and making good decisions. Vincent’s prescriptions for meetings are found in various organizational contexts.

²⁶ CCD 13b, 5-19.

²⁷ CCD 13b, 17.

First, the importance of meetings is addressed in a conference to the Ladies of Charity dated 1638-1639, in which Vincent provides a theological context for understanding meetings. The assumption here is that serving the poor is God's work. Therefore, he says, "The importance (of meetings) is obvious: Because Our Lord recommends them and promises to be in their midst. 'Where two or three are gathered,' etc. And in another place: 'If two or three join their voices, I will give them whatever they ask.'" ²⁸ For Vincent, holding meetings follows the example of Jesus himself. Jesus "had these two kinds of meetings: the full one, when He chose his disciples, and the smaller one, when he assembled Peter, James, and John on Mount Tabor. The Church itself followed the example of Jesus: the Apostles 'called two councils or general meetings: one for the election of Mathias to replace Judas and another concerning circumcision.'" ²⁹ Vincent sees the Church continuing the example of Jesus and the Apostles in the tradition of church councils, through the Council of Trent. Meetings are important for practical reasons: "Because it's a way of finding a solution to the problems that may arise in the Company and, by this means, to unite it and consequently to help it to survive." ³⁰

A year or two later (in 1640), Vincent again speaks to the Ladies of Charity about the importance of meetings in a conference at the Hôtel-Dieu. "Attendance at the meetings is required for several reasons," he says:

- 1) because the Rule obliges this.
- 2) because the meeting is held to deal with the affairs of God.
- 3) because the work can't survive otherwise.
- 4) because in so doing you practice several virtues:
 - patience in bearing with the miserable person who is speaking to you.
 - because you will receive a greater abundance of grace than you would elsewhere, in the same way as the Apostles received the Holy Spirit together. ³¹

For Vincent, meetings that dealt with the service of the poor were holy time, a pre-eminent occasion for touching the presence of God and doing His work.

Second, the style of communication in meetings should be clear and forthright. Participants should be confident in presenting their

²⁸ CCD 13b, 386.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ CCD 13b, 387.

³¹ CCD 13b, 407.

own insights, but in an objective and “businesslike” manner. In a Council to the Daughters of Charity in 1653, Vincent instructed:

(W)hen called to the meetings to give our opinion, we should first recommend this to God, and, when questioned, be prepared to answer as follows: “I am of such an opinion for such and such reasons....” If another Sister has spoken before you and her opinion is different from yours, you must reply to the reason she has suggested by giving other reasons, and say, “As to what has been mentioned, which is such or such a thing, I would like to respond with such or such a....”³²

V. *Personnel administration.* Staffing issues figure prominently in Vincent’s conferences. Much of the agenda for the conferences with the Daughters of Charity is devoted to questions of personnel management. A council of 8 April 1655, is devoted entirely to the question of whether Sisters sent to a mission in Nantes should be recalled.³³ In other council records, Vincent deals very openly with the question of whether a candidate should be permitted to remain with the community, or sent away, and under what circumstances. Sometimes a candidate was not permitted to continue for reasons of health, as doing the work of the community clearly demanded a strong physical constitution. Sometimes a candidate’s personality was judged to be too much of a detriment. In every case, there is a surprising level of honesty and frankness in these discussions. Despite the level of concern for the individuals involved it is clear that, for Vincent, the good of the mission mattered most.

VI. *Operational details.* Records of meetings with the Ladies of Charity, and with the Daughters, go into great detail about the means for carrying out the mission. The Ladies of Charity are instructed, as in a course in basic nursing:

She will set up the tray on the bed, place on it a napkin, a cup, a spoon, and some bread, wash the patient’s hands, and then say grace. She will pour the soup into a bowl, and put the meat on a plate. She will arrange everything on the bed tray, then kindly encourage the patient to eat for the love of Jesus and His holy Mother. She will do all this as lovingly as if she were serving her own son — or rather God, who considers as done to Himself the good she does for persons who are poor.³⁴

³² CCD 13b, 312.

³³ CCD 13b, 318-323.

³⁴ CCD 13b, 13.

This level of detail borders on micromanaging. On the other hand, though, Vincent could stand back in admiration of a good manager. In a council to the Daughters of Charity in 1655, very few words suffice for describing the duties of a Superioress (Mlle. Le Gras) who he thinks is doing her job well: “We need not go any further, since, by the grace of God, she’s doing — and has always done — what a good Superioress is supposed to do.”³⁵ The same Superioress is later commended for managing the:

small amount of material goods you possess; if it’s lacking, you cannot subsist.... By the grace of God, Mademoiselle has managed affairs well — so well that I know of no Sisters’ house in Paris in the condition in which you are.³⁶

A consideration of Vincentian documents detailing the development of organizations founded by Vincent reveals a different dimension to his religious leadership. The image of Vincent emerging from study of the organizational detail is both a complement and a corrective to the popular iconography of the saint. The Vincent of the organizational documents is still the simple, straightforward, gentle and immensely caring priest, concerned for both the spiritual and bodily welfare of the poor. But he is also something of an organizational genius, with the skills of a highly regarded management consultant or corporate leader. The documents help to explain the success and endurance of the organizations he founded. From the modern perspective of organizational theory and practice, he did many things right:

- The *mission* of the organization is clearly articulated, and founded in a firm but practical spirituality.
- The *results* expected are clearly defined.
- The organizational *structure* is simple, effective, and transparent.
- The process of *decision-making* is careful to include the information and insights of all the members.
- *Means* to achieving the organization’s mission (or results) are well considered (though Vincent may have been guilty of some micromanaging).
- There is great care for *staffing*: it is ultimately the right people who make the organization effective.

³⁵ CCD 13b, 324.

³⁶ CCD 13b, 325.

From a big-picture perspective, the nature of Vincent's achievement emerges. He not only inspired great charity, he organized it and made it effective.

Vincent solved, for his time, two problems: the problem of *linkage* and the problem of *leverage*.

The problem of linkage can be stated: how does the individual person find an effective way to serve the poor, using his/her particular talents and resources, in the time available? The Vincentian organizational network provided a place for people of all stations in life — from the nobility and the wealthy, to the poorest peasant woman — to become connected with a larger enterprise. Random acts of kindness may be wonderful in themselves. But when linked to one another, when charity is organized, the poor themselves are better served. The poor family at Châtillon was clearly better off when the plan was put in place to provide help on a consistent, daily basis. And the caregivers themselves were more effective, and encouraged to continue their efforts, through being linked to a rudimentary organization.

The problem of leverage is similar: How to maximize the resources of time, energy, and treasure committed to serving the poor? For Vincent, organization was once again the answer. The organization creates a system of charity that is sustained over time. It calls forth, or leverages, further commitment by the single individual, as well as inspires and generates charitable acts by others. The funds provided by the de Gondi family to endow the Congregation of the Mission leveraged further donations of property on behalf of the poor.³⁷ Organization enhances the single act of charity by calling forth and creating further charity.

In his solution to the problems of linkage and leverage, Vincent created a new organizational structure for charity in seventeenth-century France that looks strikingly similar to the system of nonprofit charitable organizations that emerged in the United States in the 20th century.

The Organization of Charity in the 21st Century

What can we learn from Vincent's experience and organizational genius to effectively serve the poor of our own time?

At the outset, we need to acknowledge that today's society, in particular government and the political economy, is vastly more

³⁷ See the study by JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., "Saint Vincent de Paul and Money" (*Vincentian Heritage*, Vols. 23-25, # 2 and Vol. 26, # 1, 2005, p. 81).

complex than in Vincent's day. In Europe and North America, government sponsored and funded social welfare programs now provide service to the poor literally unimaginable to Vincent and his contemporaries. To a great degree, the organization of charitable care in this century raises questions of public policy. For instance, the political agenda in the United States includes such systemic issues as, how to assure medical care for over forty million uninsured citizens, not to speak of the unknown number of aliens residing within our borders. Or, how to provide an income for those unwanted workers a technology-based economy leaves behind.

While acknowledging the critical role of policy development and advocacy on behalf of the poor, 21st century society still depends to a vast extent on voluntary charity to fill in the gaps of the government welfare system. In the United States, a "system" of nonprofit organizations has emerged that is part of the solution, and that provides a new dimension of opportunity for solving the problems of linkage and leverage in our time. One question for the Vincentian mission to the poor in the 21st century is: How do we understand and utilize opportunities in the nonprofit organization arena, at least in the United States? That question requires a brief exposition on the nonprofit sector and its role in American society.

The second half of the 20th century in the United States has seen almost exponential growth in the "nonprofit sector." The term "sector" (an image from geometry) identifies a portion of the social economy organized differently from the other three sectors: the household sector (personal consumption of goods and services), the government sector (public goods and services paid for by taxes), and the business sector (the sale of goods and services to make a profit for owners). Organizations in the nonprofit sector provide a needed service to society, but with the restriction that any profit may not be distributed to those in control of the organization. In recognition of their contribution to society, such organizations enjoy tax-free status.

The growth, size, and importance of the nonprofit sector in the U.S. are analyzed in detail by Michael O'Neill in *Nonprofit Nation: A New Look at the Third America?*³⁸ O'Neill traces, as early as 1601 in Anglo-Saxon law, the principle of tax-free status, an organization providing public benefit without profit to the principals. That concept was carried over to colonial America, and continued in American national and state government. The principle entered American case

³⁸ MICHAEL O'NEILL, *Nonprofit Nation: A New Look at the Third America* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002). The following paragraphs are based on O'Neill, 1-19.

law through a Supreme Court decision involving Dartmouth College in 1819, which described “eleemosynary institutions” as a separate category or sector. More on the social side, in 1835 Tocqueville noted the unusual (to him) propensity of Americans to join “voluntary” associations.

In 1913 the national income tax law codified the tax-free status of nonprofit organizations. IRC 501 (C) (3) has become the most well-known category, but the tax code includes 501 (C) (1) through 27, plus other groups as well. In the 1930s, the federal government emerged as a provider of welfare, but federal money was given directly to the individual. That changed in the Great Society programs of the 1960s; for the first time, the federal government used nonprofit organizations as a key link in the distribution of funds for public benefit. In 1980, the growing role of nonprofit organizations was marked by the foundation of the Independent Sector — an organization to represent and support the nonprofit sector as a whole.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the organizational achievement of nonprofits offers unprecedented opportunities for achieving Vincent’s great purpose of well-organized service to the poor. At the same time, the capacity of modern organizations amplifies the results of organizational failure.

What Must Be Done?

If this look at Vincent’s organizational activity has helped to highlight his skill and success in creating enduring organizations to serve the poor, how does that point a direction for the Vincentian charism in the 21st century?

Let us return for a moment to Vincent’s experience at Châtillon. His preaching *inspired* a remarkable *response* of care-giving on the part of the village. Vincent *assessed* the spontaneous outpouring of generosity, and *organized* it for effective and lasting results. There is always need for identifying and alleviating the problems of the poor, as Vincent did. But in our century, as well as in the 17th, there is still “great charity” that responds with overwhelming spontaneity to human need. The response to the disaster of 11 September 2001, provides a very contemporary illustration of spontaneous generosity. The terrorist attacks killed 3,000 people, leaving thousands of families to struggle not only with devastating personal grief, but with serious economic problems. An outpouring of donations for the victims families raised \$2.3 billion in a matter of weeks. The problem was not how to raise enough money; the problem was how to distribute the dollars given in such abundance. (The Better Business

Bureau assumed responsibility for monitoring donations, to assure that the funds reached their intended goal).³⁹

The task of identifying and naming the problems of the poor is always with us. But it is not the only task. As Vincent demonstrated at Châtillon and throughout his life, the next step is to *organize* the great charity that emerges from sheer human goodness, and to make it effective.

For the Vincentian movement in the 21st century, the example of Vincent suggests two over-arching tasks. The first is to seriously utilize, and to build upon, the vast potential of the nonprofit sector for serving the poor. For followers of Vincent, the challenge is to become expert practitioners of the art and science of organizing, just as he did. The complex of nonprofit charitable organizations, those already in existence as well as new ones yet to be invented, offer a solution to the still-present problems of *linkage* and *leverage*. How can the charitable acts of a single person be linked to others, and how can they generate still further charity, with more effective results?

Success in the challenge of engaging opportunities in the nonprofit sector brings yet a second challenge, one only alluded to in this paper. It is the challenge of keeping the organization and its leadership unselfishly committed to the mission. For Vincent, that meant always seeing the service of the poor as God's work. Besides personally being a holy man, Vincent infused his "charities" with a practical organizational spirituality. Amidst the religious and philosophical diversity of the 21st century, that task becomes infinitely more challenging. But service to those in need is the one great plain that can be reached from many religious traditions and philosophical pathways. The direction one comes from matters not, as long as we arrive at, and learn to collaborate on, the common task of serving the poor.

³⁹ ASSOCIATION OF FUNDRAISING PROFESSIONALS, "September 11 Reports Update Giving Information..." October 24, 2003, <http://www.afpnet.org>.