

## Reflection 7

# SERVICE OF THE POOR. THE CONFRATERNITIES OF CHARITY: A FUNDAMENTAL INTUITION

One Sunday in August 1617 an event occurred which was to mark Saint Vincent's whole life. *"I was vesting to celebrate Holy Mass one Sunday when I was told that in an isolated house a quarter of a league away everyone was ill. None of them was able to help the others, and they were all in indescribable need. That touched me to the heart"* (CCD, IX, 192). During the sermon, Vincent shared his feelings with the people, who were very generous in going to the aid of the sick family. However, there was no organization, which gave Saint Vincent the idea of a Confraternity of Charity. This experience moved him to establish the "charity," to develop a spirituality of the Poor One and to broaden his pastoral vision.

It was in 1625 that the meeting occurred between Vincent, then a 45 year old priest who had discovered his mission of service and apostolate among the poor after a long interior crisis, and Louise de Marillac, a woman of 35 years who had in her life experienced a considerable amount of suffering. The one and the other, actually the one with the other, in their time were destined to be promoters of an extraordinary **culture of solidarity** enlightened by the Gospel.

### 1. Organized Charity

At Chatillon, Saint Vincent encountered a concrete situation that led him to find a solution responding to the needs expressed by the people. His reflection led him to go beyond the actual event in order to efficaciously lead and guide the generosity of his parishioners. His response flowed from a willingness to adapt and a desire for organization.

As soon as he grasped the situation at Chatillon he responded. He *"said that we were to run to the spiritual needs of our neighbor as to a fire"* (CCD, XI, 25 — report of Vincent's comments in chapter). In touch with the situation, he knew how to take the steps necessary to launch the project successfully. He got involved with what was happening and went immediately to the sick family, of whom he had spoken in the sermon, and brought them the consolation of

religion. There we have all the elements of adaptation: knowledge of the situation, interest in what was happening, communication, mobilization of a large number of people and personal commitment. The situation lacked one thing, organization, to which Vincent gave his best effort. *"Let us make haste slowly"* (CCD, V, 400) in Vincent's own words.

Today the AIC teams are made up of local volunteers responding to situations of actual poverty in the here and now. They welcome the people as they are, while seeking at the same time to go beyond their immediate expressed needs, because they know that the joys and sorrows in a person's life cannot be understood except in relation to a family or institutional context (history, work, education, culture). After a serious analysis of the situation of poverty, which takes into consideration the whole system, that is, the local social setting, and after a critical examination of the causes that have brought on this situation of vulnerability, the volunteers develop a written project which can be evaluated and regularly adapted to the evolving needs.

Action is not enough, however, if the action is not up to the level of the needs. For Saint Vincent it was necessary to organize in a way that aid would respond fully to the purpose for which it was given. At Chatillon he remarked that the poor *"...have sometimes suffered a great deal, more through a lack of organized assistance than from lack of charitable persons"* (CCD, XIIIb, 8). That is why he immediately called some women together to organize their assistance to the poor. The outcome was that he founded the Confraternity of Charity, wrote a rule and delegated tasks and responsibilities to the women of the parish whom he included in the process.

There were to be no more than twenty people in the Confraternity in order *"to avoid the confusion that comes from too large a number"* (CCD, XIIIb, 9). One person was to have the responsibility of directing the Confraternity, aided by two assistants, one of whom one was to be treasurer. The rules describe in minute detail the regularity of the visits to the poor and the way to carry them out. For Saint Vincent, good organization and the participation of everyone were the effective signs of true charity.

Vincent and Louise insisted that the services be carried out with competence. Both of them were profoundly engaged in the education and the formation of the poor. They foresaw that in working on the causes of exclusion it would be possible to help some come out from their precarious situations.

Today in serving others the AIC always works in teams. The team is a necessary structure for any permanent activity and is the key to

long-term continuity, humility and sharing competencies. Moreover, teamwork enables women in poverty to enter into a process of self-advancement and the development of their own community.

## 2. Efficacious and life-giving collaboration

Vincent's establishment of the Confraternities of Charity in 1617 was a great innovation. He gave responsibility **to lay women** and made them participants in public social activities through effective organization and corporate responsibility. Under his direction, Louise would play a capital role in the coordination and animation of these teams as well as in the spiritual education of their members by helping them to live their mission of solidarity in the light of the Gospel.

It can truly be said that in France (and subsequently in other countries) Vincent and Louise directed the attention of the public to the most destitute people and in the process gave birth to modern social institutions.

*“Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray that His Divine Goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter in rain and cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toil, and, finally, that He may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works”* (CCD, I, 64 f.). With these words Vincent sent Louise on mission. She set out in May 1629 with the responsibility of visiting the Confraternities of Charity some of which were having difficulties.

In the course of her visits to the Confraternities of Charity, Louise began to sense that, in assisting the sick and the destitute, it would eventually be necessary to have persons entirely dedicated to them by vocation. In time, the Confraternities of Charity asked the assistance of the Daughters in order to guarantee the regularity of their ministry, for example, at the Hotel-Dieu.

The first major work of Louise was her role of visiting the Confraternities of the Ladies of Charity. Then, in addition to her attention to (new) foundations and the government of the houses, she was preoccupied with the spiritual education of the Daughters of Charity, watching over their instruction and forming them in charity: the poor person is Christ himself.

In 1638 Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac entered the battle against the social drama of their times, namely, children abandoned in the streets. They decided to appeal to the Ladies who obtained from the Queen a very large mansion. Louise set to work putting it in

good repair and gave her attention to teaching the Ladies and the Daughters how to alleviate the distress of the children.

Toward 1650 Vincent received a great sum of money as a gift, which he used to buy land and a house to serve as a hospice for 40 elderly people. It was the hospice of the Name of Jesus. It was a model and a breakthrough that proved that it was possible to part with the inhumane routine of the hospitals. Louise and her Daughters took care of running it.

*Today* as in the time of Vincent and Louise, working as part of a network is indispensable.

### 3. A Spirituality of the Poor

For Saint Vincent mission and charity always went hand in hand. *To go to the poor is to go toward Christ and to leave God for God.*

The poor person has a special place in the Church, since Christ willed to identify himself with the poor person throughout his own life. Vincent said, *"I must not judge a poor peasant man or woman by their appearance.... But turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is represented to us by these poor people"* (CCD, XI, 26). Meeting a poor person, **who is the icon of Christ**, ought to be done in a spirit of service and with the attitude of a servant. *"In serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ"* (CCD, IX, 199). That is why Saint Vincent insisted especially on the virtues of humility, simplicity and charity, which turn out to be the distinguishing characteristics of the Ladies and Daughters of Charity.

*Today* Benedict XVI has written: *"Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40). Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God"* (*Deus Caritas Est*, 15).

We have to take into account the deepest aspirations of the human person. Saint Vincent insisted that it is necessary *"to assist the poor spiritually and corporally,"* the poor are *"our lords and masters,"* and we have *"to adjust ourselves"* to them, wherever they are and whoever they are.

*Today* following the example of Saint Vincent, the systemic approach invites us to step back in order to approach people in their wholeness, that is, to grasp their history and culture as well as the nature and the quality of their relationships. Benedict XVI in the same vein directs human charitable activity toward the integral

human good: “...love does not simply offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls.... We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 28, 31a).

Saint Vincent considered poor people as persons with dignity and rights, to whom we owe justice and not pity. In helping the poor “we do (an act of) justice and not mercy;” “...there is scarcely any (act of) charity that is not accompanied by justice.” For Saint Vincent “alms” to the most destitute was only a temporary solution. Only work can give back to men and women in difficulty their dignity and their place in society.

Today we continue to believe in the dignity of the poor, to believe they have rights and duties and to believe firmly in the capacity of each one to improve their situation and to go forward. This is why the volunteers establish personal relations with the poorest, and accompany them in the process of assuming personal responsibility, with a view to finding their own place in society. Charitable action looks towards “...a true humanism, which acknowledges that the human person is made in the image of God and wants to help him or her to live in a way consonant with that dignity” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 30).

#### **4. An Expanded Pastoral Vision**

At Châtillon Saint Vincent discovered another dimension of the Church, namely that all the faithful have their own proper responsibility and their own sphere of activity.

Saint Vincent, after his appeal from the pulpit on behalf of the sick poor of whom he spoke, was very impressed by the response and the generosity of the parishioners — “*I met the ladies returning in droves*” (*CCD*, IX, 166). He understood that ordinary Christians, if they are motivated according to circumstances know how to become seriously and efficaciously involved in the activities proposed to them. To him it was a revelation about the important place of lay people in the Church. He saw the service of the poor as a *state of charity* (see *CCD*, VII, 396 f. and IX, 538), a place of sanctification and a confirmation of the quality of the lives of *baptized persons*.

Today Benedict XVI has written: *The Christian’s program — the program of the Good Samaritan, the program of Jesus — is “a heart which sees.” This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly* (*Deus Caritas Est*, 31b). “*All serious and upright human conduct is hope in action. This is so first of all in the sense that... we work*

towards a brighter and more humane world so as to open doors into the future" (*Spe Salvi*, 35).

John Paul II in Paris on 31 May 1980 addressing those in the lay apostolate said, *"The Church, and the Pope in its name, counts on your apostolate as lay people. The work that is properly yours in the Church is essential. No one can replace you in it, not the priests, not the religious."*

Saint Vincent knew how to value the quality of the service of women. He wrote in 1650, *"And I can give this testimony in favor of women, that there is no fault to be found in their administration because they are so careful and trustworthy"* (CCD, IV, 76). His charitable works could only have developed through the dedication of women in each locale. In 1657 he declared to the Ladies of Charity: *"For eight hundred years or so, women have had no public role in the Church; in the past there were some called Deaconesses.... About the time of Charlemagne, however, by a discreet working of Divine Providence, this practice came to an end; persons of your sex were deprived of any role and have not had any since then. And now that same Providence is turning today to some of you to supply what was lacking to the sick poor of the Hotel-Dieu"* (CCD, XIIIb, 432). He, consequently, did not hesitate to ask the women he encountered to embrace the active role that was returning to them in the Church. In this way the Ladies and after them the Daughters, under the direction of Louise de Marillac, were to continue the intuition of their common Founder through the complementarity of their vocation and their service.

Today 71 percent of vulnerable and at risk people in the world are women, so it is evident that an international NGO like the AIC made up of volunteer women who can be the voice of women without a voice has great importance.

John Paul affirmed the special role of women, when he said: *"Every human being is entrusted to each and every other human being, but in a special way the human being is entrusted to woman, precisely because the woman in virtue of her special experience of motherhood is seen to have a specific sensitivity towards the human person and all that constitutes the individual's true welfare, beginning with the fundamental value of life."* Also, he indicated a second task, *"...women have the task of assuring the moral dimension of culture, the dimension, namely of a culture worthy of the person, of an individual yet social life"* (*Christifideles Laici – The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People*, December 30, 1988, n. 51).

Saint Vincent knew how to network with people. He brought together rich and poor, clergy and lay, men and women. He knew collaboration was the key to success in the service of the poor.

Thus, he created bonds, established bridges, and promoted unity among persons of all social classes without distinction. He was the advocate of the poor before the highest authorities, whether it was Cardinal Richelieu in promoting peace, Anne of Austria in taking responsibility as a member of the Council of Conscience or Monsieur de Gondi in improving the lot of the galley slaves. He knew how to denounce injustice, oppression and extreme poverty to the point of impacting structures. Our love, Saint Vincent said, should be “affective and effective.”

*Today* we are aware that sin affects not only individuals, but profoundly affects social structures, is embodied in unjust laws, economic relations based on power, artificial frontiers and boundaries... all the unjust structures which maintain the poor in their poverty.

***May each woman and each man in the Vincentian Family take advantage of this jubilee year in order to radiate to the world Saint Vincent and Saint Louise's love for the poorest of the poor. Each one in his or her own situation, for example, might celebrate publicly this love for the least by a shared meal or some other manifestation of conviviality, so that the world might know this Love is alive!***

### **Questions for sharing**

1. People living on the margins and at risk change and live in a society that is constantly changing. How can we adjust our activities to this reality? What can we do to work on the unjust conditions that have brought about these situations of poverty?
2. What networks can we establish with the poor among the donors, the churches, the governments, the private sector, the unions, the media, and international organizations? Do we have the courage and the strength to be involved in society so we are able to denounce these structures of sin and work to change laws and transform public opinion through political action?
3. How are we to organize ourselves, like Louise, to engage the volunteers, study, reform, improve and organize charity so that it responds to the demands of our times?

Written by  
Madame SYLVIE LARMINAT, President of AIC-France

Translation: HUGH F. O'DONNELL, C.M., Province of China