

## Reflection 10

# CELEBRATING SAINT VINCENT AND SAINT LOUISE WITH POOR PEOPLE

Can you imagine a celebration of the Anniversary of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac without the poor? They are the saints of Charity. He is referred to as the “Father of the Poor” and the “Apostle of Charity”. She is the patron saint of social workers. Their lives were totally consumed in serving the poor. So, of course the poor must be included in the celebration.

Yet, most of the people served by the Vincentian family do not know St. Vincent and St. Louise. Why, because most of us in the Vincentian Family seldom take the time to tell those we visit in their homes or hospital beds or wherever we serve them about our founders. We live out the charism as we serve but we do not tell people why we do what we do. This year, especially this year of celebration, we need to tell people stories of our founders. In fact this year is the perfect time to announce to the people we serve that we do what we do because of St. Vincent and St. Louise. They are our heroes, our role models. We need to tell them so that they too may be graced with the reality of Vincentian Spirituality and the Vincentian charism.

Among the many great spiritual men and women of history, there may be for each of us a few or maybe just one or two who speak the language of our hearts and give us inspiration. These are our spiritual guides. We Vincentians have found our guides to be Vincent and Louise. Are they not also perfect guides for the poor? Their spirituality is as relevant today as when they journeyed through life in the seventeenth century. They are the ones who speak the language of our hearts and give us direction. We must tell their stories and share their wisdom with all those we serve.

St. Vincent said “It is our vocation... to set people’s hearts ablaze, to do what the Son of God did, who came to light a fire on earth in order to set it aflame with his love. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him. I must love my neighbor as the image of God and the object of his love.... I must act in such a way that people love their creator and each other in mutual charity for the love of God who loved them so much that he delivered up his own Son to death for them.” What better way is there to lead hearts to God than to use the example of St. Vincent and St. Louise?

They lived out to perfection the call to lead hearts to God. So, again this is the perfect time to tell their stories. It is the perfect time to make this a priority in the Vincentian Family.

St. Louise said, "More is required of us than to go, to come, and to give. Our intentions should be pure and thoroughly devoid of self interest." Most of us members of the Vincentian Family come and go in a hurry as we serve. There is so much to do and so many more to visit. We rush through our work of service instead of focusing on each person totally. How beautiful it is when we do take time to really visit with open hearts and minds free of distractions and the compulsion to move on to another person or matter. That is when we see the face of Christ. So, rather than coming and going and being concerned about matters of self interest, we should visit with the poor and share, especially the stories of our founders and how they encourage us to do what we do.

### **Why We Do What We Do**

People who are poor must wonder what makes us "tick". One Daughter of Charity at a clinic in India who changed a filthy bandage and cleaned the infected wound of a woman with leprosy was asked this question by the grateful woman. "Sister, how can you do this work?" Sister responded, "Our founders taught us." She went on to explain that St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac instructed the Daughters of Charity that Jesus Christ is in the person of those who are poor. "They are our lords and our masters." The woman was amazed and honored.

Most members of the Vincentian Family "come and go." We listen. We act. We serve. We talk about God. We pray with those we visit. We do much. But, most of us do not tell people why we do what we do. We do not tell them about the charism of our founders. And, we do not tell them that is what it is that inspires us to serve others.

As we have been taught by our current Vincentian mentors, we must "First Do and Then Teach." They tell us that St. Vincent instructed us to do this in all our service to the poor. So, after we provide the service for which we have been called to provide, we have the ideal opportunity to share information about St. Vincent and St. Louise our models. The woman treated by the Sister who asked why she did what she did could easily understand what Sister was saying because she witnessed service first. Each home visit made by a member of the Vincentian Family requires service first. That is what we do. We listen to the needs. We bring food. We help with rent. We get clothing. We treat the sick. Most recently we have looked for

systemic change responses so as to join with people in lifting themselves out of poverty. In all that the poor present to us, we respond. Now, let us make a concerted effort to give also the precious gift of the Vincentian Charism.

### **Let Us Be Formed**

Many of us lay members of the Vincentian Family joined our particular branch of the Family to help the poor but we did not fully understand why we were doing what they did. We just wanted to help the poor. We did not realize we were serving “Our Lords and Masters.” We did not look at the face of Jesus Christ when we sat with a struggling mother of three children. We did not know about “leaving God for God.” Now, thanks to recent formation efforts in the Vincentian Family, most of us do know the basics of Vincentian Spirituality. However, if we wish to open the doors of the Vincentian Charism widely and invite the poor to join in the celebration of the Vincentian Family, we need to be prepared to teach.

So, this year is also the perfect time for each of us to study and reflect on the lives and words of St. Vincent and St. Louise for our own spiritual growth and to be able to share this wisdom with others, especially the people we serve. To do so we need to believe in and understand the Vincentian Charism so strongly that we can not hold back from telling all those we serve about it and to give witness to it. The poor must see St. Vincent and St. Louise in each of us. Frederic Ozanam observed that “A patron saint should not be a mere signboard to a society, like St. Denis or St. Nicholas over the door of a tavern. A patron saint should be regarded as a type on which we should try to pattern ourselves as he (St. Vincent de Paul and she St. Louise de Marillac) patterned himself on the Divine Type which is Jesus Christ” (J.P. DERUM, *Apostle in a Top Hat*, p. 112).

### **The Perfect Year**

This anniversary year is the perfect time to share the news of the Charism with our “Lords and Masters” and to invite them to celebrate with all Vincentians. St. Vincent said “we should not be doing enough for God and our neighbor if we supplied the sick poor only with nourishment and medicine and if we did not assist them... with the spiritual services we owe them.” One of the most special services we can give is to teach a person to be like or in fact become the Jesus of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac. That is to follow Christ the Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor. How do we do this? Consider these thoughts:

**Share the Charism with the Poor.** While visiting with each person or family, take an extra few minutes to tell the story of St. Vincent and St. Louise and the Vincentian Family. Talk about the lives, beliefs and actions of the Saints.

**Prepare Handouts.** Within your local Vincentian Family branch (conference, association or group) develop simple written materials for distribution to the people you serve. This could be like a holy card, a flier or a pamphlet that tells the story of the Founders.

**Have a Celebration Locally and Invite the Poor.** Plan a gathering to celebrate the feast of St. Louise and/or another one to celebrate the feast of St. Vincent. Invite the other branches of the Family and all those served. Have a simple meal and tell the stories with short presentations, skits or audio visual materials.

**Invite People Who Are Poor To Become Members of the Family.** Ask those you serve, where appropriate as with any other friend, if they may be interested in becoming a member of your conference, association or group. Invite them to a meeting for the purpose of discernment.

**Initiate a Vincentian Project.** Is there a need in your community that needs attention? Bring people together from the community to discuss the concern. Involve the poor, women and men and the young at all stages: identification, planning, implementation and evaluation. Consider a Systemic Change Project. Read "Seeds of Hope-Stories of Systemic Change."

## **Extend the Vincentian Family**

What better way is there to celebrate the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Deaths of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac than to open wide the doors of the Vincentian Family to all, especially people who are poor? The Saints would have it no other way than to include "Our Lords and Masters." If we do this it will be a celebration second to none.

This is the most perfect year to reach out to the Family, all branches and the poor. At a Vincentian Family Gathering in Cameroon, Africa in July, 2009, an African story was told that conveys the desire of God that all men and women may all be one in solidarity with each other. The story is:

There was a cloud, a big beautiful cloud. In the cloud were many rain drops. Each had a name. There was Dignity, Hope and Friendship. There was Gentleness, Simplicity and Humility. There were many more with equally beautiful names.

And, there was Exclusion. Exclusion was a miserable individual. He was arrogant, self-centered, impatient and proud. God said to all the rain drops “We must wait for just the right moment to rain down on the earth. I will tell you.” However, Exclusion said “I will not wait. I want attention. I want recognition. I want to do something that will be noticed.” So, he left the cloud and dropped to earth. Plop! Nothing happened. Finally, God said to the other rain drops “It’s time! It’s time to rain down on earth.” So, all the rain drops jumped from the cloud and showered the earth. There was a loud noise, like an explosion. This was followed by cries of joy and happiness. There was love all around. The people lived happily ever after in solidarity with each other and they gave glory to God.

May the Vincentian Family grow in numbers and in love this Anniversary Year. May “exclusion” stay away. God bless our efforts with and for the poor.

### **Question for reflection**

How can we share the story of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise with the poor people whom we serve?

Written by  
EUGENE SMITH, Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, USA