

FOCUS SECTION

VINCENTIAN EDUCATION AND THE CHARISM OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

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St. Vincent de Paul is a popular saint in the contemporary practice of Catholicism. This article explains why, providing a historical overview of the many influences in Vincent's life and demonstrating how central Vincentian themes can be incarnated in educational institutions. Vincent's passion – love of the poor – remains a compelling challenge today.

At one time, the name Vincentian designated the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission. Over the past 10 years, the term Vincentian has extended to include the Daughters of Charity, the Sisters of Charity, the Ladies of Charity, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and other associations of the laity or religious who consider St. Vincent de Paul their patron and inspiration. For purposes of this essay, Vincentian education includes the educational efforts of all those who love God by serving the poor. Vincentian education, precisely as Catholic education, contains four themes: (a) an understanding of the unity of love of God and love of neighbor; (b) Vincentian education is holistic; (c) Vincentian education is a collaborative effort; and (d) the act of Vincentian education, at its heart, is about evangelization.

VINCENT DE PAUL

Vincentian educators hold as their spiritual father, St. Vincent de Paul. He was born of poor parents in Pouy, near Dax, in the spring of 1576. Attempting to escape his humble surroundings, St. Vincent de Paul embarked on a career in the priesthood, being ordained in 1600 (Abelly, 1993). Vincent's younger life is replete with stories of his capture by pirates on the Barbary Coast and becoming a slave. Many believe this to be apocryphal (Coste, 1987).

St. Vincent de Paul's experience of teaching consisted in tutoring the children of Phillipe Emmanuel de Gondi, the General of the Galleys in

France. Besides tutoring, Vincent also served as confessor to Madame de Gondi and later became chaplain to the galley slaves, those prisoners sentenced to labor on the galley. Through his association with the de Gondi family, Vincent was exposed to the spiritual needs of the poor – the galley slaves under Monsieur de Gondi's command or the peasants who lived on the de Gondi property. It was in his ministry to one of these peasants that St. Vincent de Paul received the inspiration to proclaim the Gospel to the poor, and to found a society of priests, the Congregation of the Mission, to make this inspiration a reality (Abelly, 1993).

The missions that Vincent so vigorously promoted were the outgrowth of his pastoral experience hearing the confession of a dying peasant at Folleville. The peasant, long troubled with sins that remained unconfessed, unburdened his soul to Vincent. The peasant shared the experience with Vincent's patron, Madame de Gondi, who convinced Vincent that he should preach to the peasants on her properties. So on January 25, 1617, Vincent preached on the importance of making a general confession. The numbers who approached the sacrament of Penance were so large that Vincent needed to call the Jesuits for assistance. Realizing that the work of the mission and hearing confessions would require the collaboration of other priests and not being able to depend on the continued generosity of local clergy, Vincent began to gather other priests to work with him on the missions and thus began the Congregation of the Mission. As the Missioners began the work of preaching the mission, they continued the basic work of Vincent, preaching on the value of a general confession and preparing all members of the parish to receive the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist worthily. Aware that the love of God and the love of neighbor were not separate entities, but intertwined, the missioners also founded a chapter of the Confraternity of Charity as a part of the mission (Abelly, 1993).

The Confraternities of Charity trace their beginnings to Vincent's days as pastor at Chatillon. Before celebrating Sunday Mass, Vincent learned that an entire family in his parish was ill, and there was no one to care for them. Vincent spoke of this in his homily, and later that day, he went to offer solace to the family. Upon arriving at the home, he encountered many of his parishioners bringing food and other necessities to the family. The family was overwhelmed with the charity of these parishioners. Knowing that this outpouring of charity, while impressive, was wasteful – because the family could not use all the food provided – and that in the days ahead, they might once again be without food, Vincent decided that he needed to organize this generosity. Individuals would take turns caring for the poor and sick, reporting to the group and coordinating their efforts. Their meetings provided a framework by which the membership could monitor and effectively serve the poor. More importantly, it provided an opportunity for those who were members to join

in prayer for those to whom they ministered (Abelly, 1993).

Vincent de Paul sought to convert not just the poor, but the clergy as well. As a group, the French clergy of the 17th century were an unimpressive lot. Scandalous might prove a better word to describe their behavior. They were interested in holding places of honor in court and collecting their benefices, but not performing their sacred responsibilities. The life of the rural clergy was one of drunkenness and immorality. This raised the concern that if a parish had been renewed through a mission, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain the renewal because of the situation among the clergy. Vincent, therefore, determined that the only way to effect lasting change for the good was to not only effect a change of heart among the rural poor, but also among their pastors. The Congregation of the Mission opened its Motherhouse, St. Lazare, and all of their houses to the diocesan clergy. The priests of the Mission provided pastoral instruction, ordination retreats, and spiritual direction to seminarians and both spiritual direction and conferences to the ordained (Abelly, 1993; Coste, 1987).

In his 60 years of ordained ministry, Vincent de Paul developed a system of charity that entailed caring for the physical and spiritual needs of the poor, as well as assisting the diocesan clergy in living out their vocation in a worthy manner. The greatness of Vincent's charity lay not solely in his compassion, but in his ability to organize others so that his compassionate mission would expand beyond himself.

The Vincentian mission not only involves having a heart that shares Vincent's compassion, but also organizing effectively, so that one's compassion can reach beyond the limits of any one person. Vincent's desire to share the mission becomes evident in the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, and the Confraternities of Charity. The subsequent foundation of the Sisters of Charity, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and other religious and lay associations are not only proof of the dynamism of Vincent's mission, but also of the need for that mission to be lived out among a diverse association of people.

THE SOURCE OF VINCENT'S CHARISM

Vincent de Paul has received a place of honor in the hearts of Catholics throughout the world. Known as the Apostle of Charity, his name is synonymous with works of charity toward the poor, the sick, the orphan, and the widow. Popular depictions often show the saint surrounded by orphans or beggars. His work clearly is inspirational and certainly many have used the techniques of his outreach programs as the foundation of their own works of kindness and justice. However, the challenge of those who truly seek to follow Vincent de Paul is the integration of the heart and soul with the good

acts. Vincent is not merely a socially aware do-gooder, a promoter of social justice, a politically correct icon. These simplistic interpretations do not touch the underlying motivations that sustained Vincent over 60 years of priestly ministry.

In a conference, Vincent instructed the priests and brothers of the mission: We must love our neighbor as the image of God and as the object of God's love, and act in such a way that everyone will in turn love their loving creator. We must develop among ourselves a mutual charity, for the love of God, who loved us so much that he sent his own Son to die for us. (Abelly, 1993, p. 107)

Vincent's devotion to the poor flowed from his love of God and his recognition that one encounters the face of God by gazing into the face of one's neighbor. The love of God and the love of neighbor are as one. Each individual, made in the image and likeness of God, is worthy of honor and respect, no matter how mean or low their station in life. It is precisely in the active love of God's handiwork, his creation, our brothers and sisters, that the followers of Vincent express their love of God.

THE GOALS OF A VINCENTIAN SCHOOL

If one were to examine the foundational documents of the Congregation of the Mission, the Vincentian fathers and brothers, they would find little written about the community's role as educators. Despite this, the Congregation has sponsored both secondary schools and universities during the course of its history, especially in the last 200 years. The Congregation's work in the United States from its foundation was primarily educational – seminary education, in keeping with the core mission, and education of the laity – both as the most urgent need of the bishops and as a means of financially supporting their seminary programs. In the 1970s and 1980s, as the Congregation was evaluating its constitutions in light of the Second Vatican Council, serious questions arose about the appropriateness of these institutions in the life of the Vincentian community (Poole, 1988). This soul searching, especially among those involved in the university apostolate in the United States, provided an enlivened focus on the mission of serving the poor. Through revisiting the charisms and dispositions of Vincent himself, it became clear that institutions are Vincentian by:

- Educating the poor and their children, thereby breaking the vicious cycle of poverty within family units.
- Educating first-generation college students, thereby enabling new immigrant groups, and traditionally marginalized populations to enter the mainstream in the United States.

- Presenting the Roman Catholic tradition as an interpretive framework and spiritual support for students' professional and personal lives, while respecting and being enriched by the great religious diversity represented in the university communities.
- Instilling in all students an affective and effective love for those in need.
- Researching poverty in society and looking for creative ways to moderate this social evil.
- Offering the universities' considerable resources (e.g., knowledgeable experts, volunteers, meeting space, financial support, contacts) to other local, national and international agencies and community groups with complementary goals. (Holtschneider & Udovic, 2001, pp. 7-8)

THE STUDENT IN THE VINCENTIAN SCHOOL

In order to be faithful to the charism of Vincent, Vincentian education must be at the service of two groups of students: the poor and those who might potentially collaborate in the work of alleviating the plight of the poor. These two groups must never be isolated. They must encounter one another in the classrooms, the library, the chapel, the gymnasium, and the recreation room. As these two groups of students interact with one another, they receive a holistic education marked by justice, faith, intellect, and emotion.

The largest deficit of those who are poor is their dearth of possibilities to change their situation. Education provides individuals with possibility. It opens doors. In the play, *Educating Rita* (Russell, 1981), an alcoholic professor tries to dissuade Rita from pursuing what he has found to be a vacuous wasteland. Rita responds to her cynical and perpetually inebriated mentor that his education provides him with the knowledge to choose against classical literature. She seeks an education because it provides her with the freedom to make choices about her life. Her statement clearly describes the impact education has on the poor. If those who profess to live the charism of Vincent want to affect the life of the poor in substantive ways, they must be concerned with issues of educational opportunity for the poor. In any Vincentian school, the poor must be welcomed as Christ himself would be welcomed into the midst of the community.

The other group of students that should swell the ranks of Vincentian schools is those who seek to serve the poor and those who wish to improve the plight of the poor and disadvantaged. Whether they are clerics preparing for ordination, schoolteachers and principals preparing to serve in poor inner-city or rural schools, or those who will collaborate with the poor in some other way, all should have a welcome place in the Vincentian school. Vincentian education gives students not only the requisite intellectual skills to inform their minds, but a formation that changes their hearts.

Effectiveness in Vincentian schools is measured by the level of sensitivity of those who are interested in business or literature, computers or government service, have for the plight of the poor by confronting the effects of poverty and actually encountering the poor. Faculty members in Vincentian schools invite their students to encounter the poor, join them in assisting the poor, and reflect with their students on their experiences with the poor.

THE QUALITIES OF A TEACHER IN A VINCENTIAN SCHOOL

The educational charism of Vincent de Paul finds form, life, and fire in the school's teachers. Whether the teacher is a member of the Congregation of the Mission, one of the congregations founded by or in the tradition of Vincent de Paul, or a member of the laity, he or she must develop certain qualities, virtues if you will, that will assist them in their educational mission. Vincentian schools work on the presupposition that their teachers possess both the technical and intellectual competence to perform their assigned duties. However, that is merely a prerequisite. The effective Vincentian teacher must invite students to enter into serious dialogue about the topic at hand, inspire them to the self-confidence and self-sacrifice needed to achieve the assignment, and exemplify the zeal that is requisite to integrate the current lesson to the task of transforming society.

The virtues that the Vincentian teacher must foster and exemplify are simplicity, meekness, humility, mortification, and zeal. These are the five virtues that Vincent recommended to those who were called to membership in the Congregation of the Mission (General Curia, 1989). He recommended these virtues to the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission as a way of becoming receptive to the poor that they are to serve. It is impossible to connect with the materially poor if one is clever, haughty, overbearing, or full of one's self. The poor do not want their state "rubbed in their faces." Often this happens because a well-intentioned, but non-thinking, individual is so busy with one's personal life, that he or she cannot put personal issues aside to hear the other. Straightforwardness (simplicity), matched with gentleness (meekness) and a proper sense of self (humility) become the attitudinal traits that are requisite for associating with the poor in a meaningful way. Teachers in the Vincentian tradition need to be self-possessed. The virtues of simplicity, meekness, and humility are at the core of that self-possession. The more comfortable teachers are with themselves, the less likely they will use their students to boost their own ego. In order to be effective, the person-centered approach, that is a hallmark of Vincentian education, is built on this sense of comfort with one's self.

There is no place for a lack of engagement among Vincentian teachers.

Those called to teach in Vincentian schools exhibit a sense of commitment to the teaching and learning process. Vincentian teachers must be flexible because their students are non-traditional. The non-traditional status of the students cannot become an excuse for not striving toward excellence. The curriculum of the Vincentian school is holistic and integrated (Sullivan, 1997). Excellence in this holistic and integrated approach requires the teacher to not only train minds, but also hearts. It requires teachers to see the world as their classroom, creating an instructional paradigm that is not solely academic, but also experiential. This type of zeal comes at a cost – the cost of the teacher’s time and energy. This type of zeal is accomplished by a type of mortification that truly is a giving of one’s self for the sake of the other.

TWO TEACHERS IN THE VINCENTIAN TRADITION

When one thinks of educators that embrace the Vincentian tradition, the names of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and Blessed Frederick Ozanam must come to mind. Mother Seton influenced American Catholic elementary education, while Ozanam provided an example of the nature of Christian witness in the vocation of the professorate.

Seton, who converted to Catholicism after the death of her husband, established a small school. At the request of John Carroll, the first Bishop and Archbishop of Baltimore, she established Catholic parochial schools in the United States and a new religious congregation, based on the rule of the Daughters of Charity. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton founded the Sisters of Charity in 1809 (Dirvin, 1962). Her foundation became the means by which the charism of Vincent was transplanted to the United States, before either the Congregation of the Mission or the Daughters of Charity set foot in the new world (Ryan & Rybolt, 1995). Mother Seton’s Sisters of Charity inaugurated a free, Catholic elementary education in the United States as well as providing comfort and assistance to the sick and dying.

Seton’s accomplishment was greater than the establishment of the parochial school system. It is not the establishment of the school system, but rather her providing an education to both the wealthy and the poor. The earliest foundation at Emmitsburg was founded on the presupposition that a free school for the poor be established there (Hannefin, 1989). When the poverty of Mother Seton’s sisters forced them to take on wealthy students in order to support themselves, they continued to educate and tutor the children of the poor. Mother Seton was gentle in dealing with the children in her charge (Dirvin, 1962). While she did not use the term, she certainly did recognize the “face of God” in each child with whom she worked.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, so prevalent in parishes throughout the United States, was a continuation of the tradition of the Confraternities

of Charity. Frederick Ozanam founded the Society of St. Vincent de Paul during his years as a student at the Sorbonne. A devout young man, Ozanam was scandalized by the secularist leanings of the faculty and most of the students at the Sorbonne. Entering into academic debates with the Saint-Simonians, they confronted him asking, “What are you doing for [the poor] – you and your fellow Catholics?” (Derum, 1995, p. 72). Ozanam had been involved with some service work under the guidance of Sr. Rosalie Rendu, D.C., but his experience was an isolated event. He found in the disputation of his adversaries a challenge to integrate the love of God and neighbor that Vincent had so eloquently lived during the course of his life 2 centuries earlier. Thus, he organized his fellow Catholic students to help provide service to the poor (Derum, 1995). Ozanam completed his studies and became a professor at the Sorbonne. He continued the work of the Society and helped his students integrate their academics and their life of faith with service to the needs of the poor (Ryan & Rybolt, 1995). As a professor, Ozanam was popular. Students packed his lectures. Even in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1848 when Catholicism took a conservative turn, his popularity endured (Des Rivieres, 1989).

Ozanam, in a series of letters described the nature of the membership of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Writing to Joseph Arthaud, on July 9, 1839, Ozanam described the society as student-centered.

Three conferences have been formed in a few months in the parishes of Saint-Severin, Saint-Louis d’Antin, and Saint-Medard. This is meant for the students of the Ecole polytechnique and the Ecole normale which count 18 members, nearly a third of its membership. Add to that that it is perhaps the most pious conference, and they have asked as a favor to join to the usual prayer a special prayer for the conversion of their comrades. What a happy future for university youth! (as cited in Dirvin, 1986, p. 162)

In a letter written to Ferdinand Velay, on July 12, 1840, Ozanam described the diversity of membership.

I saw, gathered in the meeting amphitheatre, more than 600 members who are not the totality of its Parisian personnel. The majority made up of poor students, but with some contrast in the addition of the highest social positions. I rubbed shoulders with a peer of France, a deputy, a counselor of state, several generals, and some distinguished writers. (as cited in Dirvin, 1986, p. 193)

Ozanam, like Mother Seton and St. Vincent de Paul before him, brought together the poor and the wealthy for a common task. As American Catholic educators continue to profess holistic education, the work of Frederick Ozanam – in the spirit of Vincent de Paul – serves as a worthy model.

THE ORGANIZATION OF A VINCENTIAN SCHOOL

Vincentian schools, in order to be true to the charism, must be collaborative endeavors. St. Paul's dictum "to be all things to all people" is impossible for any one individual. The only way to accomplish Vincent's mission of bringing the Good News to the poor is with the help of many others. During the course of his ministry, St. Vincent developed impressive organizational structures to provide relief to the poor, sick, and most abandoned. He gathered a community of priests and brothers, whose primary purpose was tending the spiritual welfare of the poor and the clergy who served them. Vincent founded the Confraternities of Charity to provide those members of the laity with means, the opportunity to assist the poor. While the works of the confraternities certainly were impressive, Vincent sought to gather a group of women whose sole devotion would be the welfare of the poor. In collaboration with Louise de Marillac, he founded the Daughters of Charity, a congregation of women that grew to be the largest in the Church (Ryan & Rybolt, 1995). What St. Vincent de Paul accomplished by founding the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and the Confraternities of Charity was a collaboration that brought priest, brother, sister, and laity together to effectively evangelize the poor by both word and deed.

Fr. Luigi Mezzadri, a Vincentian priest, succinctly described St. Vincent's propensity for collaboration and its impact on the life of the Church:

Vincent showed an extraordinary capacity for co-operation. He never acted on his own, but always looked for help from others and he had the gift of drawing out their talents. He was working for the Church; in a way, he was bringing the Church to birth. (1992, p. 25)

Through cooperation and collaboration with others, Vincent not only served the poor, he evangelized them. However, in the process of creating these collaborations, he provided his collaborators with opportunities to allow the poor to evangelize them. Those ministering recognized their own poverty and became open to recognizing Christ in the other. Vincentian administrators must challenge their collaborators not merely to be good at their respective tasks, but also to encourage those collaborators to be changed by the people they serve. The task of Vincentian administrators is not merely to provide professional development to their colleagues, but the possibility for personal transformation.

THE INTEGRATION OF CATHOLIC AND VINCENTIAN IDENTITY IN VINCENTIAN EDUCATION

The charism of Vincent de Paul focused upon the spread of the Gospel. It was not solely an evangelistic sharing of words, but an active living out of the Gospel message. Vincent's mission found words in the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord. (Isaiah 61: 1-3)

While Vincentian institutions, especially its universities, are diverse, accepting all equally, they must still be places of evangelization. This evangelization is not a matter of coercion; rather, it is a matter of allowing example to shine through. At DePaul University's 100th anniversary liturgy, Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M., the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission, offered this challenge to the Catholic faculty and students of DePaul:

All of you, who love the university, be truly Catholic at DePaul. Men and women of all religions come to DePaul: Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Hindus. But they come freely to a Catholic university, and so do not hesitate to let your light shine before our students in your liturgies, in your theology, and most of all in your personal witness to Christ. Let it be clear that for you Jesus is Lord and that he is alive at DePaul through you. "I am the truth," Jesus says, "and the truth will set you free." Let the truth be your light, my brothers and sisters. And let your light shine. (Maloney, 1998)

The challenge that faces Vincentian universities, precisely as Catholic universities, is to provide places where scholars and students can gather to effect a change in society and affect the lives of the poor. It must also be a place where the underlying charism of Vincent de Paul, the integration of the love of God and neighbor, occurs in such a way that it becomes a witness of Gospel values in the midst of a diverse society.

The challenge that any Vincentian educational institution must face is the balance between its commitment to diversity and its foundational mission as a Vincentian institution that proclaims God is loved when one's neighbor is loved, that one can be an intellectual and a person of faith, that evangelization is an invitation, not an act of coercion. Vincentian universities must invite all students, faculty, and staff to reflect upon the plight of the poor and to serve them. However, they must invite in a special way their

Catholic students, faculty, and staff to collaborate even more deeply in the mission. Those members of the Vincentian Family – the Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity and Sisters of Charity, as well as their many collaborators – must help students and colleagues to reflect upon and hear God’s call in the cry of the poor, and to encounter Christ by seeing his face in the face of the poor.

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