

The Feast of St. Vincent de Paul: Sunday, September 27, 2020

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

A Reflection on Faith and Good Works

This summer, we spent some time as a parish community looking at the Letters of James, and their connection to Paul's letter to the Romans. Their conclusion, both of them, was that good works alone would be a just a "show of piety", while faith without good works, such as studying all about Jesus Christ would impart a lot of "knowledge", yet, also, not necessarily lead to faith.



Today, we celebrate the feast day of **St. Vincent de Paul**, our Patron Saint, known as "The Apostle of Charity," and the "Father of the Poor," who died today (Sept. 27th) in 1660 at the age of 79. He was a great example of faith and good works living his life in the service of the poor.

From the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

St. Louise de Marillac collaborated with Vincent for many years in their native France. She also died in 1660, six months before him, and 10 years younger.

Monsieur (a title of respect like "Sir") Vincent, as he was known, was a man of deep faith, keen intellect, and enormous creativity. He saw a multitude of poor peasants and laborers all around him "who are condemned for not knowing the necessary truths of salvation." He decided to make the evangelization of the poor the focal point of his priesthood.



Beginning of the year 1617, Monsieur Vincent founded the "Ladies of Charity" from a group of women within his parish. He organized these wealthy women of Paris to collect funds for missionary projects, found hospitals, and

gather relief funds for the victims of war and to ransom 1,200 galley slaves from North Africa.

Then in 1625, he founded what is now known as the Congregation of the Mission (they use C.M. after their names), or as they are more popularly known, the "Vincentians." These priests, with vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and stability, were devoted entirely to the people in smaller towns with the apostolate of preaching and by works of charity. At his death, the congregation numbered 500 members, and they extend into 90 countries all over the world!

"My idea was that men [and women] who are called to continue Christ's mission, which is mainly preaching the Good News to the poor, should see things from Christ's point of view and want what He wanted. They should have the same spirit He had and follow in His footsteps."

(Prologue of the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission)

In that time in Europe, seminary life lasted for some months only; the great majority especially in the country places had no practical means of formation. Monsieur Vincent soon realized that the priests themselves did not know enough about the faith to offer spiritual assistance (for example, some did not even know the words of absolution, etc.) So, he became a pioneer in clerical training and also helped in establishing formal seminaries with curricula of several years.

Then Vincent began to organize popular missions (almost 1,000 missions in his lifetime!). In the villages at that time, the poor country people had little contact with the clergy, and therefore, little instruction in their faith. Monsieur Vincent developed systematic parish missions as we now understand them for the laity.

In 1633, Monsieur Vincent and St. Louise de Marillac founded the *Daughters of Charity*. (These are the sisters that had the "Flying Nun"-type of habits.) The sisters were active in all sorts of ministry: institutions for the elderly and mentally ill, on the battlefield; they set up soup kitchens, organized community hospitals, established schools and homes for orphaned children, offered job training, taught the young to read and write, and improved prison conditions. By the time of their deaths, there were more than forty houses of the Daughters of Charity in France, and



the sick poor were cared for in their own dwellings in twenty-six parishes in Paris! They, too, are now worldwide.

From this Sunday's Psalm 34:

*The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.*

*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

St. Vincent's body was exhumed in 1712 - 53 years after his death. The written account of an eyewitness states that "the eyes and nose alone showed some decay". His bones have been encased in a waxen figure which is displayed in a glass reliquary in the chapel of the motherhouse/house of formation of the Vincentian fathers in Paris. His heart is still incorrupt, and is displayed in a reliquary in the chapel of the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in Paris.

The remains of St. Louise and those of St. Catherine Labouré lie preserved in the chapel of the motherhouse at Rue du Bac, Paris, France. Catherine Labouré was the Daughter of Charity to whom, in 1830, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared, commissioning her to spread devotion to the Miraculous Medal.

Many educational institutions were established and operated by the Daughters of Charity over the years, including Saint Joseph College, Emmitsburg, Maryland. In 1809, Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton founded the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph linked to the Daughters of Charity, and taught there. She sent several sisters from that convent to our parish in Baltimore, to work with and teach the orphans, back when we still had an orphanage at the south side of the church.

In May of 1833, Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, a French literary scholar, lawyer, journalist and equal rights advocate, founded with fellow students what is now known as the **Society of Saint Vincent de Paul**.

In conclusion, according to St. Vincent, "There is nothing more in keeping with the Gospel than, on the one hand, to gather up light and strength for the soul in prayer, spiritual reading, and solitude, and then to go forth and dispense this spiritual good to men and women. This is how we should act; that is how we should by our deeds bear witness to God, that we love Him."

Louise Gregg

