Witness Perspective

Poverty & The Work of Christmas

By: Marian Lamoureux, North Central Region Voice of the Poor Leader

The Work of Christmas

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To make peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

-Howard Thurman, from The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations

Over the past three weeks in this National Poverty Month January 2018, we have been enlightened by weekly Voice of the Poor Witness Perspectives on poverty: how to build a road out of poverty, poverty is always about people, and how to be a change agent in the lives of the poor. Looking over these three articles, it struck me how these perspectives brought me back to one of my favorite poems, “The Work of Christmas,” by Howard Thurman.

Thurman, who lived from 1899 to 1981, was raised by his grandmother who was a former slave. He was a Baptist minister and a professor of religion at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges in Atlanta. A spring semester he spent studying with Rufus Jones, a Quaker mystic and leader of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, clarified an activism rooted in faith, guided by the Spirit, and maintained in peace.

His arguably most famous poem, the “Work of Christmas,” causes me to reflect on its meaning for us as Vincentians at this time of confluence of noteworthy happenings — the holiday season, National Poverty Month, the Pro-Life March, political angst and paralysis. Though we’ve put away our Christmas decorations in our homes, outside the work of Christmas waits for us, and our opportunities are everywhere.

❖ “To find the lost, heal the broken, feed the hungry”

Because all life comes from God, all life must be reverenced. Difficult as it sounds, the Gospel of Matthew instructs us, ‘Amen I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me’ (25:45). Those we serve certainly include the sick, the homeless, and the aged. But
looking beyond, how are we serving the “other,” the mentally challenged, the inmate, the ex-offender, the immigrant? Are we finding ways to be creative in our charity and particularly to avoid toxic charity (click here to learn about “toxic charity” from a fellow Vincentian)?” Do we really believe that there are no limits in how we can find ways to help and be a part of one’s journey out of poverty? Do we really believe in our ability as Vincentians to help others find a new way?

❖ “To release the prisoner, rebuild the nations, make peace among people”
It is a sad reflection of politics today when Facebook memes ask the question if you think veterans should be housed before refugees should be housed, or if “illegals” should get any benefits. Human beings are not illegal, nor are these mutually exclusive moral equivalencies.

It is crucial that we remember that first and foremost we are Christians, and by virtue of our baptism called to serve everyone. The pouring of the water makes all the difference. From that moment on, we are called to serve. Again, looking at the Gospel of Matthew 25:43, “I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.” A rejection of the stranger is contrary to the Gospel. Pope Francis first reminds us – “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the Gospel.”

And then our Pope and leading Catholic social-justice minded organizations ask us to “Share the journey,” pointing out on the Share the Journey Website that “Your neighbors live across the street and the country, across oceans and hemispheres” and that millions of God’s children are presently fleeing war, persecution and poverty. Pope Francis invites us to share their journey by walking with them in prayer and support, and our Pope asks to act in ways suggested on the website.

❖ “To make peace among people, music in the heart”
In this time of political upheaval, government shutdowns, accusations of who caused what, as Catholics we must pay heed to the Gospel message. How? Here’s two simple ways.

✓ Be sure to register (free) for Vincentian VoterVoice, the Society’s electronic social justice advocacy platform; and
✓ Speak up when you see injustice, no matter how innocuous it may seem.

In our serving, may we Vincentians bring peace to households, carrying a song of love in our heart and the promise of Christmas.

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