



SERVING IN HOPE MODULE VI

Our Vincentian Conference

SESSION 6.3:

Our Service

Learning Objectives

After completing this Session, you will have greater insight to:

- 1. Understand the Essential Element of Service in the Conference.**
- 2. Appreciate that “No work of charity is foreign to the Society.”**
- 3. Identify how to be a “Voice for the Poor”.**
- 4. Recognize the need for Systemic Change.**

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

After Jesus had washed their feet... He said to them: "Do you understand what I just did for you? You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and fittingly enough, for that is what I am. But if I washed your feet —I who am Teacher and Lord—then you must wash each other's feet. What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do." (John 13:12-15)

SERVICE TO THE POOR

(Each section is read slowly and reflectively, by different members)

Rule, Part I:1.2 states:

"The vocation of the Society's members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope."

The Essential Element of Service roots us in our Vincentian Vocation by calling us to person-to-person service, which encompasses every form of aid that alleviates suffering and promotes the dignity and self-respect of our fellow men and women. The Society strives not only to alleviate need but also to discover and redress the situations which cause it.

Rule, Part I: 1.3 tells us that:

"No work of charity is foreign to the Society. It includes any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation and promotes human dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions."

ACTION ORIENTATION ...

Vincentians regard the plight of distressed people as a cause for sensitive and informed boldness, rather than timidity. An alert Conference will come to realize they have the right, and sometimes the duty, to provide leadership in attacking the social problems of our society. Perhaps this will mean direct responsibility for coping with unmet needs. If the task is beyond its own capacity, the Conference may serve as catalyst within the parish or work within their Council to develop needed special works.

Rule, Part I: 1.4 mandates:

"The Society serves those in need regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender, or political opinions."

...TEMPERED WITH REALISM

Conferences must be realistic in what can be accomplished. If they attempt too much, they will exhaust themselves in contacts of a superficial sort and will be able to share little of themselves with those who often desperately need human warmth and caring. If Conferences attempt too little, they will become bored with themselves, and become institutional obstacles in the way of what otherwise might become dedicated and generous parish concern for the poor.

VINCENTIAN SERVICE

Rule, Part I: 1.8 states:

"Vincentians serve the poor cheerfully, listening to them and respecting their wishes, helping them to feel and recover their own dignity, for we are all created in God's image. In the poor, they see the suffering Christ."

PERSON-TO-PERSON

Many possibilities for person-to-person service exists. Whatever program of charitable action is eventually adopted, Vincentian involvement should possess these characteristics:

- a witnessing of Christ's love for all men and women;
- a personal sharing of time and interest on the part of the Vincentian with those in material and spiritual need;
- promoting the dignity of the human person; and
- the furthering of individual self-help efforts.

Some of the most common types of person-to-person services provided today would be the following:

- Food or limited financial assistance to meet the needs of a short-term crisis.
- Direct aid, combined with a referral to the appropriate public agency (ies), in situations where eligibility for government assistance is possible.

- Referral to an appropriate counseling agency when recurrent financial problems on the part of the individual or family point to a need for professional guidance.
- Regular sharing of manpower and material resources between a more affluent parish Conference with one less well-endowed financially.
- Development of inexpensive recreational programs through arranging for the use, at a nominal fee, of local facilities by marginal income families and special groups like senior citizens.
- Securing professional and household services at nominal cost for low-income families. This type of neighborhood service could encompass a considerable range of specialists: nurses, carpenters, doctors, lawyers, electricians, plumbers, appliance repairmen, etc.
- Sharing of expertise in such areas as budgeting, nutrition, house keeping, applying for employment, child care, home maintenance, legal and medical counsel, and the like.
- Organizing, within the parish or Council, programs or classes for groups interested in acquiring home management, budgeting or family living skills.

CHARITY AND JUSTICE

The profound words of Frederic Ozanam speak to our hearts:

"For if the question which disturbs the world around us today is not a political question, but a social question; if it is the struggle between those who have nothing with those who have too much; if it is the violent shock of opulence and of poverty which shakes the earth under it, then our duty as Christians is to throw ourselves between these irreconcilable enemies, and to make the ones divest themselves so that the other may receive as a benefit; so that equality may operate as much as it is possible among men; and to make charity accomplish what justice alone cannot do." (Frederic Ozanam November 5, 1836)

(Pause in silence for reflection-underline the words/phrases that touched you - make notes in the space provided.)

DISCUSSION:

How does our Conference live the Essential Element of Service?

CLOSING PRAYER: (Together)

Lord Jesus, deepen our Vincentian spirit of friendship during this meeting, make us responsive to the Christian calling to seek and find the forgotten, the suffering or the deprived so that we may bring them your love. Help us to be generous with our time, our possessions and ourselves in this mission of charity. Perfect in us your love and teach us to share more fully in the Eucharistic Sacrifice offered for all. Amen

SESSION 6.3: OUR SERVICE

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

"Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we welcome you away from home or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we visit you when you were ill or in prison? The king will answer them: I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers or sisters, you did it for me." (Matthew 25: 31-40)

THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

(Each section is read slowly and reflectively, by different members)

Rule, Part I: 7.1 states:

"The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it. It is, therefore, committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and to contributing to their elimination. In all its charitable actions there should be a search for justice; in its struggle for justice, the Society must keep in mind the demands of charity."

The **Voice of the Poor** is a relatively recent yet rapidly growing program of the Society. Its purpose is to increase public awareness of the causes of poverty, obstacles that hamper the poor in their struggle to improve their lot, and injustices which call out for redress. The role of the Conference in this area is to communicate these conditions in such a way as to gain the attention, sympathy and action of legislators and others who have the power to fix these conditions.

Frederic Ozanam, the founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, taught us that: "Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveler who has been attacked. **It is Justice's role to prevent the attacks.**" Vincentians through direct service to the poor have long been in a position to identify the causes that often result in poverty.

Through their experiences in Home Visits, unique to the Society, Vincentians are qualified to advocate for justice in addition to offering charity to those in need.

Rule, Part I: 7.5 tells us that:

"The Society helps the poor and disadvantaged speak for them-selves. When they cannot, the Society must speak on behalf of those who are ignored."

Therefore, **Voice of the Poor** are advocacy committees operating at all levels of the Society: the Conference, District, Arch/diocesan, and National Council.

WHY MUST WE GET INVOLVED?

Rule, Part I: 1.5 states:

"Vincentians strive to seek out and find those in need and the forgotten, the victims of exclusion or adversity."

While charity provides temporary alleviation of pain and suffering, it is not enough. We strive for the identification and elimination of the cause of the need in the first place. We call for both charity and justice. We speak for the preferential protection of the Poor and vulnerable particularly for those who are afraid to speak or cannot speak for themselves.

Calls to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul seeking emergency assistance come in continuously. In home visits Vincentians hear the cries for help first hand - food, assistance with rent, utilities, health care, car repairs, bus fare,the cries continue unabated. Resources to meet growing needs are limited. We cannot be satisfied with the little given when the solution is only temporary. Members are called to be a voice for the voiceless and for advocacy and justice.

Rule, Part I:7.6 states:

"Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements."

SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Our Mission states: "Organized locally, Vincentians witness God's love by embracing all works of charity and justice. The Society collaborates with other people of good will in relieving need and addressing its causes, making no distinction in those served because, in them, Vincentians see the face of Christ."

Rule, Part I: 1.10 challenges:

"Vincentians endeavor to help the poor to help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and that of their local community."

Therefore, Vincentians make a commitment to walk with the poor not only for the short term-but especially for the long haul...to empower them to become self-sufficient.

In works among those who are poor, Systemic Change aims beyond providing food, clothing and shelter to alleviate the immediate needs of the poor by:

- Focusing on assisting the poor to develop strategies by which they can emerge from poverty.
- Aiming at transforming a complete series of interacting elements, rather than just an individual element.
- Changing attitudes that have caused the problems which a group hopes to solve...and begin to see the world anew.

Systemic Change helps us to grapple with the question: "What can Vincentians do to create opportunities for the poor, through collaboration with people who are poor, to break the cycle of poverty." We must come to the understanding that poverty is not the inevitable result of circumstances, but it is the product of unjust situations that can be changed. (Reference: **Seeds of Hope** available from the National Council)

Rule, Part I: 1.6 tell us:

"Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty that may be identified or anticipated. It gives priority to the poorest of the poor and to those who are most rejected by society."

(Pause in silence for reflection-underline the words/phrases that touched you - make notes in the space provided.)

DISCUSSION:

How does our Conference promote social justice and systemic change?

CLOSING PRAYER: (Together)

Lord Jesus, deepen our Vincentian spirit of friendship during this meeting, make us responsive to the Christian calling to seek and find the forgotten, the suffering or the deprived so that we may bring them your love. Help us to be generous with our time, our possessions and ourselves in this mission of charity. Perfect in us your love and teach us to share more fully in the Eucharistic Sacrifice offered for all. Amen.

ENRICHMENT READING

SERVICE TO FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The Incarcerated:

- Friendly visitors to men and women who are in prison.
- Assistance to the families of inmates.
- Support those on probation or parole to get back on their feet and find meaningful employment.

The Institutionalized and Home-Bound:

- Visits to those who are patients in hospitals, live in nursing homes and who lack family and friends
- Friendship calls on home-bound elderly persons

- Home Care Services enabling people to remain living at home can consist of one or a combination of the following:
 - Volunteers to assist the home-bound in handling homemaker responsibilities;
 - Preparation and delivery of hot meals by volunteers;
 - Providing occasional leisure time opportunities for family members who normally take care of an aging relative;
 - Telecare services by daily telephoning the elderly to check on them, their needs and for purposes of social exchange; Home maintenance services by providing chore services, minor home repairs, etc.
 - Transportation Services to stores, doctors' offices and church;
 - Recreational Services by activity and companionship in the home or at Centers for the Aged;
 - Special Personal Services of volunteer barbers, beauticians etc.

The Handicapped:

- Offer help and companionship to handicapped persons (the blind, deaf, physically disabled, mentally challenged) and services similar to those provided needy older persons.

Those in Crisis:

- Temporary Homemaker Service.
- Transportation in an emergency.
- Baby sitting in an urgent situation.

The Lonely and Forgotten

- Alleviating the suffering that accompanies the breakdown of families (in most years, over two million divorces will be granted in this country).
- Ministering to those who are in the dying process without the comfort of others who care.
- Comforting those bereaved and left alone in their grief.
- Visiting those effectively abandoned in State and County mental hospitals.
- Helping the victims of serious crime.

INFORMATION AND REFERRALS

- Providing information about services related to poverty, medical and emotional needs, family and personal problems, youth counseling and youth activity programs, senior citizens programs and facilities.
- Referrals to self-help programs which can limit the practice of recurrent hand-outs. Such "entitlements" may be destructive of human dignity and degenerate into a subtle form of government enslavement. Self-help systems are such operations as food co-ops, housing rehabilitation, credit unions, repair co-ops, adult education, home services for the aged and shut-in, legal services, and the like.
- Advocacy on behalf of those who are encountering delays and obstacles in the providing of services to which they have apparent right.
- Conducting informational programs regarding community welfare and counseling programs, i.e. Social Security, counseling services, budgeting, household management, etc.

A PLANNED APPROACH

Rule Part I: 7.4 tells us that:

"The distinctive approach of Vincentians to issues of social justice is to see them from the perspective of those we visit who suffer from injustice."

The Conference must take a sensible step toward helping the people of the parish, the neighborhood, and the community in both a realistic and a Christian way. To avoid the excesses of either too much or too little, each parish Conference must approach its task with head as well as with heart. A vital Conference employs the following techniques:

- listening to the poor in order to understand their actual needs;
- fact-finding about community socio-economic needs;
- becoming familiar with existing social service programs;

- analysis of the Conference in terms of its competencies, available person power, and financial capacity;
- determination of appropriate priorities with respect to meeting people's needs;
- the organization of work so that the Conference can effectively carry out an agreed upon mission;
- continuing evaluation of Conference activities.
- participation in the Council "Voice of the Poor" Committee.