

Serving in Hope Module I
Our Vincentian Vocation

SESSION 1.1: What is a vocation?

Learning Objectives
After completing this Session, you will better:

1. **Appreciate the meaning of "vocation."**

2. **Articulate your "call" to be a Vincentian.**

3. **Understand your ministry of service as a "call" to put your faith into action.**

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

"The two disciples heard what John the Baptist said, and followed Jesus. When Jesus turned around and noticed them following Him, he asked them, What are you looking for?' They said to him "Rabbi, where do you stay?" "Come and See,' he answered." (John 1: 37-39)

INTRODUCTION:

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

The word "vocation" comes from the Latin vocare; which means "to call." Vocation is a "call" a personal summons from God to a human being, inviting the person to embark upon a specially chosen work relative to God's plan of salvation. As members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, we have been "called" by God to a ministry of service to those who are poor, to bear witness to Jesus' compassionate love.

READING:
(Manual of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States, p. 4)

It's not for everyone. It's not for anyone. But being a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul - being a Vincentian - is for some. It is a special calling by God. Blessed Frederic Ozanam says: " ... what is proposed to us is the sublime vocation God has given us. Would that we were a little bit worthy of it and bent easily to its burden." (Letter #90)

St. Vincent de Paul said over and over again, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." The Church says: "The followers of Christ are called by God, not according to their accomplishments, but according to his own purpose and grace." (Lumen Gentium, #40)

A member of the Society puts his or her faith into action. The Vincentian vocation is the intimate desire to participate personally and directly in helping the needy by person-to-person contact and by the gift of one's heart and friendship, doing so within a Conference, a community of faith, of lay persons each inspired by the same vocation.

The Vincentian vocation may be expressed in many ways and with different shades of meaning. Practical translation of faith into action, meditating upon it and adapting it to our changing world is the very life of every Vincentian, the very life of the Society.

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

DISCUSSION:
Have you felt that being a Vincentian is a "vocation" - that you have been "called" by God to serve the poor?

CLOSING PRAVER: Let us pray together the words of St. Vincent:

"It is our vocation... to set people's hearts ablaze, to do what the Son of God did, 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." Amen

ENRICHMENT READING:
(Please read before the next session.)

FREDERIC OZANAM'S VOCATION STORY

Frederic Ozanam was born in Milan, Italy on April 23, 1813, and at the age of three, his family moved to Lyon, France. When Frederic was 7 years, old he nearly died of typhus. His parents had already faced the death of 8 of their children, but with a deeply rooted faith in God they prayed that Frederic would be cured, and by a miracle of grace he lived. Frederic's father was a doctor, and he often saw his father and mother leave, sometimes in the middle of the night, to take care of the sick and the dying. Their example gave him the wisdom and compassion that only comes from the witness of people's lives.

At the age of 16, while in college, Frederic suffered a severe crisis of faith. He questioned why he believed and he faced despair, depression and scruples. When the temptations became stronger and sharper, Frederic felt surrounded by darkness and he felt utterly alone. He prayed to the Holy Spirit; he asked for the gift of faith, the grace to believe, and when the crisis ended, he promised to consecrate his life to the defense of the faith and the service of truth.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul

At the age of 18, Frederic went to Paris to attend the University. The post-revolutionary Paris was not merely anti-Catholic, it bristled with open hostility against anything Catholic or Christian. The young college students would often meet with their friend and mentor, Monsieur Emmanuel Bailly, to discuss and debate issues. One evening, at a meeting, the revolutionaries issued a challenge by saying, "Christianity is now outworn and defunct. It may have been useful in the past, but what use is it today? What has Christianity to offer? Where are its works now? Show us your works!"

"Show us your works," this pierced Frederic's heart and sent him to the poor. By grace, Ozanam knew the secret that service must be motivated by love and that assistance given to the poor must be given personally with sympathy, humility, compassion and respect. The lives of his parents had taught him this wisdom.

Frederic and his companions came to know that they needed to organize their works for the poor- they needed to organize formally to help the poor on a regular basis, both in order to serve the poor and in order that others could see the witness of their lives. And so on Tuesday evening, April 23, 1833, Frederic Ozanam, together with Emmanuel Bailly, Auguste Le Taillandier, Francois Lallier, Paul Lamache, Felix Clave and Jules Devaux, began the Conference of Charity and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was born.

Emmanuel Bailly sent Frederic and his companions to Sr. Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity. Sr. Rosalie gave them the names of families to visit in their homes. Pondering, she looked at Frederic and said, "Because you see Christ in His poor, I know you will approach each one you visit with humility as His servant. But, always remember that if we had been through the hardships they have had to meet, if our childhood had been one of constant want, perhaps, we too, would have given way to envy and hatred, as I must admit have many of the poor in this quarter. But, be kind and love, for love is your first gift to the poor. They will appreciate your kindness and your love more than all else you can bring them."

Frederic chose St. Vincent de Paul to be the patron saint of his new Society. He once said:

"Even the revolutionaries admired St. Vincent, they forgave him the crime of having loved God." Frederic wrote: "To choose a patron saint does not mean simply adopting a figurehead which will help us to cut a good figure in the religious world. A patron is a model whom we must try to imitate, as he strove himself to imitate the Divine Model, Jesus Christ. It means trying to carry on the work he has started endeavoring to acquire something of his warmth of heart, attempting to catch up the threads of the thoughts which were in his brain. A patron saint provides a model for us to copy on this earth and a protector who will watch over us in heaven."

Frederic and Amelie

Frederic was named a professor at the Sorbonne when he was only 27 years old. He was the youngest to be named to this post. Frederic's faith that had been tried by fire, proved strong as he continued to face the prejudice and the anger of those who hated him in hating the church.

After many years discerning his vocation, thinking first that God was calling him to the priesthood, Frederic realized that marriage was his vocation and on June 23, 1841, when he was 28, he married Amelie Soulacroix who was 20. Then on July 7, 1845, they had a child whom they named Marie. Frederic had a deep conviction that marriage was indeed a sacrament and a vocation. The sacrament of marriage was a powerful means of holiness for Frederic and Amelie, as for countless Vincentians throughout the world. Frederic knew the poverty of poor health all his life, and his suffering led him further on the journey to a compassionate heart.
It was Amelie's love and strength that supported Frederic during the painful years of suffering that he had to face. Amelie believed in Frederic's dream, in his vision of the Society, and when he became discouraged, she was always there to bring hope.

Legacy

The Rule of the Society evolved out of the life and faith of Frederic. Authentic Vincentian service assists the impoverished and the troubled but it is done in love and with love. As Vincent, Frederic knew that this is what our Lord asks of his followers, namely, that they seek and find Jesus in the poor. Vincentianism is Faith in Action: it is a reaching out in friendship and with helping hands to those who are poor or who are suffering. Vincentian helping is per-son-to-person, by a personal gift of the heart, in humility, simplicity and charity. Being a Vincentian is a vocation.

Frederic knew that service must promote human dignity and integrity, and that "No work of Charity would be foreign to the Society." The Society was to be concerned not only with relieving need but also with redressing the situations that cause it, and so he advocated the concepts of Christian social justice, the rights and dignity of every individual and the need for equality of opportunity in education and employment.

Frederic taught that Vincentians must seek through prayer, meditation on the scripture, the teaching of the Church, through their daily lives, and in their relationship with those in need, to always bear witness to the love of God. And Frederic also knew, as Vincent did, that we do not go to the Lord, as if we were alone. We need a Christian community where members mutually encourage one another in loving God and neighbor.

Frederic possessed a faith conviction that a PROVIDENT GOD was guiding history and guiding his own personal journey. He always had a true devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. Therefore, it seems fitting that on the feast of the Birthday of the Blessed Mother on September 8, 1853 Frederic Ozanam died at the age of forty, having attained an authentic holiness through his life and work, knowing that God had indeed called him to be a Vincentian.