



## **SERVING IN HOPE MODULE V**

### **Our Vincentian Rule**

**SESSION 5.5:**

#### **The Rule Demands our Work for Justice**

**Learning Objectives**

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

- 1. Identify the call of the Church for the lay faithful to work for social justice.**
- 2. Understand our Vincentian call to work for social justice.**
- 3. Appreciate our call to become the “voice of the voiceless.”**

## OPENING PRAYER:

*Jesus, opening the scroll read: " The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners..." Then he said, "Today, this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:18-21)*

## INTRODUCTION:

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

In his encyclical letter, Dec. 25, 2005: "**Deus Caritas Est**" (God is Love), Pope Benedict XVI continues to challenge us by saying:

"The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society...is proper to the lay faithful... they cannot relinquish their participation in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote the common good. The mission of the lay faithful is therefore to configure social life correctly...it remains true that charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as 'social charity.'" (29)

"Those who work for the Church's charitable organizations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity. Consequently, ...charity workers need a formation of the heart': they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirit to others. As a result, love of neighbor will no longer be for them a commandment imposed, so to speak, from without, but a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love." (31a)

"The figures of the saints such as... Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac...stand out as lasting models of social charity....the true bearers of light within history, for they are men and women of faith, hope and love." (40)

## **Rule, Part 1-Section 7: Relationship with Civil Society- Work for Social Justice**

**Praying with the renewed Rule let these words penetrate your heart:**

As **Vincentians**, we are committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and to contributing to their elimination. In all our charitable actions there should be a search for justice; in our struggle for justice, we must keep in mind the demands of charity.

As Vincentians, we should speak out clearly against situations where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation.

**Praying with the Rule, we ask... Are we:**

- concerned not only with alleviating need but also with
- identifying the unjust structures that cause it?
- committed to identifying the root causes of poverty?
- promoting a culture of life and a civilization of love?
- looking towards the sustainable development and protection of the environment?
- speaking out against the injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion of those we serve?
- fostering new attitudes of respect and empathy for the poor?
- promoting understanding, cooperation and mutual love among people of different cultures, religions, ethnic origins and social groups?
- working with families and communities?

**Praying with the Rule, we ask... Do we:**

- envision a more just society in which the rights, responsibilities, and development of all people are promoted?
- listen to the voice of the Church calling us to create an equitable and compassionate social order?
- see the issues of social justice from the perspective of the poor whom we visit?
- help the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves?
- speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves?
- oppose discrimination of all kinds?
- work to change the attitudes of prejudice, fear or scorn?
- defend the right of each person to be responsible for his or her own life?
- refrain from identifying with any political party?

**(Read quietly the following text)**

**DISCUSSION:**

**What social justice issue challenges you?**

**CLOSING PRAYER: (Together)**

*O Lord, grant us the wisdom and integrity to faithfully live our renewed Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Give us the grace to be committed to grow in holiness, to live in a community of faith and love, and to serve those who are poor and suffering. May all Vincentians be a visible sign of your boundless love. Amen*

**ENRICHMENT READING: (For your prayer and reflection)**

**EXPANDING THE CIRCLE OF SOLIDARITY**

Dennis Holtschneider, CM

Some stories come along at the right moment in your life. Here's a story that has never left the back of my head since the day I heard it...

*A villager is walking by the river early one morning. The villager looks out into the water and sees a baby floating down the river. Horrified, the villager races into the water, grabs the baby, and brings the baby to shore. The baby is fine. Relieved, the villager looks back into the water and sees another baby floating down the water. The villager again dives into the water and rescues this baby as well. Once more, the villager looks into the water... and sees dozens of babies floating down the river. The villager calls out an alarm, and the entire village comes running to the river to rescue as many babies as they can before the water carries them away. This is a village that is mobilized. Every villager is at the river, trying to save the babies from the water. This is a village that is improving lives. Many of the babies are being saved. But the babies keep on coming... because no one is going upstream to find out who is throwing the babies into the water in the first place.*

You may have heard this story before. It's simple but it came along at a time in my own life when it changed the way I looked at the world. I was drawn to the Vincentian way of life because of its charity, and the way real, flesh-and-blood people were assisted. I loved working in the soup kitchen; teaching people to read in the literacy classroom; building up the self-confidence and spirituality of youth in an inner city youth groups; getting people into housing; spending time cooking, cleaning, speaking with, and housing people overnight in the shelters;

referring people to social services that would make a difference; referring people to legal aid to help them stay in this country... and so much more. Those were tangible projects. When I went to bed that evening, I had done something real.

Then came this baby-in-the river story, and it was like I opened my eyes and saw something I hadn't looked at before. I had wondered about the conditions that made other people's lives so different from my own, but it was such a big question, and I really didn't know much about it, that I usually set the larger questions aside, and just continued doing charitable work. This story made me stop and wonder if I was just like those villagers who kept rescuing the babies and never solved the problem. What difference was my charity - and life - making?

I have come to believe that it is not enough to give food and shelter, important as that is. If I do nothing to change the situations and structures that make people poor, then I've only dabbled a bleeding wound. I haven't stopped the bleeding. I now believe that God wants us to stop the bleeding. He wants us to go upriver, to fix the problem, not just minister to the symptoms of the problem.

We must be advocates for the poor. We aren't professionals. I know that. We aren't government officials, policy wonks, economists, analysts, or anyone important who can change society. But even if we aren't professionals, we must be advocates. Advocates are important. There aren't enough professionals out there to make a political difference. Things change because enough people come together and create energy. The professionals can't make that change, only large groups like us... Vincentian Advocates.

I've been wondering about the larger Vincentian Family itself. In Vincent's day, no one even thought of changing larger structures to keep people from becoming poor in the first place. They thought about charity. But in our age and time, we have realized that if we make changes to our laws, to our government programs, to our city and educational policies, that many more people can be helped that way than can ever be taken out of poverty by our charitable works. So, I've been thinking for some time about what the Vincentian Family in the U.S. can do. We don't have policy experts among our ranks, or politicians, or economists. What can we do? What do we have to give?

It crystallized for me during the recent presidential election. No one mentioned the poor. Neither side - republican or democrat - mentioned the poor. **The poor were invisible in the last election.** And that's where we can help. We know the poor. We may not be policy experts, but we know the poor. I want to make a proposal today. And I want to propose something that

would require all of the Vincentian Family to work together in the United States: Let's get the poor into the public eye. Let's make the poor visible again, and let's do it together:

Some possibilities:

- On a local level, let's get every group of boy scouts and girls scouts, and neighborhood associations, schools, churches to do something for the poor. To see the poor, to meet them, not just drop off bags of clothing for people they'll never meet.
- More regionally, let's meet with elected officials, and give them tours of the neighborhoods we work in. Let's tell them the stories and needs of the poor.
- Let's meet with local newspapers, give them story ideas.
- Let's get people at our churches and institutions to write letters about the needs of the poor.
- When there's a larger issue, get them human interest stories.
- Nationally, let's hire a PR firm to help us figure out how to get the needs of the poor back on the political agenda.
- Let's mobilize the national foundations to put the poor back on the map of public concern.
- Let's work with existing national organizations, such as Network and others, to provide them our access and knowledge of the poor.
- And let's use the poor to do this. Empower them to speak on their behalf.
- Let's work across church lines.

Let's create a national visibility for the poor. Let's foster a national desire to do something to help the poor. In the end, this is only one idea. The larger point is contained in the story about those poor babies floating down the river. It's not enough to give charity. Not in this world. Not at this time. The poor need our advocacy as well as our handouts.