

The Joy Of Christmas

Christmas is that time of year that most Vincentians look forward to and start planning early. It is on the conference calendar and the preparation dates started long ago, as far back as September or late August when they met with the school principals, many of them new principals, to get their agreement and commitment on fall and Christmas help. At the same time they also sought a Thanksgiving food drive commitment.



We are not the only ones anxious about Christmas. One group contacts me in early November to find out if they can do a family for Christmas. It is a yearly project in their office that gives them great joy and satisfaction.

As Vincentians we commit and look forward to serving our neighbour in need in the best possible way. Each year we try to improve on the past year. How can we do it better this year? We ask. All we have to do is ask ourselves what we would do if it was our children or parents we were serving. Ask ourselves what our benefactors would want. It's up to us to make that magic. And it is magic for ourselves and those we are fortunate enough to serve. As Vincentians we can only grow in spirituality by service, by returning God's love through our neighbours in need. We are so fortunate for this opportunity.

As Vincentians we have the privilege, opportunity and obligation to make each Christmas the best ever. This is our goal and we are not alone. Christmas is the time of the year that many of us find the Lord walking beside us helping make things happen. We willingly took on this obligation when we committed to the vocation of being a Vincentian. And, Yes, it is an obligation and we owe it to ourselves, our conference and our neighbours in need to fulfill this obligation to the best of our ability.

Will we inconvenience ourselves in the service of those in need? Most certainly we will. We understood this when we committed to the vocation of being a Vincentian. While we are volunteers we still must make and fulfill our commitments. We ask ourselves if we have the time for this but our faith tells us that the Lord will give us all the time we need.

***"If we do not get JOY from serving
we should not be doing this"***

There are many different ways of making a great Christmas for those we serve.

I don't suggest that the following suggestions are the only way.

That this is the only way. No one way is more correct than the other as long as we achieve the objective of serving those neighbours in need with **Love, Respect, Justice and Joy**.

However, all the different ways involves hard work, commitment,

Since you get more joy
out of giving joy to others,
you should put a good deal
of thought into the
happiness that you
are able to give.

— Eleanor Roosevelt

probably some late nights and long days and maybe a bit of worry. When we are tempted to take a short cut or delete something we have to ask ourselves what is the risk, what is the possible effect? Do we have a right to take that risk?

I do suggest that we don't pattern our service off another group that might be a lower standard. We don't want to meet the lowest denominator. Set the bar high. Set a standard you can be proud of and have the faith that the Lord will see you through. Yes, I know He sometimes makes us wait till the 11th hour but He does come through.

We certainly don't want a negative effect. Rather, we want a Christmas that, as a conference and individuals, we can be proud of. We have one chance to do it right. Each year we should challenge ourselves and our conferences to do better for those we serve than the year before. If we are to live and believe our faith we know that the Lord will walk with us to see this happen.



When we pack the food box we should use our best judgment and put everything in the box that we can. Pack the box with Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner in mind.

Please don't insult the person with stale dated food. It is marked "Best Before" for a reason. Please respect that That last can of soup that you jammed in the box might be one more meal for that family. It all counts. Be as generous as you can.

I remember working loading food boxes with a Vincentian and he remarked; *"The food boxes are heavy when we pack them but they seem light when we bring them to our neighbours in need."*



***The more we bring that family at Christmas
the less stress they will have in their life.***

Christmas presents are generally plentiful for the younger children. Don't be afraid to give a child several gifts. We can never give too much. Gifts for teens and adults are scarce and often you will get gift cards to fill this need. Regardless of that, all people deserve and want a gift the same as you enjoy getting a gift. Mothers generally want gift cards for food and are not concerned about themselves.



But, please don't leave them out. Gloves, scarves, chocolates etc are all good gifts. Find something that you know the mother or father would like. And please don't give a used article. Don't give a gift to one of our neighbours in need that you wouldn't give to your own family. Let that be your litmus test. For teens Gift cards for the movies, I Tunes, Coffee Shops etc are all good choices.

"Our Standard of service should be the highest possible"

The gifts come from many sources such as;

- Schools offering to do families or individuals
- Individuals doing a family or more
- Businesses. It is easy to get businesses to do families.
- Parishioners will generously supply the bulk of the gifts and food

Remember that confidentiality is paramount and the business or individuals don't know who the family is or take the Christmas order to them unless they are screened Vincentians.

Many of the gifts will come from our parishioners. The generosity of the parishioners is generally quite humbling and they look forward to the opportunity of giving.

To start, initially we call each mother or father, probably in early November, and asked what each person would like for Christmas. We gathered as much information as possible on each family sheet. While we were talking to them we tell them what day we are doing Christmas and give them the choice of picking up their Christmas order at the church or having it delivered. Ideally, our delivery day should be as close to Christmas as possible and ideally no more than a week away. This gives more time for money to come in as well as giving the parishioners more time to purchase gifts.



***Christmas is not about us.
It is about those we serve.***

If we do the Christmas too early the food will be gone by Christmas and probably the presents will be opened. The date should be selected for the benefit of those we serve rather than for our convenience. Involve some of your parishioners to sort and wrap gifts. Youth groups such as Boy Scouts and Girl Guides will help.



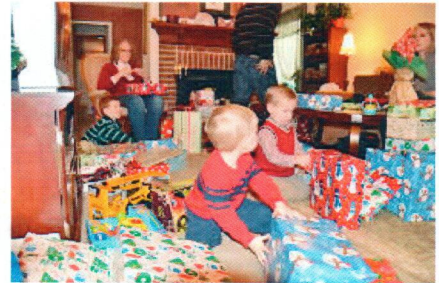
Next gift tags are made out for each individual gift with as much information as possible. The Tag, as one example might say; Family 43 Mother would like a pink sweater in size medium. You might also add that the gift should be returned by a set date. The gift tags might be put in baskets in the church and before and after mass the parishioners will pick the ones for which they want to get a gift. Vincentians should be available before and after the mass to answer questions.

A conference might put some on the Jesse tree. No, not all the gifts will come back for various reasons so we will allow for this by putting in gift tags with a G rather than family number. Expect that you will need 30% additional gifts for these reasons. These will be generic gifts. In the final outcome we will still not have enough gifts for the teens and adults and should be prepared to purchase things such as socks, chocolates, Coffee shop cards, Subway cards, movie passes, etc., to ensure every person in the house receives at least one gift.

We generally put a Christmas letter in each family order. We wish them a Merry Christmas and also put in the mass times for Christmas and invite them to join us for Christmas mass if they can. And some do.

Sure we respect boundaries but if a family is out of your boundary and there is no conference to serve them, what will you do? What would your benefactors want you to do? Could you go to bed knowing that you refused a family and they might not have Christmas? I think not. As Vincentians we don't think that way, we will serve them with "Love, Respect, Justice and Joy". Remember, if you commit to serve them, the Lord will walk with you and provide as He always has.

When the family opens the gifts and the mother tearfully tells you it was the best Christmas ever you know you succeeded and made a difference. That is your reward and a great reward. Many of our best benefactors will tell you that Saint Vincent de Paul came to their house when they were small. Surely, some day some of the children you are serving this Christmas will be benefactors to the Society in years to come.



***Could you go to bed knowing that you refused a family
and they might not have Christmas?***

Getting resources for Christmas is often a challenge but we must remember that we are not in this alone. I firmly believe, and I know many Vincentians who agree, if we are willing to do the work, the Lord will provide. And, often in amazing ways. But we must do the work. Wishing is not enough. Rely on your faith and plain old fashioned hard work and you will do a Christmas for your families of which you will be proud.



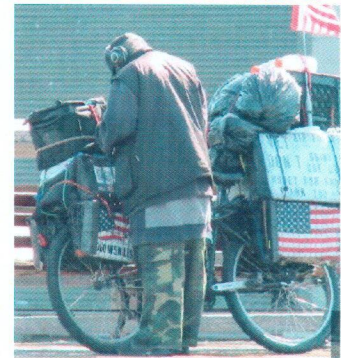
Very often we are overwhelmed with gifts, especially for the small children. Put some aside to use through the year for birthdays of the children of the families we serve. It is so nice when you visit a family to have some gifts to bring along through the year. Be as generous with the family orders as you would want God to be to you with his love.



Many of our families will pick up their Christmas orders. However, many do not have vehicles and we will deliver their orders to them. Sometimes others, such as the K of C help us with deliveries and that is appreciated but remember that there must always be a Vincentian with the delivery.

Serving our families is great but there is more to Christmas. Our RULE tells us to "Seek out those in need" Remember

our act of contrition and the words "**and for what we have failed to do**". Are there others that need help. Others that will not have presents or food for Christmas. Ask yourself that question. The sad truth is that many people, individuals and families will spend Christmas alone, without gifts and perhaps very little food. Some of these people are in the apartment buildings where we have other families that we serve. Some of these people are homeless on the street. What a great opportunity and privilege to serve Him and return His love through these people.



The Forgotten

I had breakfast a few mornings at the Tim Horton in Whitehorse a few years ago with this gentleman with the bike holding everything he owns. I enjoyed his company. But, I wonder where he spends the nights. I wonder if he is hungry. I wonder if he is still alive. I wonder if he is in somewhere warm for Christmas where he will be treated like a human being with Love, Respect, Justice and Joy. These are the forgotten people. We can and we must not forget them.

Can we not pass the word that there is help. We do not want to go to bed Christmas eve knowing that an individual or family didn't have Christmas and we were aware of it. If you get a call Christmas eve, please go to them. You will sleep more peacefully if you do.

Have enough faith to believe that if you commit to do this the Lord will help as He always does.

For us, our reward, I can assure you, is going to bed Christmas eve tired but also very happy knowing that we made a difference and served everyone as well as we possibly could. That is what will give us a happy and Holy Christmas.

William Graham, Vincentian