

Vincent de Paul's Recipe for Solidarity

Charity, Justice, & Organization

Meghan J. Clark



In the wake of widespread natural disasters, the interdependence of the one human family comes clearly into focus. The damage of Hurricane Irene, flooding in Mississippi and Tennessee, the earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear meltdown in Japan, and the devastating earthquake in Haiti all reveal a profound vulnerability and connection within the human family. Like the Samaritan in Luke's Gospel, we experience a communal feeling of compassion and respond by generously giving donations. In the last 30 years, grand campaigns of charity have become commonplace. From *LiveAid* in 1985 to the *Clinton Bush Haitian Fund* in 2010, the American people have demonstrated a great capacity for charity as almsgiving (personal financial donations). Charity, in popular discourse, often exclusively refers to these types of actions. Despite the fact that charity is a word Christians hear and use often, charity as the pervasive and umbrella virtue has waned in the popular religious imagination. Instead, charity has become synonymous with almsgiving or material donations. However, Christian charity is richer, deeper, and requires a great deal more of us than simply *giving alms*.

THE CHARISM OF CHARITY

All Christians, by our baptism, are called to live charity. It is "by the virtue of charity, 'the bond of perfection,' we love God above all else and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God."¹ But what does that mean? What does *living charity* require of individual Catholics? What does it mean for faith formation? The heart of practicing the Christian virtue of charity lies in its intimate and necessary relationship to both justice and organization. A relationship exemplified in the example of St. Vincent de Paul and the communities he inspired. In Vincent, we find a concrete historical model for

how we can develop solidarity in our parishes, diocese, and national and global communities.

Charity and daily concern for the poor is the heart of the Vincentian charism. A deep and abiding commitment to all human persons as equally created in the image of God with full dignity is central to the mission of St. Vincent de Paul, the confraternities he founded (most notably the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity with St. Louise de Marillac), and the Society of St Vincent de Paul (founded by

Frederick Ozanam in 1835 and placed under Vincent's patronage). For Vincent, the call of Christian discipleship demanded that "we should love our neighbor as being the image of God."² In order to love one's neighbor as the image of God effectively, Vincent recognized that charity required significant organization. Reflecting on the Charity of Women at

Châtillon-les-Dombres, France in 1617, Vincent notes:

Since charity toward the neighbor is an infallible sign of the true children of God, and since one of its principal acts is to visit and bring food to the sick poor, some devout young women and virtuous inhabitants of the town of *Châtillon-les-Dombres*, in the Lyons diocese, wishing to obtain from God the mercy of being his true daughters, have decided among themselves to assist spiritually and corporally the people of their town who have sometimes suffered a great deal, more through a lack of organized assistance than from lack of charitable persons.³

The observation that in situations of distress, the poor often suffer, not from a lack of charity or charitable persons, but

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¹ *National Directory for Catechesis*, 164.

² Abbe Maynard, *Virtues and Spiritual Doctrine of St. Vincent De Paul* (1877), (St. Louis, MO: Vincentian Foreign Mission Press, 1961), 126, 137.

³ Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. Sr. Marie Poole DC, (New York: New City Press), 8.



rather a lack of organization holds as true today as it did in 1617. If one looks at Haiti in the wake of the earthquake, there was a massive outpouring of charitable giving and of charitable persons willing to donate their time and services. The difficulty, however, is that in order to be effective, charity needs organization. In his recent book, *Haiti After the Earthquake*, Paul Farmer explains:

We all gave thanks for the Good Samaritans who struggled to save lives after the quake, even as we struggled with chronic problems such as low public-sector wages and lack of supplies. Giving thanks for Good Samaritans was one thing; coordinating them, [was] quite another. On day four after the quake, it was clear that the wounded city was mobbed with rescue and relief workers. More medical care was available in urban Haiti than ever before. The coalitions brought together by the disruptive force of January 12 included a veritable horde of highly trained health professionals, most from North America (including hundreds of Haitian-Americans).⁴

⁴ Paul Farmer, *Haiti After the Earthquake* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs Books, 2011), 14.

Need for people, money, and supplies remained, but at its most basic level the charitable response to the Haitian earthquake required organization to be effective. The act of “giving” was not and is not sufficient for living charity in light of the gospel.

EQUALITY AND DIGNITY

For Vincent de Paul, living charity requires that organization engages the poor and suffering as equal human beings with dignity. In a society full of suffering and upheaval, “the social mission of St. Vincent de Paul was to restore these victims of war to their dignity as human persons, to their proper stature as children of God. His program for the reconstruction of society was simplicity itself.”⁵ Vincent provides concrete historical witness to contemporary Catholic catechesis’s recognition that “respect for the inherent dignity of every human person is the foundation of a just society, and its ultimate end is the development of those persons to their fullest potential.”⁶ Respecting the dignity of each human person in the community requires confronting reality. Just as the aid workers

⁵ Most Reverend James A. McNulty, DD, “St Vincent De Paul and His Social Mission,” *Saint Vincent De Paul: A Tercentenary Commemoration of his Death 1660-1960*, 62.

⁶ *National Directory for Catechesis*, 169.

and healthcare professionals needed to be coordinated and organized in order to provide effective aid, charity that does not engage reality is not charity. Because Christian charity is grounded in love of neighbor as *in the image of God*, it requires not only the proper intention and motive, but also listening and engaging those in need as neighbor. As Christians, we cannot assume that we know the appropriate and effective charitable response without listening to the needs and voices of those in question, or we run the risk of perpetuating the victimization and vulnerability of the poor; then we are not practicing Christian charity.

ACTING WITH JUSTICE

Practicing charity in light of the gospel also requires justice. In founding the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Frederick Ozanam would distinguish the two stating, "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 attack."⁷ What does it mean to both pour oil on the wounds of the traveler AND prevent a future attack? In the Daughters of Charity's hospital social work, we find a historical example of simultaneously providing organized charity and working for justice. For St. Louise de Marillac and the Daughters, *care of the sick* was not limited to acute illness; Louise established hospital social work, seeing to it that in Paris "before a young girl was discharged from the hospital there, the sisters assisted her to find suitable work so that she would have a means of support and would be able to live in dignity."⁸ Responding to the direct need of the sick is an act of charity; attending to the future of these women is an act of justice. Both are required for living in light of the gospel.

The necessary union of charity, organization, and justice in Christian discipleship is evident in Scripture and Catholic social teaching. For example, in Luke 4:18-19, Jesus himself clearly links both charity and justice stating, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty

to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." A favorite of Christian groups focused on charity as well as those focused on justice and organization, Luke 4:18 is central to the mission statement of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Demonstrating the intersection of charity, justice, and organization, CCHD has a "dual pastoral strategy of education for justice and helping people who are poor speak and act for themselves reflects the mandate of the Scriptures and the principles of Catholic social teaching. CCHD also provides the Catholic faithful with concrete opportunities to live out the love of God and neighbor in ways that express our baptismal call and continuing Eucharistic transformation."⁹ Catholic social teaching and the demands of our baptismal call are emphasized in the *National Directory for Catechesis*: "Our society needs the witness of Christians to take the social demands of the gospel seriously and who actively practice the virtue of social justice."¹⁰ This is a crucial part of our moral formation. The intersection of charity, justice, and organization is essential if we are to dismantle social sin and injustice, as "social injustice can be so deeply rooted and ingrained into the life of a society that is almost defies eradication."¹¹ Still, this is precisely what is asked of us, by our baptism, by Christ. We are called to be both the Good Samaritan and actively work for a more just society. The poignant insight of Vincent de Paul is that responding to Matthew's parable of the Last Judgment¹² is simultaneously a matter of charity and justice.

9 *Catholic Campaign for Human Development Review and Renewal*, 2-3.

10 *National Directory for Catechesis*, 170.

11 Ibid. p. 172.

12 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me' (Mt 25:35-40).

7 "Charity and Justice," <http://www.vincenter.org/res/word/fowords.html>.

8 Margaret J. Kelly, DC, "Louise de Marillac: The 'Gentle Power' of Liberation," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*, 36.

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SOLIDARITY

This integration of charity, justice, and organization provides a base recipe for developing solidarity. Catholic social teaching's principle of solidarity has as its foundation the fundamental commitment to the full and equal dignity of every human person, regardless of poverty or infirmity, as a child of God and brother or sister in Christ. For Vincent,

All [human persons]men form a mystic body; we are all members of each other; all our members have such sympathy and are so connected together that the evil of one is the evil of the other. Yes, to be a Christian and to see a brother in affliction and not weep with him, not feel for his sickness, is to be devoid of charity, is to be a Christian in appearance only, it is to be without humility.¹³

The unity of the Christian community means not only that we are to feel sympathy, but also that the neighbor is an extension of ourselves. To be Christian is to feel pain with those in

pain as well as to feel joy with those who are rejoicing.¹⁴ In *On Social Concern*, John Paul II defines solidarity saying, "this felt interdependence is a new moral category, and the response to it is the 'virtue' of solidarity. Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or a shallow sadness but a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. It is in attitude squarely opposed to greed and the thirst for power" (SRS 39). Inspired by the challenge and example of Vincent de Paul, we are called to cultivate solidarity through practicing organized charity and justice through listening and encountering them as equals. Only then, will our well-meaning efforts to reach out to those in need embody the virtue of charity inspired by the gospel, which is ultimately *friendship with God*. ■

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13 Maynard, 131.

14 Ibid, 132.

Four ways to cultivate solidarity through charity and justice

1. **On the Parish level:** What projects and activities are your local Societies of St. Vincent de Paul and parish social justice groups engaged in? In the midst of busy lives, engagement in our local parish grounds us and provides a strong link to the world around us. It is often easier to see poverty and suffering in other parts of the world, than it is to recognize the needs in our own backyard. Working for charity and justice in our own parish is crucial for facing the reality of suffering in our community.

2. **On the Diocesan level:** Catholic Charities and Catholic Campaign for Human Development work in your diocese. Contacting your local Catholic Charities website or local CCHD coordinator will alert you to diocesan projects focused on charity and justice. Through learning about, supporting, and participating in CCHD community organizing efforts, we cultivate solidarity within our neighborhoods. (<http://www.usccb.org/cchd/>)

3. **On the National level:** The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in coordination with Christian leaders around the country, has launched the "Circle of Protection." As Catholics, we are called to join our voices with those whose voices are not heard in Washington – the poor and vulnerable. As the "Circle of Protection Statement" reminds us: "They do not have powerful lobbies, but they

have the most compelling claim on our consciences and common resources. The Christian community has an obligation to help them be heard, to join with others to insist that programs that serve the most vulnerable in our nation and around the world are protected." (For more information: <http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/2011/11-085.shtml> and <http://www.circleofprotection.us/>)

4. **On the Global level:** As mentioned above, the theology of accompaniment calls us to walk *with* the poor and vulnerable. Many people engage in this through joining volunteer organizations (many religious orders, like the Jesuits, Franciscans, Vincentians, etc. have volunteer organizations. For more information: <https://www.catholicvolunteernetwork.org/>). Are there ways that those of us living in the United States can join in solidarity with those in other countries? Three organizations are at the forefront: Jesuit Refugee Service (<http://jrsusa.org/>), Catholic Relief Service (<http://crs.org/>), and Christian Foundation for Children and Aging (<http://www.cfcausa.org/>). While less well known than the others, CFCA is a Catholic organization that organizes sponsorship of children, college students, and the elderly. Modeling its work on solidarity and *walking with* our neighbors, CFCA prioritizes relationships based on equal human dignity and respect. ■