

**Reflections on 25 Years of Colorado Vincentian Volunteers**  
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**September 28, 2019**

Who would have known more than 25 years ago that we would be here together, celebrating 25 years of Colorado Vincentian Volunteers with friends we knew before 25 years ago and SO MANY friends we have gained over these last 25 years! It is such a blessing to be here! Thank you. And thank you not only for being here tonight, but thank you for being HERE, here in this community that IS CVV. Everyone who is here tonight and all those who were not able to be here physically, and those who are still yet to come, truly ARE CVV. This is the greatest lesson we have learned over our 40+ years of ministry. CVV has become a symbol of the true meaning of the Body of Christ, mystical and very physically present, all at once. It is amazing to look out over this crowded room and to realize this Body of Christ. You are amazing.

We feel a need to apologize for reading our reflection with you. Several months ago, a wise woman on our Program Committee said, "I want to hear about *your* journey, *your* conversion over these last 25 years." (Margaret was so wise we decided to hire her.) And as we told her, we are not really "keynote speaker types," so thanks for your patience. We will also ask you to participate and to recognize your own connections and insights that are absolutely part of this journey.

We have realized over the last few months what a task it is to put all of it into words. So this is a very incomplete picture of how CVV has transformed us. This brought us to look up the word "transformation," which states: Noun: a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance; a marked change in form, nature, or appearance; a process by which one figure, expression, or function is converted to another. (You can see we have a few more gray hairs, and we have snacked on some gleaned bagels.) For us, transformation truly has happened year by year, and we discovered long ago that if we are not being challenged, trying to change and grow, we not only become stagnant, but our community and organization can become stagnant as well. So here goes.

When we started CVV in 1994, we had discussed the proposition of it with several groups before we came to the Vincentians. And then, we were just sitting there and talking over a beer at a St. Thomas Seminary Bizarre with Tom

Esselman, who is here tonight. He said, “That sounds like something we might be interested in helping to form. Let’s take it to our Provincial Council.” Long story short, they approved the proposal and with the financial backing, the seeds of the charism, and the encouragement of the Midwest Province of the Congregation of the Mission to make this a community supported Non-profit, CVV began. It would not have happened without them. And we would not be standing here today as Vincentians ourselves without CVV, which over these 25 years has become Vincentian and is still becoming Vincentian.

Then came the task of creating staff and interviewing Vincentian priests, one of whom would be our chaplain. Little did we know that priests were not accustomed to interviews, but it was so clear in that process that we wanted Tom Nelson to join us in those beginning years to create CVV. Little did we know how different Tom’s and our experiences were, which became a huge gift in the creation of CVV, and which, we all three can attest to, brought the struggles that helped to lay the foundation. It is so true that the pain and the struggles are so worth it when we are able to work through them, listen to one another and glean what we can so that we can come to decisions based in the mission. Tom introduced to us the *Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission*, written in part with the help of Hugh O’Donnell, who is also with us tonight.

These Constitutions truly led Tom to the Vincentians, and they have become a guide that grounds not only us, but each group of volunteers throughout these 25 years. We use these 6 characteristics every year as the volunteer group creates their goals and objectives for the year, and we are using them today to share our conversion story.

1. **Clear and expressed preference for the apostolate among the poor, so that their evangelization is the sign that the kingdom of God is present on earth.** CVV is based on 4 components or pillars: Spirituality and Prayer, Community Life, Reflection and Discussion on the Gospel, and Direct Service and Advocacy. This last one is all about being with people who are living in poverty and are marginalized. It is this core pillar for which the other 3 are in place. It is central to the CVV mission.

We believe that we must be grounded with the poor: with the poor part of ourselves, with people experiencing economic poverty, with people experiencing marginalization because of disabilities or mental or physical health concerns, with people who are rejected by the culture as having no worth or no voice or no dignity. *They* are at the core, and knowing them and recalling our relationship with them continues to ground us, from our early experiences of SPLUNGE (Special People Living a Uniquely Nourishing and Growthful Experience, an urban retreat for high school students) to our mission in Central America and at Casa Juan Diego in Houston; from our interactions with local non-profits who are working directly with people who are marginalized to the volunteers themselves. What does this look like practically? When we are faced with a million choices set in front of us (which phone to get, what plants to put in our garden, what house to buy, what clothes to wear, etc.) we can picture Jorge and Silvia in El Progreso, Honduras, and recall the very few choices they have. When we learn of St. Vincent dePaul's regret at the end of his life, "I do not know the name of a poor person," we can try to continue building relationships with them, we can continue to look for the person in our midst. Bishop Ken Untener once said, "To find the poor you must go out of your way. You must look with different eyes, for the poor feel we do not want them in the normal parts of our lives." When we are complaining about picking up our friend Manuel at the bus station, realizing that we have a "busy" schedule, we must be reminded of how we need him in our lives, how we need each relationship to remind us not only of who we are, but of who God is.

Let us pause for a few moments, and think about those we know who experience poverty and marginalization and simply call them by name.

- 2. Attention to the realities of present-day society, especially to the factors that cause an unequal distribution of the world's goods, so that we can better carry out our prophetic task of evangelization.** As we were reflecting on this presentation, we remembered that when our country took an economic dive downward, CVV grew to two communities. We grew because the need was greater than ever. And we grew because people like all of you believe in young people with their ideals, energy, fire and

passion, and you continued to support us and all of the placements where volunteers work.

It also means trying to keep in tune with the different generations of young people over these 25 years. The pioneers of the first year were on fire to serve and to respond to a call for social justice. 25 years later, we hear some new motivations, such as a need to respond to the environmental crisis, a need to be more grounded in our faith. Throughout these many years and alongside the speed of growth with technology, paying attention to the realities of our time has become more and more critical.

How does this affect our conversion? We once heard that working with young people can keep you young. Not so sure about that, but working with young people can keep opening new avenues, new inventions, new motivations, new perspectives, new questions that must be part of the ongoing growth and transformation of CVV. When we started CVV we didn't have email, digital stories, Facebook, and these were not automatic additions for us. We also learned that we must realize how to keep the elements of our program that truly ground us in the mission *of inviting Young Adults into a process of transformation through companionship with people who live in poverty and are marginalized.*

Hopefully, experiences along the way of dealing with volunteers who are struggling at their worksites, of getting pushback from 22-year-olds (isn't that what they are supposed to do?), of trying to decide on a guideline or a rule for the houses, of having to come to the decision to ask someone to leave, of reviewing evaluations from volunteers who sometimes struggled more than we knew at the time, of sharing with one another the loss of life... hopefully, all of these experiences have given us more opportunities to empathize and to be humbled by the privileges that we have. We must recognize these privileges, acknowledge them, act on them, recognize the opportunity for growth, and, at times, reconcile and seek forgiveness for them.

It's interesting to think that during these 25 years, we have first been: younger than the volunteers' parents, then their parents' age, and

now more their grandparents' age. What does that say to us about transformation?!

Let us pause for a moment and think about the realities of today and what issues we must pay attention to so as to better respond.

- 3. Some sharing in the condition of the poor, so that not only will we attend to their evangelization, but that we ourselves may be evangelized by them.** We MUST be evangelized by them. We MUST open ourselves to receive the loaf of bread that "the other" has to offer. We must hold up a mirror as we look at our neighbors, our brothers and sisters, our friends. AND, we must look at our lifestyle. This is perhaps one of the hardest for us to talk about tonight, because we are so blessed to have so much: family members who are healthy and loving, our home and all that is in it, our jobs, our cars, the opportunities for travel, our community, the list goes on. And what we constantly try to do is to recognize all as gift and to detach from each one, while at the same time to be inspired by others who are truly living life so simply that others may simply live, inspiring us to detach more and more.

We have also realized over time that the young adult men and women who come to be part of CVV are witnessing to us this value of sharing in the condition of the poor, are witnessing to us the value of simplicity, are witnessing and reminding us of what they have to offer, and how "*they* must forgive *us* the bread that we give them." They have helped us to truly understand that we are all poor and that realizing that fact is realizing what Vincent DePaul meant when he evangelized so as to be evangelized.

Let us pause to reflect for a moment on how we are sharing in some condition of the poor, or how we are called to share in the condition of the poor.

4. **Genuine community spirit in all our apostolic works, so that we may be supported by one another in our common vocation.** Perhaps at the core of this is our little community: our family, our relationship with each other, our children Sean and Katie who come along into this ministry. As our co-worker Ryan can attest to, our early morning “walks and talks” are at the heart of how we process our ministry, of what we struggle with, of what we bring to the table. Our family relationship creates the grounding for us to do this for these 25 years. Monday night dinners become our family dinners, which Katie so often helps us to remember through her presence and her insistence on being here. So many of our colleagues who work in other programs throughout the country face burn-out (what *is* burnout?) before they have the beautiful opportunity and the privilege to see so many of the fruits of our labors. When alum come back and share the amazing things they are doing, the amazing families they raise, the amazing insights they have into their work, we are truly humbled. Often when you alum return, you remember those *long* Mondays with appreciation for the reflection and the intentionality that were integral to our Reflection & Discussion times, and you forget about the tiredness or the now-and-then questions about *why* we are doing this. (Maybe this is when you realize why we *love* Theological Reflections!

And we are deeply humbled and we recognize our poverty through the gifts of the broader community that makes up CVV, through the staff (shout out to Adrienne who helps balance the books), through the generosity of donors, people who cook, people who serve on committees, people who give us advice, people who repair things at the houses (and we even once in a while bring an extension cord or lamp from home to fix!). We are humbled and grateful to know that we cannot do this alone. We gain new perspectives on businesses that offer their services to us, on Foundations that have a profound impact on services to marginalized people, on local parishes and pastors and communities of priests and sisters who have led the way for this lay organization to be created. One transformation we have experienced is a deepened understanding and awareness of *gratitude*.

Let us pause a few moments and recognize those who are part of each of our communities and be thankful for them.

5. **Readiness to go to any part of the world, according to the example of the first missionaries of the Congregation.** We are, and have *always* been, part of something bigger, part of something beyond the walls at 1732 and 1544 Pearl. The opportunity to travel and to be part of MISEVI, which is a collaborative group of Vincentian mission programs, gifts us with a broader view. The privilege of studying Vincent in France is part of that gratitude and that bigger world, bigger community, broader perspective that has shaped our world, be it Kenya or 5-points, Capitol Hill or Honduras, Swansea or Guatemala, LoDo or Mexico; all the privileged places we have been help to shape a wider view and a readiness to go anywhere, which for us continues to be Denver. And it offers us a view of the readiness of these young men and women to come to Denver and to have *this* place as their “anywhere” to serve.

As we look back on these 25 years and more, we realize that each step of the way, each yes to the here and now, each time we made a change led to the next and led us to be HERE. That call to “anywhere” is really to HERE.

Let us pause and think of the places that have formed us.

6. **Striving to live in a state of continuous conversion, both on the part of each individual member and on the part of the whole Congregation, according to St. Paul, who counsels us: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”** This is perhaps the crux of all of these characteristics. When we are continuously opening ourselves to new perspectives, to voices of the voiceless, to reflecting on the “whys” of what we encounter so as to gain from the “wise” who surround us, to the struggles of seeing things differently than the person I am working with and we embrace the struggles along the way, we see that we are led to more creativity, to understanding that “none of us is as smart

as all of us,” to the realization of how our brothers and sisters (literally) are part of this messiness and this total conversion.

So, we are grateful for the opportunity to *begin* this reflection on transformation. Begin, because it must be an ongoing reflection that hopefully will ultimately lead us to truly understand what Tom Nelson reminds us: we are radically dependent on God. We are grateful for the holy ground of these 25 years. We are grateful for each and every person who makes CVV what it is, and for all those who ground us in what Vincent shared, “Go to the poor and you will find God.”