

Advent from a Vincentian Perspective, Part 2: Hope in the Incarnation: A God Close to the Poor

The mystery of the Incarnation is at the heart of the Christian faith. In it, we discover a God who does not remain distant but chooses to come near, taking on human flesh to dwell among us. The Incarnation is not just a theological concept but a tangible expression of God's solidarity with humanity, especially the poor and vulnerable. For Vincentian spirituality, this reality takes on profound significance, as it calls us to see the face of Christ in the poor and to serve them with love and compassion, particularly during the Advent season, a time of waiting and expectation.



The Incarnation: God's Act of Proximity

The Incarnation of Christ is a radical act of love. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, enters human history not as a powerful king but as a child born in a humble manger, in the midst of poverty. This act of divine humility speaks of God's desire to be close to those who suffer, those who are marginalized, and those who are often forgotten by society. St. Vincent de Paul, who dedicated his life to the service of the poor, recognized this deep connection between the Incarnation and the poor. He once said: *"Let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows."* (CCD XI:32)

This quote emphasizes that true love for God is expressed in action, particularly in service on behalf the poor. For St. Vincent, loving God and loving the poor were inseparable,

because Christ is present in the poor. The Incarnation is, therefore, not just an historical event but a present reality, inviting us to encounter Christ in the vulnerable and to be instruments of God's love for them.

Advent: A Time of Active Waiting

Advent is traditionally understood as a time of waiting, but it is not a passive wait. It is a time of active preparation for the coming of Christ, both in His birth and in His second coming. The Vincentian perspective enriches this understanding by reminding us that Christ is already present among us in the person of the poor. St. Vincent taught his followers that service on behalf the poor is not just charity; it is an encounter with Christ Himself. In the famous "Monsieur Vincent" film (1947), St. Vincent says something that, although we do not find in his writings, is perfectly in line with his feelings: You will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket. But you must keep your gentleness and your smile for the poor. They are your masters.

These words challenge us to see Advent as more than just a season of spiritual reflection. It is a call to action, to prepare not only our hearts but also our hands to serve. It is through this service that we prepare for Christ's coming, because in serving the poor, we are preparing a place for Christ in our lives. The Advent season becomes a time to reflect on how we can better serve those in need, not out of obligation but out of love for Christ, who identifies with the poor.

Discovering Christ in the Poor

Frederic Ozanam, a layman inspired by the example of St. Vincent, also saw the importance of encountering Christ in the poor. He co-founded the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which continues today as a powerful movement of laypeople serving those in need. Ozanam believed that the poor are not just recipients of our charity but bearers of Christ's presence. He wrote: "The poor we see with the eyes of flesh; they are there and we can put finger and hand in their wounds and the scars of the crown of thorns are visible on their foreheads; and at this point incredulity no longer has place, and we should fall at their feet and say with the Apostle, 'Tu est Dominus et Deus meus', You, the poor, are my Lord and my God!" (Letter to Louis Janmot, November 13, 1836.)

This powerful statement brings to life the reality of the Incarnation. Christ is not a distant figure from the past, but He is present here and now in the suffering of the poor. To encounter the poor is to encounter the living Christ, and this is the heart of Vincentian spirituality. Advent is a time to renew our awareness of this truth and to commit ourselves to living it out in practical ways. It calls us to open our eyes to the suffering around us and to see it as an invitation to meet Christ.

Hope in the Incarnation: A Source of Strength

The hope that the Incarnation brings is not just a vague hope for a better future. It is a concrete hope rooted in the fact that God is with us, especially in our darkest moments. The poor, who often face the harshest realities of life, are living witnesses to the hope of the Incarnation. Despite their suffering, they remind us that God is close, that He is Emmanuel, “God with us.” St. Vincent de Paul often spoke of how the poor are our teachers. They teach us patience, humility, and above all, hope.

In the Advent season, we are invited to contemplate this hope and to let it transform us. The hope of the Incarnation gives us the strength to continue working for justice, to continue serving those in need, and to continue believing that God’s kingdom is breaking into the world, even in small and humble ways. It is a hope that sustains us, especially when the burdens of life seem overwhelming.

A Call to Reflect and Act

The mystery of the Incarnation invites us into a deeper relationship with God and with the poor. It challenges us to see Christ in the faces of those who suffer and to respond with love and compassion. During this Advent season, let us take time to reflect on how we are living out this call in our daily lives. Are we truly seeing Christ in the poor? Are we serving them with the love and dignity they deserve? As we prepare for Christmas, let us remember that the greatest gift we can offer to Christ is our service to those in need.

Questions for Personal and Community Reflection

1. How can I become more aware of Christ’s presence in the poor and marginalized around me during this Advent season?
2. In what ways am I being called to serve the poor with greater love and compassion, recognizing them as bearers of Christ’s presence?
3. How does the hope of the Incarnation strengthen me in moments of difficulty, and how can I share that hope with others, especially the most vulnerable?