

Advent from a Vincentian Perspective, Part 3: The Call to Service: Active Charity during Advent

Advent is a season of waiting and anticipation, a time of preparation for the coming of Christ. Yet, this waiting is not passive— it invites us to active participation in the unfolding of God’s love in the world. Within the Vincentian tradition, love is not merely a feeling or sentiment; it is an active, outward force expressed through service to others. The call of Advent is thus a call to manifest God’s love through acts of charity, especially toward the poor and marginalized.



Love in Action: The Vincentian Perspective

For Vincentians, charity is not simply about giving money or providing temporary relief. It is about entering into the lives of those who suffer and then, offering tangible support as well as dignity and respect. This aligns perfectly with the spirit of Advent, a time when we prepare not only to welcome Christ into our hearts but also to recognize Him in the faces of the poor.

Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, deeply understood this. In his words: “Charity must never look to the past, but to the future, because the number of good deeds already done is always very small, while the present and future miseries to be taken care of are countless.” (Letter to Léonce Cournier, February 23, 1835.) This insight is vital as we reflect on how to live charity during Advent. Ozanam challenges us to look beyond past efforts and recognize that there is always more we can do, especially during this sacred time.

Practical Ways to Serve During Advent

Advent offers us a unique opportunity to put love into action. But how can we respond to this call in concrete ways? Here are several suggestions for practicing active charity during this time:

1. **Visit the Lonely:** Many people, especially the elderly, spend the holiday season alone. A visit or phone call can make a significant difference in their lives. Organizing community visits to nursing homes or hospitals can bring comfort and companionship to those who may feel isolated during Advent.
2. **Feed the Hungry:** Food insecurity affects many, and the demand at food banks and shelters increases during the holidays. Consider organizing a food drive, volunteering at a soup kitchen, or preparing meals for families in need. As Ozanam once said, “*Let us do without hesitation whatever good lies at our hands.*” (Letter to François Lallier, October 5, 1837.)
3. **Support Refugees and Migrants:** The Holy Family themselves were once refugees, fleeing to Egypt to escape persecution. Today, millions of refugees and migrants are in need of support. Offering practical assistance—whether through donations, legal support, or helping them integrate into the community—embodies the Advent spirit of welcoming the stranger.
4. **Provide Warm Clothing:** Winter is especially hard on those living in poverty. Collect and distribute warm clothes, blankets, and other essential items to those experiencing homelessness or living in precarious situations.
5. **Be Present to the Poor:** Often, what people need most is not material goods but presence and attention. Taking time to listen, to hear the stories of those who suffer, and to affirm their dignity is a profound act of love. Ozanam reminds us, the poor person is a unique being, a sacred image of God (Cf. Letter to Louis Janmot, November 13, 1836).

The Transformative Power of Charity

When we respond to the call to service, we not only help those in need, but we also transform ourselves. Service opens our eyes to the humanity of others and breaks down the barriers of indifference. Through our acts of charity, we come to understand more

deeply the mystery of Christ's Incarnation—that God is present in the world, especially among the poor and vulnerable.

Ozanam often spoke of charity as a means of transforming society. He saw it as a way to restore justice, but also as a way to transform the heart of the giver. In serving others, we are drawn closer to God. Advent is the perfect time to embrace this transformative process, as we prepare for the coming of the One who was born to save us all.

A Call to Action: The Spiritual Call to Service

The act of serving others is a form of prayer. It is an encounter with Christ who, as Ozanam said, “is hidden under the rags of the poor.” Advent reminds us that the birth of Jesus in a humble manger is a profound statement of God's solidarity with the most vulnerable. To follow Christ's example, especially during this season, means stepping out of our comfort zones to serve the poor, not as an obligation but as a response to the deep love we have received from God.

Charity, in the Vincentian sense, goes beyond mere almsgiving. It seeks to uplift and restore the dignity of those who are marginalized. Vincent de Paul and Frédéric Ozanam both emphasized that charity should be personal, rooted in love, and involve direct service. Ozanam once wrote, “The knowledge of social well-being and reform is to be learned, not from books, nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man's garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind.” (Quoted in Louis Baunard, *Ozanam in his Correspondence*, 279)

Questions for Personal and Community Reflection

As you contemplate how to live active charity during Advent, consider these questions for personal and community reflection:

1. In what ways can I personally engage in concrete acts of service that bring comfort and dignity to those who are suffering this Advent season?
2. How can my community respond to the needs of the poor in a way that reflects the love and compassion of Christ, particularly during this time of waiting and preparation?