

When we lose our jobs and deplete our finances trying to keep up with our expenses, many of us can move back home or rely on family members or friends to help us out; hopefully they can help us until we are able to establish ourselves once again. But the poor don't have those safety nets. Many don't have family or friends who are willing or able to help them. When times get difficult many have no other recourse but to live in the streets.

The work of Vincentians has changed over time. At first the exclusive focus was to take care of the immediate need: to feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, provide clothing to those walking the streets, etc. This still continues to be an ongoing need for many poor. But Vincentians are also looking at the bigger picture. What can we do about the sources, the root causes of poverty, and what can we do to change or mend these sources/causes of poverty? One of the old images that used to be used was why provide people fish to eat when you could teach them how to fish (and thus provide for themselves). But the situation of poverty often does not provide such a simple solution. Sometimes the various structures of society keep the poor in poverty and do not allow them opportunities—certainly not easy opportunities—to find a way out of poverty.

For instance, in a 28 July 2012 article in the *New York Times* entitled *Poverty in America: Why Can't We End It?*, it was reported that there were 4 reasons for poverty in America: (1) An astonishing number of people work at low-wage jobs; (2) Many more households are headed now by a single parent, making it difficult for them to earn a living income from the jobs that are typically available; (3) The near disappearance of cash assistance for low-income mothers and children — i.e., welfare — in much of the country plays a contributing role too; and (4) Persistent issues of race and gender mean higher poverty among

minorities and families headed by single mothers.

To the extent that these 4 reasons are true, Vincentians would start critically reflecting on what we might do to help change these sources of poverty. If low-wage jobs are a source of poverty, what might we do to help raise the minimum wage in the U.S. and elsewhere? If poor households are headed by single parents who are trying to hold down a job, what might we do to provide good affordable child care or, maybe better, strengthen couples who are struggling with their marriage, or help single parents find better paying jobs. These are just a few examples of the broader, structural thinking that Vincentians are beginning to unfold. Vincentians want to examine the structures that exclude the poor. How can we change the very systems in our society that help cause poverty in the first place? Vincentians find it difficult to tolerate social conditions that stunt the prospects of the poor. If one of the cultural systems in America that keeps the poor in poverty is a wage that is so low that a family will never be able to get out of poverty, can we help someone find a better job or can we work at creating living wages for these workers?

And if we really want to empower the poor, we need to involve them in the process. We must walk with them, search for answers with them, involve them in discovering the solutions. We do this not so that we can feel better about ourselves but to reveal to the poor their own dignity, worth, and value. This is called empowerment.

These are not easy questions to address but they can be solved or at least improved. If we can combine the wisdom of age with the enthusiasm and open-minded thinking of the young, maybe we can put our minds together to help make our world into a much better place together with the poor. This is the Vincentian Path.

Today members of the Vincentian Family work together with the poor, following this Path. **Join us! We need you!**



## The Vincentian Path

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The word "Vincentian" comes from the name St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), a French priest whose life work focused on seeing Christ in the poor.

Early in St. Vincent de Paul's ministry he was not concerned with serving the poor. Instead, he wanted to establish a regular source of income so that he and his family could live comfortably. But life's experiences changed St. Vincent.

Early in 1617 St. Vincent heard the confession of a dying peasant on the De Gondi estate (the property of a wealthy family). The peasant later related to Mrs. de Gondi his joy in being freed from sins that he had kept hidden for so many years. This experience touched St. Vincent deeply; he realized that there were thousands just like this poor peasant in need of pastoral care and healing. In the same year St. Vincent was named pastor in the town of Châtillon-les-Dombes. He learned of a sick family that was in need of food and medicine. Before Mass St. Vincent pleaded for help. His parishioners brought so much food to the family at one time that it would spoil or be wasted. St. Vincent realized he needed to coordinate this charitable outpouring so he formed the first Confraternity of Charity to respond in an organized way to the needs of the local poor. St. Vincent continued this practice of establishing Confraternities to help the poor in various other locations. He realized that God

was challenging him to organize and motivate others to reach out and serve the poor. These experiences



transformed Vincent's life. Vincent became deeply moved with the Christ of the Christian scriptures: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 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, and 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.'" (Matthew 25: 31-40)



ST. VINCENT DE PAUL FORME A CHATILLON SA 1<sup>RE</sup> SOCIÉTÉ DES DAMES DE CHARITÉ ET LEUR REMET SON REGLEMENT. 8 X 11 1617

Luke 4: 18-19 was also one of St. Vincent's favorite passages from scripture:

"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."

St. Vincent realized, just like Mother Theresa, when she worked in southern India, that Christ identified himself with the poor, that Christ was present in the poor. St. Vincent grew to personally realize that presence of Christ in the poor whom he served.

Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M. the former Superior General of the Vincentian Fathers and Brothers, wrote, "Vincent turned the church upside down. He put the poor on top, with the rest of us in service and support, being evangelized by them and evangelizing them. Constant attention to seeking a just society necessitates solidarity, and solidarity is in the center of all Vincentian values."

The poor are not altogether unlike us. Yes, many have mental illness. But many, unlike a lot of us, have no one to rely on when times get tough. Many of us have family and friends whom we can rely on.

