



For the poor you have  
always with you

2021

## VINCENTIAN REFLECTION ON THE WORLD DAY OF THE POOR

By Andrés R. M. Motto, C.M.





## INTRODUCTION

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Every year, since 2017, Pope Francis has invited the world's population to **undertake a critical reflection on the situation of people in need**, not only in terms of material poverty, but also on all aspects of the spiritual, moral and social challenges posed by the reality of poverty. As members of the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul, we are closely involved in this Christian commitment to help those who suffer, with all our talents and energy. Thus, being a Vincentian member specifically means acting to eradicate poverty; it should almost be our obsession.

For some time, I have been thinking about how to provide Conferences throughout the world with some **positive training/formation materials** that could contribute to the Pope's proposal for a reflection needed on the WORLD DAY OF THE POOR, set for the Sunday before the Feast of Christ the King. So I approached our dear Father Andrés Motto, of the Congregation of the Mission (CM), who is the spiritual adviser to the Council General International, and the Director of the International Formation Centre (CIF), as well as a respected writer at the Vincentian Family.

Father Motto has prepared an excellent reflection which will be very useful for all members of our Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and for all the other branches of the Vincentian Family. It is not lengthy, but is a very **profound and knowledgeable** piece. Going from the Introduction to the Conclusion, it is divided into three, very well-written parts: **Jesus and the poor; Vincent and the poor; Ozanam and the poor**. At the end, there is a list of 10 suggestions for a more focused way of living the World Day of the Poor, serving those who suffer in more practical ways. I know that we are presently living through a health crisis, but the suggestions can be implemented without anxiety, always respecting safety protocols.

Father Motto's text is incredibly rich, but at the same time, easy to understand, full of examples with scripture quotations or references to major writers, not just Catholic and Vincentian, linked to human history. It is pleasant, encouraging and, above all, very comforting to read Fr Andrés Motto's words. He always teaches us to live our Vincentian charism with prayer and action, like St. Vincent and our leaders and founders, through Ozanam. We can never lose sight of our servants, our loved ones, our friends and our masters -the poor- who open to us the gates of Heaven.

May this WORLD DAY OF THE POOR help us achieve the aims proposed by Pope Francis in this world, helping us to build a more fraternal, fairer civil society, since **the poor you will always have with you** (Mk 14:7).

Member Renato Lima de Oliveira  
16th President General

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION





## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Inception

My dear brothers and sisters of the SSVP, I invite you to reflect on this wonderful day, instituted by Pope Francis, which so closely matches our Vincentian identity. The “Day of the Poor” arose spontaneously from the heart of the Pope. He instituted it at the end of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. It is celebrated on the penultimate Sunday of Ordinary Time.

Let me tell you more about how it started. It was on Sunday 13 November 2016, a week before the end of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. At St Peter’s, Pope Francis was celebrating the Jubilee year dedicated to all marginalised people. On this occasion, at the end of his homily, the Holy Father said this: [...] we all “ask for the grace not to close our eyes to God who sees us and to our neighbour who asks something of us. That is where the Church’s magnifying glass is pointed, and in the light of these reflections, I would like today to be the ‘Day of the Poor’”. This closing sentence was not in the text of the prepared homily for this celebration. Pope Francis expressed it spontaneously, seeing the thousands of poor people present at the Eucharistic celebration, and those who had spoken to him during the days beforehand. He had been powerfully affected by the looks and tears of these people, when, lifting his eyes from the page before him, he announced his wish for a “Day for the Poor”.

Pope Francis energises Christians as well as believers of other faiths, and all people of good will, to invite the poor into our own places. If we listen to them, “they could be the guides to help us live out our faith with greater integrity”. The poor, “with their trust and their readiness to allow themselves to be helped, show us with modesty and often with joy, how important it is to live just with what is essential, and give ourselves up to the Father’s providence”. They show us how fragile we all are.

### 1.2. The purpose

Francis explained the two aims of the World Day of the Poor. These are very practical. First off, “this day is meant to encourage all believers to react against a culture of discard and waste, and instead embrace a culture of encounter”. At the same time, this invitation is directed at everyone, “regardless of religious affiliation”, so they can be ready to share “with the poor through concrete signs of solidarity and fraternity”.

Let us examine this. In the mind of Pope Bergoglio, these days will help every Christian community hold out a hand to the poor, the weak, to people whose dignity is too often trampled down. Because the Church cannot remain unaware of the cries of the poor. From its earliest history, throughout the centuries, the Christian community has put itself at the service of those most in need, even though sometimes it has failed or forgotten to provide assistance. This Day is intended as a brake, however slight, on the growing social inequality arising in the world, ever more frequently, because of the abuses of a small number of privileged people. Francis warned that “in this setting, we cannot remain quiet, or resigned. We must respond to it all with a new vision of life and society”. Without doubt, we in the SSVP, along with many others, are responsible for bringing about this change.

Pope Francis proposes that the World Day of the Poor will be a powerful call to grow our awareness, so that we can become more convinced than ever that sharing with the poor allows us to listen more attentively to the truth of the Gospel.

On the World Day of the Poor, every year, the Pope offers a slogan with its respective topic. Through these days, Francis invites us, as it says in the First Letter of John, not to love words





without works. The first World Day of the Poor was on 19 November 2017. Pope Francis was directly involved in celebrating this day, saying Holy Mass in St Peter's Basilica, together with many people in need, and with volunteers. "They can invite the poor and volunteers to take part together in the Eucharist on this Sunday, in such a way that there will be an even more authentic celebration of the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King, on the following Sunday".

### 1.3. How to live it

Francis invites us to share. True charity consists of being together, being close, sharing the pain and suffering of sickness, as well as the other difficulties of marginalisation. The challenge to be faced is to leave indifference and convenience behind, to mobilise in order to solve the problem of poverty. Service to the poor involves "reciprocity", because the helper and the helped both suffer forms of poverty, though they differ. And by helping each other, they both become better. This celebration invites all church communities to explore the various ways they can provide continuity and empower service to the powerless. It is also an invitation to empower all volunteers. So the SSVP wants us to experience this even more fully every year.

Another practical suggestion by Pope Francis is that we all undertake to organise times for meeting together, especially in the week leading up to the celebration, for friendship, solidarity and practical help to the marginalised. He also asks us to invite those in need and volunteers to take part together in the Sunday Mass, and welcome those in need as "guests of honour" to our Mass. Francis proposes that on this day, "if there are people in our neighbourhood who are in need of protection and help, let us approach them: it will be the right time to meet the God whom we seek". The Pope emphasised that this work of mercy must be sustained by prayer, because "the foundation of all the various practical initiatives carried out on this Day will always be prayer".

The proposal is to help the poor not just once a week. This is still useful and worthwhile. But the day involves something more Vincentian in nature, it means growing in emotional support to those in need. The Bishop of Rome exhorts us to "hold out a hand to the poor, to meet them, look them in the eyes, embrace them, make them feel the warmth of love which breaks the cycle of loneliness. Their hand, extended to us, is also a call to move out of our own certainties and comfort, and recognise the value that poverty itself has". Empowering the emotional side... let us grow in effective service to those in need. We must not be content with what we are doing, but see if we can do it better, if we can do more. "We have to hear the cry of the poor, and commit ourselves to lift them out of their marginal situation".

We have to admit that there are poor people who steal, who get used to asking and do not want to adopt a work ethic, that there are poor people who gain by telling tear-jerking stories (I have a child with rickets, my mother is quadriplegic and needs an operation). But we must still attend to these difficult faces of poverty as Vincentians, helping them to change. Although at times we need further training in order to do it well.

While reflecting on the World Day of the Poor, I would like to thank so many SSVP brothers and sisters who live out their service with such devotion. May they see the mysterious presence of Jesus in the poor, and find their path in life through helping others. May they gently wipe away tears, in the name of God who consoles. Brothers and sisters whose lives are based on service in union with God. Who have charity as the centre of their lives. Love received which they make fruitful. In this way, they give clear witness to the Gospel. SSVP members who understand that they have to hold out a hand to so many people in need whom they meet every day.



#### 1.4. Proposal

I suggest to them that we take an amazing path. This idea arose while chatting with our President Renato Lima de Oliveira. He suggested to me that we first look at Jesus and the poor. Then Saint Vincent de Paul and the marginalised. Thirdly, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and the excluded. And to finish, consider poverty in the world today. This seemed to me a very complete framework on which to base these simple investigations. At the end of each topic, I will provide some questions which can help to deepen and enrich the reflection. Questions that we can answer on our own, or with the other members of our conference.

Remember that our aim is to grow in our personal development, in order to improve our service. As André Kostolany has said “It’s not enough to have ideas; it’s more important to make them real, but for that we need courage”.



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# 2

## JESUS AND THE POOR





## 2. JESUS AND THE POOR.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. Close to Christ

When an SSVP member becomes closer to the Christ of the Gospels, they increase their love for Jesus and for the poor. Similarly, their trust in Providence grows. So let us begin. Jesus was born poor (Lk 2, 6-7), and lived as a child in a simple, working family (Lk 1, 16; Mk 6, 3). He felt himself sent to announce good news to the poor (Lk 4, 18), and to heal sinners, the sick and marginalised (Lk 7, 21-23).

Throughout his life, Jesus slowly discerned his mission, and the path the Father intended for him. He rejected the temptations of power and status, recognising that the Father reveals the mystery of God to the simple, and hides it from those who claim to be wise and prudent (Mt 11, 25-26). He was at all times on the side of those tempted into sin (Heb 4, 15), pitied those who were like sheep scattered without a shepherd (Mk 34), blessed the poor people (Lk 6, 21-23) and reproached the proud rich (Lk 6, 24-26) as well as the hypocritical Pharisees. He made the poor the judges of humanity, and took whatever was done or omitted for the poor as being the same as for himself (Mt 25, 31-45).

This option chosen by Jesus brought him conflict, and led him to his death. His death was an assassination plotted by all his enemies. But the Resurrection is the triumph of Jesus, and the Father's confirmation of the legitimacy of his way. While he lived in this world, some groups considered him mad (Mk 3, 21), a blasphemer (Mt 26, 65), a drunkard (Lk 7, 34), possessed by demons (Lk 11, 15). But his raising up by the Father shows that the way of Jesus is the authentic way of the Kingdom, and that Jesus was right to have followed the evangelising path of the servant of the Lord (Is 42, 49). Proclaimed mysteriously in the baptism (Mk 1, 9-11) and the Transfiguration (Mk 9, 1-8), it was realised in the Resurrection; Jesus is truly the Son of the Father, and the one to whom we must listen and whom we must follow. Following Jesus means taking up our cross, and losing our life, but only to gain life and salvation (Mk 8, 34-35).

The path of Jesus is not that of the pharaohs and powerful of this world, but that of freedom, brotherhood and solidarity with the poor. It is the path of blessing which leads to life, while the other way leads to death itself.

The Church wishes to continue the story of the disciples grouped around Jesus, and tries to be a community spreading the mission of Jesus in this world. It wants to be the sacrament of Jesus, a sacrament of liberating salvation in our own earthly history (LG 1; 9; 48). Their pastors (pope, bishops, etc.) guide them in this mission, continuing the role of Peter and the apostles (Mt 16, 18-19). The *sacraments* are not just rituals for individual salvation, but moments of strength in the life of the church community. Its centre is the Eucharist, the sacrament which feeds the Church with the body and blood of Christ, and continues to construct it as the body of Christ in history (1Co 10, 17). The catechesis of the sacraments must be framed within the understanding of the Church as the community of Jesus.

### 2.2. Following Jesus is to live under the power of the Spirit

This Spirit, God's gift for the age of the Messiah, is a spirit of justice and righteousness for the poor and oppressed (Is 11; 41; 61). It is the Spirit which guides the entire life and mission of Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> See CODINA, Víctor. "Fe y Discipulado". In: Various Authors, *Vida, Clamor y Esperanza: Aportes desde América Latina*. Ediciones Paulinas. Bogotá. 1992. 151-159





(Lk 4, 18), who, anointed by the Spirit, went through the world doing good and offering liberation from the oppression of evil (Acts 10, 38). This Spirit is the one that makes us call God Father (Ga 4, 4). It is the one that groans along with creation and the people seeking their freedom (Rom 8, 18-27). In the calls of the poor, the Spirit too calls out and asks for freedom. This is the Spirit that gives strength to those persecuted and martyred for justice. It is the one that gives hope and joy to people, while they wait for better days: they suffer, as in the pains of childbirth, waiting for something new to be born (Jn 16, 21).

Following Jesus as members of the SSVP means accepting and starting to live all this. It is a path which requires discernment, to continue recreating in the 21st century the attitudes of Jesus and the calls of the Spirit. To be a Christian committed to social causes requires being especially open to Jesus, as being a Christian, sharing the pain of the people, assumes a *change of attitude* from a neutral religiosity to a committed faith, in solidarity with impoverished ordinary people. Being Christian assumes rooting out all that is unjust, corrupt, oppressive, that violates human rights and tells political lies, wherever it comes from.

For this conversion, more than ever we need prayer and the help of the Lord. As necessary, taking a stand: if someone is faithful to the Gospels, they know that anyone who accepts and encourages a situation of injustice cannot be with Christ (Lk 11, 23).

Being Christian means *committing oneself from faith to a changed reality*. This commitment, a concrete way to follow Christ, covers all aspects of the real world: economic, social, political, cultural, religious, family, personal and more. Faith offers us new horizons, inspiration, and above all the strength of the Spirit, who is still maturing history towards new heavens and a new earth.

### 2.3. Being Christian means being in solidarity with ordinary people

Radical changes have to come from conscious, organised people. For this they rely on the example and blessing of the Lord, who calls them blessed, and identifies with them. Christians born in other sectors of society have the happy vocation of joining in solidarity with the cause of people in need, putting their abilities at their service. This can accelerate change. Many SSVP brothers and sisters know this very well. The Church's preferential option for the poor is based in this context. The aim is for the Church of the poor to be the authentic face of the Church of Jesus. Let us also note that the transforming potential of the poor is empowered if they receive the right evangelisation. This is why we must be good messengers of the faith for them.

Following Jesus Christ in this way has a strong ethical dimension. This is increased with the free gift of "being with the Lord", and being open-eyed contemplatives. The joy of discipleship, hoping against hope, the happiness in the midst of conflict can only be maintained from the profound, personal and communal experience of the Spirit of the Lord.

Let us end by observing that following Jesus together with the poor means fighting on behalf of the Lord of life. Being on the side of the God who created life, of Jesus who came so that we might have life in abundance (Jn 10, 10).

#### QUESTIONS:

1. How often in my life do I read and meditate on the scriptures?
2. How can the option for the poor taught us by Jesus be continued?
3. How far does the life of Jesus guide our Conference?



# 3

## SAINT VINCENT AND THE POOR







### 3. SAINT VINCENT AND THE POOR

I want to start by sharing with you an interesting historical fact. If you set out on a tour of French churches, particularly those in Paris, you will see that throughout the 19th century, Saint Vincent de Paul appears everywhere. During this period, so many statues or windows with his image were created. Why should this be? In the 19th century, a strong movement for Catholic social Christianity began. In St Vincent, it found a model of love of Jesus and support for the poor. This model of holiness encouraged involvement in serious social issues. Some sociologists state, on the one hand, that the 19th century in France produced a “Catholicism of defence of the faith”, with a strong apologetic slant. On the other hand, it also produced the “Catholicism of Saint Vincent de Paul”. This was more evangelical, and affirmed faith in service. It was a service which retained its capacity for argument, and was open to socio-political thought. A Christianity which brought people to faith through the power of example, love and justice. The SSVP was inspired by this model, and kept it up to date during the 19th century.

This said, let's go back to the 17th century, for some of Saint Vincent's ideas about the option for the poor.

#### 3.1. Christology

Vincent de Paul saw Christ as the evangeliser of the poor. The basis for his *preferential option* for the poor and suffering is his own life within Christ. The Bible revealed Jesus to him as the missionary of the poor. He saw that Christ became flesh to fulfil the redemptive purpose of the Father, that he descended and emptied himself to make himself servant of those he came to save. He understood that he did all this, moved by a spirit of perfect charity. The core of the Vincentian Christ is: Our Lord is the evangeliser of the poor. He met Jesus Christ in his “vicars”, the poor. This gaze of faith arose particularly from a reading of Matt. 25, 31-46. The Word of God led him to turn a critical eye on his unequal society, trying to make it more inclusive.

Christ identified himself with the poor during his earthly life because he lived like them; taking on their cause, he took on their condition.<sup>1</sup> After ascending to heaven, he continues to identify with those who suffer. From this conviction, Vincent could say: “...serving the poor, I serve Jesus Christ. My daughters, how true this is! Serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. This is as sure as we are here. A sister will visit the sick ten times a day, and ten times every day she will meet God in them”.<sup>2</sup>

Pastoral experience completed this. He discovered Christ among the poor. Christ lives mysteriously in the person of the poor, still suffering in them. Christ and his passion are always real and continuing, while unjust suffering continues.

#### 3.2. Option for the poor

Adam Smith observed that the poor man is “the one that society does not wish to see”. Vincent de Paul committed himself to raising awareness and making visible the various forms of poverty in which so many groups of people lived. This issue disturbed many Christians of his time, because society could not admit or accept that there were people who suffered. Vincent understood that every State had resources and could relieve distress.

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1 See E. S. IX, 819. [*Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents* (to the Daughters of Charity)]

2 E. S. IX, 240.



Monsieur Vincent aroused social concern among the nobility and the bourgeoisie for those who suffer. He certainly moved within the tight bounds of a mindset which accepted a sacred and absolute monarchy. But within this framework, he considered ways of *optimising* society so that the poor were not ill-treated, or tethered within a long-term situation.

For Saint Vincent, the option for the poorest and most unhappy took priority. He worked not only to meet the immediate needs of the dispossessed, but also to transform the situation underlying the structures of exclusion: promoting education, training, strengthening a culture of work and providing thorough evangelisation.

I admit that I like to see M. Vincent as a theologian and pastor seized by love of God and his suffering people. His were a heart and an intelligence offered to the poor. Prophetically, his action focused on the most humble of our brothers and sisters. He reminds us that they are held within the heart of God, as Christ made himself poor. Reading Saint Vincent goads us into asking ourselves if we ourselves give the poor the place they deserve. It leads us to reflect if those of us adopting Vincentian ethics and spirituality in the 21st century are trying to be good and faithful servants in our efforts to relieve poverty. Since, insofar as possible, poverty should be a transient experience. Similarly, it invites us to transform the Church and the nations into the home of the poor.

### 3.3. A concrete example: the sick

We see how Vincent de Paul teaches us to deal with some very needy poor people, such as the sick. We recall that the Vincentian Family first cared for poor people who were sick. What greater poverty is there than to lose one's health!

*Practical service.* In the 17th century, he ensured the sick received clothes, food and care in general. He stressed especially that they should have good food and drink.<sup>3</sup> His experience told him that an invalid recovered much faster with a healthy diet. Another task was to ensure that a doctor visited the sick poor. Similarly, medicines must be obtained and dispensed while the illness continued, and the funeral wake had to be arranged for those who died, if the family could not do it.<sup>4</sup>

*Spiritual service.* Teaching the sick to live a Christian life, while the healing process took place. Through loving conversation, appropriate to their situation. Another way is to read a devotional book to the patient. Also, encourage them to tolerate their illness with patience and through love of God. Similarly, prepare those whose illness ultimately overcomes them to make a good death.

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3 Vincent de Paul was a real 17th-century nutritionist. Providing the best food which he thought a sick person could eat. We can read one of the many passages in which he described the diet. "All the sick shall have the bread they need, as well as 250 grams of cooked mutton or beef for lunch. The same roasted for dinner, except on Sundays and feast days, when they may have chicken or fowl for lunch. Also give them minced meat for dinner two or three times a week. Those who do not have a fever shall have a quart of wine every day, half for lunch and half for dinner. On Fridays, Saturdays and other fast days, they will have two eggs, with soup and a bit of butter for lunch. The same for dinner, the eggs prepared according to their appetite. And if fish can be found at a reasonable price, they will be given this only for the midday meal. Those who are very sick may be granted permission to eat meat in Lent and on other prohibited days. Those whose illness prevents them from eating meat will be served soup, rolls, barley water and fresh eggs three or four times a day". E. S. X, 579. If we compare this with the diet served by some hospitals in the 21st century, I'd prefer Vincentian care!

4 On the burial of the poor person. "You will make sure that the dead are buried at the expense of the Confraternity, give them a shroud, order the grave to be dug... Attend funerals of those you have cared for during their illness, in all this behaving like mothers who accompany their children to the graveside; in this way you will be practising fully and with great personal benefit the spiritual and corporal works of mercy". E. S. X, 580.





It is advisable for the sick to receive the sacraments, ensuring, in particular, that they are given the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Anointing.

*Visiting the sick.* During his lifetime, Vincent de Paul had the happy custom of visiting the sick. One day he went to visit an ailing man. He found him resigned to the will of God, and convinced of divine mercy. Monsieur Vincent, pleased to find him thus, encouraged him, saying: “Sir, seeing you in this frame of mind, I am much relieved, as if I have been given a treasure”.<sup>5</sup>

**QUESTIONS:**

1. What Vincentian lessons regarding those in need strike you most?
2. Am I concerned about providing both material and spiritual help to those in need?
3. How does our Conference care for the sick?



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<sup>5</sup> See DODIN, André. *Monsieur Vincent raconté par son secrétaire Louis Robineau CM.* (Paris: O.E.I.L., 1991).

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# 4

## ANTOINE-FRÉDÉRIC OZANAM AND THE POOR







## 4. ANTOINE-FRÉDÉRIC OZANAM AND THE POOR.<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1. The principle of mercy

The life of Blessed Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam is that of a person committed to total, liberating service to people in need. In general, SSVP members are very familiar with Ozanam's biography. Fewer know of his ideas on this topic. I invite those to reflect on a small part of Ozanam's social thinking. I will use Chento's method, analysing some of the texts Frédéric published on this subject.

"Evil today is not found in a single district, but in several parts of Paris; and not just in Paris, but in Lyon, Rouen and all the manufacturing cities of the North, ... Imagine what winter will bring, when the length of that season suspends the little that remains of building work, and turns forty thousand more people unemployed into the streets of the capital! Of course, we are not used to echoing public alarms... On descending these rickety stairs on each floor, where we have seen so much suffering, so many hazards approaching, we have been unable to restrain our sorrow and we have promised to inform our fellow citizens of it all".<sup>2</sup>

Everything starts with mercy, with feeling the pain of the unhappy neighbour, and seeking the way to resolve it. Ozanam knew very well the terrible situation of the poor in those difficult years of the 1840s. In this particular text, Ozanam considered that this situation, already serious, would get worse as winter approached. When building work was paralysed by bad weather, many workers were laid off. Knowing at first hand the suffering and anguish of the poor, of the workers who struggled for their own and their families' survival, Frédéric made three observations: 1. Join with the pain of so many destitute people. 2. Complain: get involved and do not keep quiet. Act and also use the media available (in this case, the journal) to denounce injustice and speak out for those without a voice. 3. Ozanam worked for the poor, but also questioned leading groups in the country, asking them to find solutions for these causes. They had the practical capacity to transform society, so they should get to work and do something.

Ozanam teaches us to suffer with the troubles of the poor and come to their aid. But we must also denounce the injustice we see, get involved and be meaningful prophets. Serving the poor also means championing them before others. Demanding that those with the power should change the situation of those who suffer. So that even just a few of them may be counted among those who serve the poor. This is to put the gospel into action, and live the Vincentian charism.

### 4.2. Defending workers' rights

"It is time to share and recover what is our good; I am referring to the old, popular ideas of justice, charity and fraternity. It is time to show that the cause of the proletariat can be defended, to dedicate oneself to the relief of the suffering classes, and pursue the elimination of destitution".<sup>3</sup>

The upheaval of French society in the first half of the 19th century led to many serious problems. One of these was the growing dissatisfaction of the working class: very low wages, terrible working conditions and few acknowledged rights. Ozanam was convinced of the need for thorough reform, that would eliminate or at least lessen the state of semi-slavery for the vast mass of workers. For this, he clung to Christian principles of charity and justice. Sadly, the conservative

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1 See FERNÁNDEZ CHENTO, Francisco. *Tejiendo la obra de Dios*. Barakaldo. *Somos Vicencianos*. 2018.

2 "Aux gens de bien", *L'Ère nouvelle*, 15 September 1848.

3 "Les origines du socialisme", in *L'Ère nouvelle*. 1848.



wing won the elections on 23 April 1848. They ordered ill-advised and unpopular measures which led to protest demonstrations in Paris, from 23 to 26 June 1848. The workers took to the streets and raised the barricades. A state of siege was declared, and the revolt was harshly suppressed by General Cavaignac.

But despite these historic reverses, Frédéric believed that it was possible to build a society based on democratic principles, on justice, charity and fraternity, which he also saw as being consistent with the Gospel of Jesus. Advocating the cause for the elimination of destitution, but without turning to the violent struggle which pitted the ruling classes against the people in June 1848.

#### 4.3. True democracy

“As all human beings are equal with regard to their destiny, society owes them equal protection, with a clear preference for those most in danger and the weakest. In the end, the homeland is neither the idol of the ancients, nor the legal fiction of modern lawyers. If we are a family of 35 million human beings who think the same as us, suffer the same as us, often are worth more than us, then fraternity becomes an easy duty among children of the same flesh and blood”<sup>4</sup>.

One of his first articles in the journal *L'Ère nouvelle* bore the title “*Les deux républiques*”. Therein, Ozanam compared two types of republic. The incorrect type of democracy was that which, while retaining an elective form, became a tyranny. The correct one had to respect the sovereignty of the people, as this was “the most impressive temporal expression of the sovereignty of God”. The article went on to observe that the purpose of any society was to protect the freedom of all. It looked forward to a democratic society in which all people were protected equally, and one which was particularly aware of the needs of the weakest or most vulnerable.

Frédéric asserted in his text that all human beings are equal. So that he preserved the principle of fraternity, which he saw as a Christian, democratic value. Believers since the beginnings of Christianity have asserted the universal brotherhood which unites us all as children of one Father. Democracy only works if it respects fraternity, so that it does not fall into abuse or privilege.

Blessed Ozanam spoke out for a democracy concerned with individuals, particularly those who suffer most. He sought a new Republic, formed with intelligence and charity, protecting all virtues and all rights, made to temper and bring justice into the hard world of work. Similarly, he took on the task, where possible of relieving poverty. Remember the two small points we covered above. They are easier to achieve within a democracy which respects all people.

The contemporary nature of Frédéric’s message is surprising. Our experience in today’s world is that democracy in many nations does not emphasise particular preference for the most vulnerable and needy. As Vincentians, we find elements in Ozanam’s teaching for evaluating the democratic quality of our countries and institutions. Its fitness depends on the value given by the leadership to protecting people in need, as well as respect for the electorate. Remembering that they must fulfil the promises they make, so that people vote for them. In Frédéric Ozanam, we receive lessons on how to defend the ordinary people, also by participating in public institutions.

#### 4.4. Gifts properly given

“Alms alone, alms not accompanied by words and love, are humiliating for those who receive them. Do we remember that man does not live on bread alone? That the Lord himself did not ask us only to clothe and feed the poor, but also to visit and comfort them? Shall we explain everything

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<sup>4</sup> “*Les deux républiques*” in *L'Ère nouvelle*, 23 April 1848.





that the teachers of charity, up to Saint Vincent de Paul, have told us about the sensitive behaviour which must take into account the legitimate susceptibilities of the poor?”<sup>5</sup>

In this short article, we see the fine spirit and the delicacy of Frédéric Ozanam towards his neighbour. The poor person does not need material help alone, but also needs to be recognised as a person. They need not to be “ignored”. As Vincentians, we must always treat the disadvantaged person with dignity and respect, with true friendship and closeness. Frédéric inherited his fineness and sensitivity from Saint Vincent, who on many occasions spoke of the treatment and esteem deserved by those with problems, or who live in poverty.

We know that Frédéric Ozanam was an illustrious character: he was qualified in two careers, Law and Literature, with doctorates in both. He spoke several languages; was a great lecturer and communicator. He knew the writings of Saint Vincent de Paul, and it is certain that he read them, and quoted them frequently in his many articles and letters. His formation brought him closer to the poor, rather than the opposite. His formation also meant that his presence among the poor was liberating. Similarly, he learned that reducing charity to mere almsgiving is a *caricature of charity*. Almsgiving is needed, but it does not change society. Hence, charity includes it, but adds to it good treatment, which dignifies. In the same way charity gives creativity in seeking social advancement.

#### 4.5. Giving work and education

“It happens to us too, my friends: we work, suffer and we see neither the end nor the result. But God sees it, and when he releases us from our task, before our wondering gaze he shows what He, the great artist, presents in all its parts, and invisibly: he has woven together with our work what up to now seemed so sterile to us. Then he will deign to hang in his gilded palace the tenuous fabric we have stitched.”

Amélie, Frédéric’s widow, tells how her husband once said to the workers: “My friends, each of us has his task in life. Mine is to dive into ancient books; I can assure you that, under the dust of these old pages, I discover lessons which the past has left us, in the most fascinating form”. Ozanam always invited ordinary people to study and to be educated. This ensured their instruction in the truth and their path to improvement.

But he also used to invite people to work. Work is one of the regenerating powers of the world. And it is an obligation for everyone: no-one can remain lazy. Even more, we can take food and clothing to the poor throughout life, but if they are not trained and have no work, they will always be beggars. Hence, the importance of education. Remember, not just education for a profession, but also in the faith.

For Blessed Ozanam, the universal law of work applied with the same force to those workers who plough the soil and draw water from the river, to those who labour in the fields of science and those who produce art and literature, or are dedicated to government. He taught that, with our labour, we are building God’s work, in ways that we do not always understand; we will never see the overall picture. Sometimes, suffering is too much, without seeing “either the end or the fruit”. But this should not discourage us. The Bible tells us that some plant the seed, others gather the harvest. Let us contribute with our labour, and be faithful to the obligation and the gift of work, since in that way we collaborate with God to complete his plan upon this earth. A final reflection, perhaps in the life *post mortem*, close to God, we may see the greater picture of our service to the poor; and understand that this service to the poor, this catechesis with them, this vocational school, this provision of work, improved the life of many people, even if during our life on earth we could not see it properly, or follow the whole process.

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5 “Des dangers de la charité” L’*Ère nouvelle*, 29 October 1848.



#### 4.6. The evil of avarice and greed

“It is madness to spend our days accumulating what cannot be enjoyed; it is similarly a madness to heap it up for the children. The children who see a mountain of gold pile up behind them may feel strongly tempted to sit at its foot, folding their arms. Preparing a fortune for them is often to invite them into the sin of laziness. And that excuse of children is sometimes nothing but a pretext. Lift the veil and you will see egoism. Egoism which finds in property a means to extend and prolong the personality which enjoys surrounding itself with many things in the present, and leave a great deal behind itself for the future”.<sup>6</sup>

Just like alms given without sensitivity and which misunderstands the poor, it does not help. Neither does it benefit despair, to pile up goods. Ozanam recalls for us the frivolity of wishing to accumulate goods in this life for ourselves and our descendants, over and above what is needed to lead a dignified life. As Scripture says (Lk 16, 19-31), everything is left behind, we can take nothing with us. Even more, the use we make in this world of our goods determines whether we are followers of Jesus or not.

If you allow me, I will add something more. Let us count the number of children who quarrel with each other when it comes to sharing out the goods of their deceased parents. There are families which have fallen out, which have broken up after their parents' legacy. I have also known cases of brothers who have defrauded their siblings. Oh, wicked children, who want their parents to die, to leave them their legacy...

#### 4.7. Removing prejudice against the poor

“God did not make the poor... It is human freedom which creates poverty... Crippling taxes have created them, taxes on salt, on meat, on the necessities for survival”.<sup>7</sup> In the depths of the social and economic crisis in France in 1848, politicians ignored the need to provide work for ordinary people, were uninterested in education for the people... and on top of that, increased taxes. This subject can unfortunately be very topical today in many countries. To top it all, there was no lack of some bourgeois Christian, who uttered this biblical phrase to calm their conscience, “Because the poor will always be with you.” (Mt 26,11).<sup>8</sup>

The paragraph in Frédéric's article starts with a clear and resounding statement: God did not make the poor. He was convinced that our God does not wish there to be people suffering destitution, inequity and injustice. God does not make some rich and others poor. God does not endorse inequality and poverty from which millions of people in our world have suffered and are suffering.

Frédéric's second sentence seeks for the human roots of poverty. It is the misuse of human intelligence and freedom which create poverty. Someone carried away, or “blinded” by greed, the hunger for power and wealth, crushes a significant part of humanity under the yoke of hunger, misery and death. A temptation from which no-one is free.

Ozanam also denounced the speed at which governments act to repress the protests of the people, and on the contrary, the slowness in addressing the needs of the working class. Through disinterest, through the weight of bureaucracy, through ignorance of how the marginalised live.

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<sup>6</sup> Letter to François Lallier, 5 November 1836.

<sup>7</sup> “*Les causes de la misère*” article in *L'Ére nouvelle*, October 1848.

<sup>8</sup> Exegesis of this interesting scripture text would take a lot of time. Let us try to do it some other time.



While they delay, Ozanam observed, in the 12th district of Paris alone there were 4,000 homeless children. Even now, political leaders are not in any hurry to lift the taxes on general consumer products (on salt, meat, on the necessities for survival”).

Let us look at another text from Ozanam. “When we rightfully support public assistance and encouragement of work, we have an authority on our side, little remembered, that of Bossuet, who, in his *Politique sacrée* summarising the social economy of Christianity, expressed himself in these terms: ‘For the wise prince, laziness must be odious, and the lazy man must not be allowed to benefit from his unfair rest. Laziness is what corrupts customs, gives birth to crime and produces beggars, that category which has to be banished from a well-governed kingdom’. Replace the prince for the people, and this passage seems written for our problems. In fact, the Church’s action... never ceases to make every possible effort to ensure there are no poor people. It does not think too much, to place at the service of the poor not just compassion, the spirit of sacrifice and all the resources of human hearts, but also discernment, order and the power which society has to act”.<sup>9</sup>

Ozanam defends the right of the bankrupt and workers to receive State assistance. It is not easy to escape poverty, the poor “are not poor because they want to be” as some people say. Having said this, Ozanam does not load everything onto the shoulders of the State. He is aware that *members of civil society must take an active part in helping the poor*. The people, believers all the more so, cannot remain calm and indifferent in the face of the multitude of impoverished people caused by an unjust society. They cannot say “there will always be poor people”, and go back to a nice warm *siesta*. Ozanam always thought of the example of the first community of believers in Jerusalem, where the needs of all were met, and no-one was poor.

As administrators of our goods, the Church asks us to use them wisely and for the common good. The SSVP, moreover, is especially called to devote some of our personal goods to the needy in the world, those who suffer most from injustice and destitution. It is certain that what we give can vary significantly among us brothers and sisters, since all social classes belong to our organisation. Some can give more, and others can hardly afford a few coins, which only just last to the end of the month. Let us all give something to relieve poverty, without anyone judging anyone else.

#### QUESTIONS TO PUT THE GOSPEL INTO PRACTICE:

1. Which of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam’s texts attracted you most?
2. What can we, members of the SSVP, do to remedy the unjust distribution of goods?
3. What contribution can we make to improve democracy in our countries and our region?
4. How are we promoting education in faith and vocational training in the people in need we help?



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<sup>9</sup> “*De charité légale*”, article in *L’Ère nouvelle*, 15 November 1848.



# 5

## CONCLUSION: IMPROVING OUR SERVICE TO THE POOR







## 5. CONCLUSION: IMPROVING OUR SERVICE TO THE POOR

### 5.1. Many things are not going well

We know that it is bad governments that are the leading cause for the generation of poverty. Sometimes we ask ourselves, how do so many rogues and incompetents achieve power?... I have no idea. But I have sometimes seen that these bad governments are the result of years of accumulated blunders, cowardice, and the excessive pursuit of power. Institutions slowly become corrupt (a congress, the executive, judiciary, police, etc.). And the truth is, that when corruption “colonises” an institution, it takes years and years to get it back on track. It is also a consequence of failing to educate the people in democratic values.

Similarly, it comes from the debasement of communications media, which, given sufficient money, can speak well of a dead fish. In all these sectors, unhappily there are also many Christians. Summing up, to maintain this gloomy world where so many live in poverty and distress, gloomy intelligences are needed, unable to consider the other person. Some governments, trade unions and businesses are afraid of the poor becoming organised, since this could be a threat, and hinder the “ill”-ordered institutions they create. So as well as finding ways of preventing the poor uniting together, every now and then, they help them, as a way of seeking votes or to calm the waters a little, but without major changes.

Lack of interest in others is a reality. See, when I write a short piece like this, I try to ensure things go in a planned order, with a clear aim. In order to underline this, sometimes I like to introduce a personal anecdote, where I also play a certain part. I remember when I was 9 years old. I was in Luján, my hometown and I was coming out of school. The school was run by the Marist Brothers. When I was crossing the bridge, a sudden downpour started. We were three school friends together. When we reached Plaza Belgrano, where there was no shelter, we were absolutely soaked. At this point, the father of one of my friends arrived. He was from the richest family in that year group. And his car showed this clearly. The man allowed only his own child to get in, and left us, two boys of 9, completely at the mercy of the rain and the cold wind. Well, the SSVP wants to create another way of being part of society.

As Michel Foucault said, the poor are not only excluded, they have no escape. Very often, the poor are repressed or ignored. We include here, among so many other forms of poverty, that of language inadequacy which is a serious form of poverty. It makes it difficult to study, communicate, and progress in employment. So the SSVP also focuses on public education. Some social sectors criminalise poverty, but the poor themselves suffer more from crime. Those who live from crime are very small groups. I do not deny that many poor districts are unsafe places. But let us not forget that in these places, many good people who live there have to put up with the crime, the ill-treatment and the threats, and sometimes, the weakest of them are recruited into crime. That is why it is so necessary for Vincentians to visit the homes of the marginalised.

### 5.2. Let us look at the alternative

Jesus Christ became human in order that humanity could mature into its proper freedom and dignity. Jesus understood the sufferings of the world, but his purpose was to relieve them. The Master teaches us that the Christian, seeing a needy neighbour, stops, leaves any other business and runs to help their brother or sister in need. The poor person is a real human being, John or Paula, with whom to create bonds of friendship. But through them, it is God who calls me. It is God who suffers. It is Jesus who takes the good deed done to a poor person as one that we do to Him.



During the Renaissance period, in his book *Utopia*, Thomas More imagined a world where poverty had been eradicated. “In Utopia, since everything belongs to anyone, no one will ever lack anything. The inhabitants work to ensure that the State’s storehouses are full. Everything is distributed fairly, there are no poor and no beggars. No one owns anything, yet everyone is rich.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps his model was very radical, but the main thread of his thought is still valid; poverty could be eradicated.

Saint Vincent tried to reconcile an infinitely good, wise and powerful God, with a world in which there was too much poverty and suffering. His stubborn response was: God is interested in human beings. This unjust world, lacking in charity, is not what God wants. One of Saint Vincent’s secrets is that he loved to nourish himself with the writings of the early Church, and of the Fathers. For this he pointed out that if necessary, the sacred cups and ornaments should be sold to meet the needs of those who are suffering. We remember that faith in Jesus Christ and in his Gospel was central in the origins of Christianity. They translated this into helping the poor. The historian Suetonius commented that the distinctive feature of these men and women who had appeared in Imperial Rome was that “there were no poor among them”. They continued what Luke expressed in Acts 2, 42-47, that is, they distributed the money among themselves, according to the needs of each. And they did it happily, fraternally, sustained by prayer. In human history, a new way of living together had appeared, to eradicate the “injustice of poverty”. In the origins of Christianity, the poor were not only the recipients of aid. Once they had been helped, they then learned to care for others poorer than themselves. But these ideals are all too often lost in Christianity. Indeed, some Christian groups have themselves promoted the serious exploitation of human beings by others.

### 5.3. The response of the SSVP

But God raises up new prophets of social issues. One of these was Saint Vincent. Another was Blessed Frédéric, who himself followed Vincent de Paul’s spirituality, updated for his own time. Like the Vincentian Family as a whole, we, at the SSVP, want to join this movement for social change, towards an inclusive world. We want to be an alternative to the world of corruption which oppresses the poor. I say “we want”, because we also require conversion and improvement. Every year, therefore, we unite ourselves eagerly with the World Day of the Poor instituted by Pope Francis.

The SSVP promotes personal service to those in need. This is very good. But we also have to implement the Church’s Social Teaching. Find ways of bringing the poor out of poverty, because they are given work, because they can access private property, however little. Nonetheless, this causes problems for us with conservative sectors who still see the poor as an inconvenience, as an undesirable presence. Let us never forget that what is needed is to grow in empathy with the poor. Let us help to overcome poverty, but not dismiss sensitivity and respect towards the poor person. Let us continue our efforts, so that the dispossessed can grow in faith and spirituality. That they can get to know God, for whom we live.

We must have an unstoppable desire for change. Not simply wanting to relieve marginalisation, but to build a history of liberation. Together, we can build a history of overcoming poverty. We are not called to preserve the *status quo*, when this has created marginalisation. We have to suggest disruptive, inclusive and enriching models. Let us Vincentians accompany those in need to learn their own destiny and grasp it with both hands. They, not us, are the leading factor in their own history. With this attitude, we will continue helping joyfully.

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1 Thomas More, *Utopia*, Cassell & Co. 1901.



Our charism calls us to transform the world, so that things continue to improve. For this we need spaces for study and development. We have to continue increasing our knowledge of the world of poverty. If you will allow me, I invite you to read socially-conscious literature. This will often allow us to walk in the shoes of the poor. It gives us the opportunity for empathy with the dispossessed. It is another way of knowing about the life of the marginalised. It also gives us greater affective understanding, opening our minds and being more aware of the difficult ethical situations in which they live. I suggest two writers among the many thousands of good ones there are. This time, I have chosen two Latin American authors, elsewhere I will mention those from other continents: Luis Ruffato is a Brazilian writer who lets people inspire him. He produces stories about the middle and lower classes, mostly from São Paulo. Carola Saavedra is a Chilean writer, but works in Brazil. She produces stories about the poorer classes in Rio de Janeiro.

#### 5.4. A life commitment

As Vincentians, we have to examine our attitude to the poor every day, since reducing poverty means being sensitive to the pain of the other person, and the means to relieve it. In this way, it is possible to help. I repeat, that in this context, the annual World Day of the Poor provides a motivation for the SSVP to work even harder to eradicate poverty. If our “antennas” are working well, we can perceive how God is sending us out to encounter, and speaking to us especially through human faces, above all, those of poor people, the hungry, the oppressed.

Listen to God, so that you can then serve the poorest people in the best possible way. I say to each of you, and to myself: if God speaks, the best I can do is to preserve an expectant silence, and listen to him, receive him, address him personally, respond to him, trust myself to Him, put myself at his disposal, allow Him to meet me. Say to him, like Samuel: “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3). Like the psalmist: “I hear in my heart: ‘Seek my face.’ I will seek your face, Lord” (Ps 27). Like Paul: “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (Acts 9). Like Mary of Nazareth: “Let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1, 26-38). Like Peter: “Lord, to whom would we go? Only you have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6, 60-69). Reading Lk 5, 12ff, I too can say, with the man suffering from leprosy: “Lord, if you wish you can cure me”, so that He might say to me: “I do wish it, be clean”. May these Days empower the encounter, the experience, prayer and dialogue.

Well, after writing all these pages, to relax my thoughts a little, I went out for a coffee at a small Paris bar. While I savoured my coffee, I watched the woman working behind the bar drying a cup with a cloth that was not very clean...







# 6

## SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR EXPERIENCING THE WORLD DAY OF THE POOR







## 6. SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR EXPERIENCING THE WORLD DAY OF THE POOR

Pride, egoism, and some dominant groups always want to have some poor people available whom they can use or exploit. The SSVP unites with all people of good will, who want a more productive, distributive and inclusive world, in order to ensure that many forms of poverty are only “temporary”. They want scarcity and penury to be reduced, and where this is not possible (in illness or severe disability) ensuring these people are supported in a dignified way by the State and civil society. This Day must motivate us, so that every year our service to the poor is assessed.

Remember that everything offered here is by way of suggestion, you can offer other ideas. And from the 10 ideas we offer here, you don’t have to do them all. Every local Conference can do one, two or three a year, and others the following year. It’s better to do small things well. These proposals must be prepared, well in advance. Some require a fair amount of work beforehand.

There are others which can be done with the people we are helping in the week leading up to the Day. Others which we ourselves, SSVP brothers and sisters, do in the week beforehand. Finally, there are ideas to do on the Day itself:

1. **The week before, make longer visits to the homes of the marginalised, or to the other places we visit, prisons, hospitals, homes for the elderly, etc. Let us try to listen to what they say.**
2. **Find a steady job for a destitute person.**
3. **Freely share among the people we help, giving them sanitizer gel, masks or other necessities (depending on the current problems).**
4. **Offer good catechesis to our unfortunate people, whichever group they belong to. A dynamic, positive, respectful and participatory catechesis. We can use various technical media to deliver this. The themes can vary, anything from the life and thoughts of Saint Vincent de Paul, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, or Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati.**
5. **Make sure that a deprived person, someone with a disability, can complete their documentation to receive a pension or grant from the State.**
6. **With proper care, we can provide material and spiritual help to a parish or chapel which is in a marginal and conflict-ridden part of our city. This should help our gradual integration with the poorest of the poor.**
7. **Invite suitable people to become members of the SSVP. Welcome them, bring them to the first meetings, look after them, teach them patiently and happily.**
8. **Provide members of the Local Council with a good talk about Jesus and the poor. Using the huge resources offered by contemporary Christology.**
9. **Share the World Day of the Poor, not just with our poor friends, but also with other branches of the Vincentian Family.**



- 10. On the Sunday of the World Day of the Poor, share with our brothers and sisters who suffer deprivation, inviting them to Mass and then to a meal. So that we grow together in friendship and in spiritual life.**

May Jesus our Saviour accompany us in this task. May Mary, through her actions with her cousin Elizabeth and the marriage feast at Cana, inspire our own humanitarian actions. A warm embrace from me, for all our members of the Society of St Vincent de Paul around the world.

