

Simplicity

Syd Tutton

I have always believed that the most profound things in life are also the simplest.

The happiest people I have ever come across in my life are the ones who have been able to nurture a genuine simplicity of spirit. They don't overlook the complexities of work and life but they do maintain a strong sense of balance and a sound sense of proportion. In other words they keep reminding themselves of the things that really matter.

In our work with the poor we can learn a lesson or two about this Christ-like simplicity. In the midst of so many tragic stories, who among us has not come across people in great need who have something very sacred to teach us about the things that really matter?

I am often surprised when members of the Society start thumping the table about the need for greater spirituality among the membership. We are certainly all in need of nourishment for our spirit. We are human. It goes without saying that we hunger and thirst for the things of the spirit. Indeed, the ravages of European colonization are most plainly evident in the way in which the Aboriginal people of this land have been *spiritually crushed* as they were taken away from their mothers, their country, their meaning.

What surprises me when I hear those cries for greater spirituality is that more often than not the spiritual treasure that lies under our noses is monumentally ignored. I am speaking, of course, of the simple signs of joy, the simple signs of peace, the simple wisdom we encounter in the most unexpected places, the simple serenity derived from shared prayer and reflection.

If you look around the world today at organizations and institutions it's clear that, while change is always inevitable, the organizations that move the furthest away from the simplicity of their founding mission are the ones that seem to come undone.

I do not believe that the St Vincent de Paul Society has strayed from our founding story. I believe in fact that we exercise a wonderful fidelity to that founding story in so many ways. Despite all our flaws, as individuals and as an organisation, we do seek our God in the lives of our marginalized sisters and brothers. We do assist people in need, following the Christ's injunction: "*Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do to me.*"

But I also believe that there are some gaps in our fidelity to the simple founding story that was given us by Frederic and his young companions.

There are two gaps that I would like especially to highlight.

Firstly, I believe that we must return to the fearless standard of advocacy established by Frederic and his young companions.

Over the last few years we have begun to do this. For many in the Society this change has been embraced with great joy. For others it has been shunned and treated with the greatest of fear.

We have been subjected to harsh criticism from some quarters, accused of sticking our noses into politics and the public arena.

I believe sincerely, however, that we are simply being faithful to Frederic's revolutionary love for the poor; a love so unconditional that it could never be satisfied with tiding them over until the next crisis. It was always a love that sought to go to the roots of poverty and inequality, challenging the laws, the structures, the economic and social forces that caused people to be poor and kept them in the shackles of poverty.

As our Lord stated in what amounted to his mission statement when he read from the scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth, citing the prophet Isaiah:

*"He has sent me to announce good news to the poor;
to proclaim liberation for prisoners, sight for the blind; to let the oppressed go free..."*

In the spirit of this beautiful text from the scriptures, the Rule of the St Vincent de Paul Society says that: *"The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it."*

Frederic was aware how conservative Catholic opponents might react to his own advocacy for justice, charity and equality. In 1848 he wrote to priests, asking them to work in the city's poor suburbs, warning them "not be dismayed even if the hard-hearted rich, offended by your attitude, should accuse you of communism."

Despite the criticisms we have received and will continue to receive, our eyes must always be on the needs of the poor. This is where we find our God. As our Lord taught us in the Sermon on the Mount:

*"Happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice.
They shall be satisfied."*

And, again, as the Rule reinforces for us:

The distinctive approach of Vincentians to issues of social justice is to see them from the perspective of those we visit who suffer from injustice.

Remember those beautiful words in the Magnificat?

*"He has pulled down the mighty from their thrones
And raised up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
But the rich he has sent away empty."*

That is what we attempt when we adopt the perspective of the oppressed. This is the kind of just and compassionate society we are working to build as we express in our new Mission Statement:

“The Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.”

Now I wish to turn to what I see as being the second gap we need to address. On this one I feel that we have made less progress.

We have failed to be a real place of welcome. This might come as a shock to some of you. We pride ourselves on welcoming the poor and the marginalized. We pride ourselves on being an organisation built on the foundations of faith, hope and charity.

The truth, however, is that when it comes to creating a space for people to join us on our journey we all too often resist. We do this in subtle ways. Sometimes we do it quite overtly.

It wasn't so long ago that our rule denied membership to women. We've remedied that injustice, although we still have a distance to go when it comes to the proportion of women in positions of responsibility in the Society.

The glaring problem for us right now, of course, is the fact that we have failed to truly welcome the young. We have clung to the comfort of structures and arrangements that effectively shut out the young. We have lost much of the simplicity of the founding story in this respect; a story that is essentially a story of a group of young people consumed by a desire to find their God in the marginalised.

Let me share with you a snapshot of the future of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia if we decide to go along as we are now, clinging to our comfort zones.

According to the research commissioned by the Society in the *Project X Report*, if current trends continue, the membership of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia will reduce significantly.

In eight years time, if the Society does not modify its current practices it can be predicted that the following will happen:

- In a best case scenario more than half of those then aged 75 or older will cease to volunteer.

Assuming the Society manages to hold baby boomer numbers, attract 20 per cent more Generation X, and recruit a high number of Generation Y, then the Society will face a 30 per cent drop in volunteer numbers.

- In a worst case scenario, if the Society loses 75% of its volunteers then aged over 75, holds onto Baby boomer numbers and does not actively recruit Gen X, Gen Y or Gen Z, then the Society will have a **50–55 per cent fall in volunteers**.

The research on Generation X shows us that we have failed to attract or to keep those who are aged between 27 and 45. How on earth can we speak to the hearts of Generation Y (12-26 yrs) unless we liberate ourselves from the shackles of prejudice and make way for the work of the Holy Spirit?

These are hard challenges. They demand of us that we ask some important questions of ourselves.

What is worst? Having few members or having little cash?

A St Vincent de Paul Society that is low on Vincentians is a thousand times more embattled than a St Vincent de Paul Society that is low in cash reserves.

We need to reflect on this very seriously.

At the present time, how much effort do we put into ensuring that younger people are attracted to join us? Now compare that to the effort we put into fundraising.

Is the money important? Yes, of course it is, if we want to have the resources to assist our marginalized sisters and brothers?

Are our financial resources as important as our human resources? No. Because for us, our greatest human resource is the Vincentian. This is not to say that we do not value our paid staff. They do an invaluable job in enabling the Society to operate on a professional footing. But could we ever imagine a St Vincent de Paul Society that was so denuded of Vincentians that it consisted *primarily* of paid staff?

How can we possibly serve the poor in Australia if there are none of us around?

How can we stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers experiencing new forms of poverty and exclusion unless we are truly welcoming of new members from younger age groups and from diverse backgrounds? These are the people who may well challenge us and make us feel uncomfortable; people who may well bring a newness and freshness of vision to the simple story of compassion and justice we aspire to live.

Vincentians feel a great sense of the sacredness of the stories we hear from the people we assist. We want to do something to honour these stories. We owe it to the people who are rendered voiceless. We have chosen to join our voices with the voices of others in Australia who share this same passion for social justice. *We*, however, have something distinctively Christ-centred to share as we bear witness to the Gospel of love.

It was not for nothing that the original name of the St Vincent de Paul Society was the 'conference of charity' or 'the conference of love'. This was at the heart of Blessed Frederic's vision.

The Refounding journey that has commenced in the Society in Australia is all about returning to the well-springs of this vision at the same time as we honestly and intelligently analyse the signs of the times we now live in.

When Frederic founded the Society he was simply being faithful to Jesus, the Word made flesh. He and his companions became the presence of Jesus in the streets of working-class Paris in the 19th century. More to the point, he and his companions recognized and worshipped the Word become flesh in the poor and despised "dangerous classes" of Paris.

For us in Australia at the beginning of the 21st century we are challenged to discern how Christ can become flesh through us. This is the essence of our refounding journey.

There are three ways to respond to the challenge of how to address the gaps I have mentioned above.

- 1 Nostalgic escapism - where we live in the past where everything seemed to be just right.
- 2 Do nothing – pretend that we do not have a problem or that we do have a problem but if we close our eyes it will just go away. A variation on this theme is the position that the problem lies with everybody else.
- 3 Refounding – going back to the core reason for our existence as an organization whilst discerning how we can truly bear witness to this in our contemporary context.

The Project X Report has given us clear warning signs of our fate if we do nothing. It has also presented us with a solid case against the destructive (even when well-meant) effects of nostalgic escapism.

The St Vincent de Paul Society looks forward to an Australia where no one is left out or pushed out, an Australia where there is not only a redistribution of opportunity but a redistribution of hope.

It is very hard for many people to cope. It is even harder when they are made to feel like they are to blame for the fact that they are poor. Some suffer from oppression on a number of fronts. They might be oppressed on the basis of race. Witness the marginalisation experienced by Indigenous Australians or the plight of our sisters and brothers who have come to Australia seeking asylum. Women and children experience exclusion and often homelessness due to domestic violence. Single mothers are targeted for special coercive treatment by the so-called welfare reforms. Think of the people whose lives are torn apart by mental health problems. Think of the growing ranks of the working poor.

All of these people remind us of our reason for being here. They remind us of the simple call of the gospel. They remind us of our own humanity. They share with us the gift of their vision of life from the perspective of the oppressed. They enable us and empower us to engage in a prophetic call for justice from below.

We owe them our solidarity. This is why we must not run away from the changes we need to make.

This is why we are called to be pilgrim people, a people on the move; not a people who cling to the past.