

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Talk to Representatives of the St. Vincent de Paul Society
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Introduction

Here's a poem that has a message for all of us:

I was shocked, confused and bewildered
As I entered heaven's door
Not by the beauty of it all
Nor the lights or its décor

But it was the folks in heaven
Who made me sputter and gasp –
The thieves, the liars, the sinners,
The alcoholics and the trash.

There stood the kid from seventh grade
Who swiped my lunch money twice.
Next to him was my old neighbour
Who never said anything nice.

Herb, who I always thought
Was rotting away in hell,
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine,
Looking incredibly well.

I nudged Jesus, "What's the deal?
I would love to hear your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here?
God must've made a mistake.

"And why is everyone so quiet,
So somber – give me a clue."
"Hush, child," he said, "They're all in shock.
No one thought they'd be seeing you."

Those verses remind us that we are all poor before God!

It is an honour to meet with you today. The St. Vincent de Paul Society has always had a special place in my heart. I am also thankful for the opportunity to speak

about the social teaching of our Church, a great treasure that I have studied, taught and spoken about for most of my life, and that is not known as it ought to be.

Frederic Ozanam and the Catholic Social Movement

Blessed Frederic Ozanam, your great founder, was an important figure in the Catholic social movement that gave rise to what today we call the social teaching of the Church. Let me review some basic facts about that Catholic social movement. The industrial revolution in England is usually dated 1760 to 1830; it was somewhat later in most European countries. That revolution, combined with *laissez-faire* capitalist ideology (the view that the government should keep out of the economy and let so-called economic laws operate freely) brought with it appalling human poverty and suffering, as people moved into urban centres to work in the new factories. Starvation wages, long hours, child labour, dangerous working conditions and terrible housing brought misery to the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

The first to react to this “social problem”, as it came to be called, were the Utopian Socialists, and the Communists, but especially, after 1848, the Marxists, who called for the complete overthrow of capitalism. However in France and Germany especially, but also in other European countries, Catholic leaders, especially lay people, acting out of a deep sense of Christian charity, began to respond with different forms of social service to assist the poor.

It was not long however before many of them began to see the need, not just for alleviating the suffering of people around them, but for attacking the causes of this suffering. Hence there arose movements to promote social legislation, initiatives to organize working people, even model factories. The Catholic movement grew to the point that it even alarmed Karl Marx, as he acknowledged in a letter he wrote to Frederick Engels in 1869. By the latter part of the 19th century, the leaders of this Catholic social movement from various countries had begun to meet and to draw up a set of principles for common social action. Copies of these principles were taken to Pope Leo XIII, who had assumed the papacy in 1878. He used them as the basis for the first official document of Catholic social teaching, *Rerum Novarum*, published in 1891.

This is a remarkable story when you think about it. Catholic social teaching had its origin in the response of Christian charity that then developed into a movement for justice; it came from the bottom, among ordinary Catholics, not from the top; and it was primarily a lay initiative. Blessed Frederic Ozanam was an important figure in the early years of this movement.

Ozanam was a 20 year old law student in Paris when, in 1833, he founded the St. Vincent de Paul Society in co-operation with some fellow law students. In a hot debate with a non-believer one evening, Ozanam had argued that the Church had done much for civilization. His opponent challenged him to show what he did about his faith except talk about it. The question hit home, and Ozanam saw that he needed to do what Jesus did: go to the poor. So began the St. Vincent de Paul Society. It was based, not on a

sophisticated charter but on personal witness. A fundamental principle of the society was that the members must personally visit those they were assisting rather than just setting up some distribution program. They began taking free wood and coal for fuel to the tenement slums in Paris. Within a few years it grew into the largest Catholic charity in the world, which today has a million members serving the poor in many, many countries.

Though the St. Vincent de Paul Society turned out to be Ozanam's most powerful legacy, it is important to pay attention also to other things that Ozanam did. In common with other members of the Catholic social movement, he saw the need to promote justice for workers. As a Catholic lawyer who was also grounded in the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, he pioneered the concept of what he called "the natural wage", a notion that Pope Leo XIII would later describe as a family, living wage, and he agitated for it in his writing. He promoted the formation of labour unions. He condemned slavery, long before it was abolished in places like the United States. He spoke of the importance of empowering people so they could speak and act for themselves. He called for the implementation of what the Church today calls "the option for the poor."

I want to say a something about that "option". It had been, and remained for a long time, the practice of Catholic hierarchies to maintain close ties to those in power. The theory was that, if those in positions of power and leadership could be influenced then they would change social conditions and make them better for the poor. It visualized a "top down" movement. Ozanam was one of those who said this strategy was wrong. The Church, he said should ally itself instead with the poor. This is the principle that came to be enshrined in the official documents of Catholic social teaching, and that would come to be explicitly endorsed by the Latin American Bishops in 1968 at their conference in Medellin, Columbia. The Church, they said, should be at the side of the poor. In fact, as Ozanam had also said, the poor evangelize us.

What I want to emphasize before moving on is the fact that Blessed Frederic did, in a way, see the need for both social service and social action, or for both charity and social justice. It's true that he believed the *primary* means to improve the life of the urban poor was through the widespread practice of Christian charity. He had no plan for systematic social reform. He said "Social welfare reform is to be learned not in books or from a public platform but in climbing the stairs to a poor man's garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secrets of his lonely heart and troubled mind." However his work on the "natural wage", his encouragement of labour unions, his published lectures on the dignity of work, his insistence that the Church has to come to terms with the modern world, helped prepare the way for the Church's teaching on social justice. So engagement in social justice is in no way alien to the thought of Ozanam; in a sense it completes it. It is interesting also to note that Giuseppe Toniolo, one of the specialists who advised Pope Leo XIII when he was writing *Rerum Novarum*, was an active member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

I want to consider with you the distinction between these two practices of social service and social action, or charity and social justice.

Charity and Justice: Social Service and Social Action

There is a story I have used a number of times about a farming community in which there was a very dangerous curve in the highway just outside town. There were frequent accidents at the curve and many injuries. Motivated by charity, the local people organized a group of volunteers who could be called on to pick up victims of these accidents and transport them to the nearest hospital. After a year or two the local people held some fund-raising events and collected enough money to buy an ambulance which was stationed near the curve to move accident victims more quickly and safely to the hospital. Then people began to think that they should do something about the cause of these accidents by lobbying the highway authority to straighten out the highway.

It turned out however that a powerful local politician owned a farm market that was located right at the curve on the highway. Since he saw himself losing business if the highway was moved, he used his influence to block any changes to the dangerous curve. At this point a group of local citizens formed an action group which, by a combination of publicity, boycott and lobbying finally managed to get the dangerous curve removed, and of course the accidents and injuries ceased.

The volunteer group that picked up the accident victims and got them to the hospital, as well as the local citizens who raised money for an ambulance are good examples of the exercise of charity or social service. The action group that used a combination of techniques to get the dangerous curve removed from the highway is an example of the exercise of social justice or social action. Of course this is a very simple example. Removing the causes of poverty, injustice and human suffering is usually far more complicated and is rarely as completely successful as the highway campaign.

The example does show us the difference between social service and social action, all the same. Social service is a direct and immediate response to human need; among Christians it is an exercise of charity, an expression of love for our neighbour; and usually it is about helping individuals. Social action however is an organized effort to change a social practice, habit, law or structure that unjustly harms others and is rightly called social sin; among Christians it is an exercise of social justice, an expression of concern for the common good; and usually it is about changing society.

Probably the best writer on the subject of social justice was Father William Ferree, who identified the act of social justice as organization. Though we indirectly serve the common good in many ways, especially by the practice of the virtues, the most direct form of social justice is organization aimed at making changes demanded by the common good.

Before we go any further, we should note that both social service and social action, both charity and justice, are needed. Moreover it is instructive to see that Blessed Frederic Ozanam was, in a sense, engaged in both, though he did not confuse the two. His work with the St. Vincent de Paul Society was one thing; his efforts to promote the living wage, unionization of working people and the abolition of slavery were something

different. It is a clear requirement of our faith and it is the explicit teaching of the Church that we be engaged in both charity and justice. We must also not allow one to obscure the need for the other. Clearly there are two dangers to be avoided: Letting social service get in the way of social action, and letting social action blind us to the importance of social service. I want to spend a little time on each of these dangers.

Letting Social Service Get in the Way of Social Action

This can happen in several ways that appear innocent enough and yet can be quite harmful. Consider the following examples.

First, social service can so absorb our energy that it prevents us from seeing the underlying causes that cry out for attention. I think a clear example of this today is the community support of food banks. We have thousands of food banks in Canada today and we certainly need them. There are two of them in the area where I live and they are a godsend for many families that simply wouldn't survive without them. Our two clustered parishes of Woodslee and Maidstone are extremely generous in helping these foodbanks. In fact one of the foodbanks was founded, and is still managed by one of our parishioners. Yet the more we help those foodbanks the more we can feel that we have done our part for the poor. We can lose our critical sense. We are no longer scandalized that a country as rich as our own should be one in which people have to rely on foodbanks. There is no excuse for this. Social assistance rates should be adequate to support people, social housing should be readily available and the minimum wage, as the Senate Poverty Committee pointed out back in 1971, should be at least 60% of the average industrial wage. Most of you have heard the striking statement made years ago by Dom Helder Camara, the late Archbishop of Olinda and Recife: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."

Second, social service, as you members of St. Vincent de Paul know so well from your own experience, carries with it the danger of paternalism. We can make people more dependent on us instead of doing all we can to help them speak and act on their own behalf. It is interesting to see that this was a concern of Blessed Frederic Ozanam. He understood well that really helping people means empowering them.

Third, social service can let governments off the hook. In fact many neo-conservative politicians in the past thirty years have said frankly that caring for the poor is the work of churches and charities. They have glamourized it as "volunteerism", the sign of a good and committed citizen. There is nothing new here. In his 1931 social encyclical, Pope Pius XI, commenting on the terrible poverty of people said: "This state of things was quite satisfactory to the wealthy, who looked upon it as the consequence of inevitable economic laws, and who therefore were content to leave to charity alone the full care of helping the unfortunate; as though it were the task of charity to make amends for the open violation of justice, a violation not merely tolerated, but sometimes even ratified, by legislators." (no. 4)

Fourth, social service can mute our voices when, to support our work of charity, we accept help from government agencies or businesses that, by their policies and practices are helping to create the very poverty we are trying to alleviate. Some of the businesses that are most prominent in sponsoring charitable enterprises today are the most blatant examples of poor wages and anti-union activity.

In its social teaching the Church has more than once called attention to this danger of charity getting in the way of justice. Pope Pius XI, in his 1931 document, already referred to, *Quadragesimo Anno*, made the famous statement: “Charity cannot take the place of justice unfairly withheld.” (no. 137). In his most recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict says the following: “Charity goes beyond justice, because to love is to give, to offer what is “mine” to the other; but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is “his”, what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting. I cannot “give” what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice. If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just toward them.” (no. 6)

Letting Social Action Get in the Way of Social Service

Though the work of social service or charity is not the same as the work of social action or justice, and is not a substitute for it, it is nonetheless something that is essential to what it means to be a Christian. In fact, social action that is not rooted in the virtue of charity runs the risk of becoming simply a power trip. This is a most important truth that has been emphasized especially by Pope John Paul II and by Pope Benedict.

In his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict points out that the Lord’s command to love others obviously includes attending to the sufferings and needs of others, which means also their material needs. By assisting others in their need we give witness to the world of the Father’s love for all people, a love made visible in his Son. That is why the works of charity have been part of the Church’s life from the very beginning. In a very important passage, Pope Benedict points out that this exercise of social charity quickly became established as one of the Church’s three essential qualities, alongside the proclamation of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments. All three of these activities belong to the very nature of the Church and are inseparable from one another (no. 25).

That means that when you do the works of charity, or social service, as members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, you are acting in the name of the Church. What you are doing is a genuine Church activity. You are making the charity of Christ present and visible in the world, the same charity that is made present in the Word of God and in the Mass and the sacraments. This is not the case with social action or the work of social justice. When you engage in social action or social justice, you do so guided by the social teaching of the Church, but you do so as members of the earthly city not as members of the Church. What you do is not a Church activity but a civic activity.

“We have seen that the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church, but belongs to the world of politics . . . The Church’s charitable organizations, on

the other hand, constitute an *opus proprium*, a task agreeable to her, in which she . . . acts as a subject with direct responsibility, doing what corresponds to her nature.” (no. 29)

It should be clear however that all of us, to the extent possible for us, need to be involved in both social service and social action.

Consequences of Distinction Between Social Service and Social Action

There are a number of consequences for you as members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

First, like Blessed Frederic, you too need to be engaged not only in the work of charity but also in the work of social justice. However you must not confuse the two. As members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society you are engaged in what can properly be called “Church activity”. In contrast to this, as people engaged in the work of social justice, you are acting as citizens of the earthly community. So while I call on you today never to be content simply that charity be practised toward the poor, I remind you that when you engage in the work of social justice you do so not as members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. You put on a different hat, as it were.

Second, this does not mean, however, that there are not some overlapping areas. One of those areas is that of advocacy. Your service of the poor rightly includes helping them to know what government services are available to them, and helping them to get in touch with such services. It includes as well compiling information about the poor, their conditions, their needs, their problems, and making such information known to people like our legislators. It includes combating false and misleading caricatures of the poor that are common in our society. Most importantly, it includes helping the poor to speak and act for themselves, empowering them so they take charge of their lives. This, as you know, was a very important consideration for Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

Third, it means that, whether we are engaging in charity or justice, we must be people who, in the words of Pope Benedict, have undergone a “formation of the heart” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 31). Our service of the poor, if it is to be Christian service, is based on the fact that we see, love and serve Christ in the poor. We are not called on to romanticize the poor. Sometimes they are not very attractive and are in fact in some ways the authors of their own misfortunes. However the Church has never accepted the idea that there are what some writers call “the undeserving poor.” We serve the poor because we see and love Christ in them. One of the reasons why I have always loved Dorothy Day and read her works with such attention is that she never forgot this basic principle. Many times the poor she lived with and served let her down and betrayed her. However she never ceased to see Christ in them. Ozanam himself said: “Our faith is weak because we cannot see God. But we can see the poor, and we can put our finger in their wounds, and see the marks of the crown of thorns.” One of the great principles of Blessed Frederic was the need to visit the poor in person. I see here one of his ways of making sure that we are treating them the way we would treat Christ.

Some Suggestions for Vincentians

You are servants of the poor and I stand here with the greatest respect for you. There is so much that I can learn from you. However I have been asked to speak to you today because of my long association with the social teaching of the Church. In the light of that teaching, and keeping in mind the things I have already said, I want to offer a few suggestions for your consideration.

First, Involve Yourself in Social Action Wherever You Can

While I am mindful of the fact that all of us have only so much time and energy, and cannot be involved in everything, I strongly encourage you to supplement your ministry in the St. Vincent de Paul Society with some degree of involvement in social action inspired by the Church's social teaching. With your intimate knowledge of the poor, and your love for them, you are the ideal people to engage in work for justice. So I encourage you to be politically active and to contribute what time and effort you can to local social action coalitions, for example. All of us have occasions when we are called on to be involved in activity required for the common good.

Second, Learn More About the Church's Social Teaching

The little book on this topic that I have recently published is entitled *The Social Attitudes of a Catholic*. That title reflects my conviction that if your social attitudes are in accord with the Church's teaching, you will do and say all sorts of things that will serve the common good, wherever you are and whatever your occupation.

For this reason I want to say something brief about four of the social attitudes that our social teaching urges on us: our attitudes to human dignity, to the social nature of the person, to human rights and to property or possession.

Human dignity: Everyone claims to believe in human dignity. However what people mean by that expression can be very vague. What does the Church mean by it? The word "dignity" means something that stands on its own, something that is not just a means to something else. In this sense it is not our human nature but rather our human *end or goal* that has dignity. For our human end or goal is to glorify God. That is the end or goal of the entire universe. Think of it this way. I have a petrified bone from a dinosaur that I obtained many years ago in Drumheller, Alberta. It is 75 million years old. When you think back to that time, you realize there were wonderful animals, plants, lakes, mountains, but what was the sense of it all? What creature could look at it and praise the God from whom it came? It was only when evolution reached the point when humans appeared that there was, within creation, a creature that could look at it all, come to know the God from whom it came, and respond to that God in the name of all creation. So human dignity means that what distinguishes us from all the other animals is that we can know and love God and so attain the very purpose of creation.

The Social Nature of the Person: British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once made the comment, “There is no such thing as society; there are only individuals.” In fact she was quoting the American writer, Ayn Rand, whose book, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, was all the rage at one time, and who was an unabashed defender of free market capitalism. Rand was a favourite of Alan Greenspan, who for twenty years headed the U.S. Federal Reserve and had great influence on U.S. economic policies.

The statement is nonsense. As several contemporary writers have shown, the so-called “individual” is a myth, a creation of some 18th century writers who, in the emerging market economy, sought to picture humans as solitary individuals, intent only on self-interest, and competing with one another in the marketplace. In fact, a little reflection shows us that we are profoundly social from the moment of our birth. Who I am is inseparable from the family in which I grow up, from who my parents are, from the ethnic community to which I belong, from the country in which I live. In many ways I am the product of those communities and so I also have responsibilities to the common good of those communities. For example, my country, Canada, is not just 34 million individuals but is a social family, tied together in dozens of ways, and where all of us need to be treated as members of the “family”. This is the basis for universal social programs, and for taxation.

Human Rights. In our society people are quick to assert their rights. Yet what do we mean by a “natural human right”? Secular society does not have a clear and defensible answer to that. However for Catholic social teaching, the answer is clear. Human rights are my entitlements to what I need to fulfill my obligations, to God and to the various communities to which I belong. I have an obligation to God to become what God calls me to be, and so I have a right to what I need in order to do that. Thus I have a natural human right to practice my religion, to know the truth, to marry and raise a family. I also have obligations to the communities to which I belong, and so I have a right to what I need to fulfill those obligations. Thus I have a right to what I need to support my family, a right to work that makes sense, to a family, living wage, a right to vote and a right to be active politically. At the same time, it is clear from this that I do not have a natural human right to get drunk or to make all the money I want (these don’t flow from corresponding obligations).

Property and Possession. There is a very strong sense of ownership in our culture. How readily we say: ‘It’s mine; I worked for it; I can do what I like with it.’ This attitude is rooted in a couple of faulty notions: the idea that property is nothing more than the fruit of my labour, and the idea that human fulfillment comes from possession.

Our social teaching maintains that we have a natural human right to human use of the goods of this earth. In other words, as God’s managers, made in the image of God, we have a right to use this earth’s goods to care for ourselves and our family and to carry out our distinctively human activities. Experience shows that, taking human beings as they are, with our tendency to quarrel, to be more careless of what is not properly ours, and to be lazy, the best way of arranging this is through some system or private-property holding. However – and here is the big point – whatever system we set up must be such

that it truly makes it possible for all people to have that access to the goods of this earth that is theirs by right; so private ownership has all sorts of limitations on it. Pope John Paul II said it clearly: “There is always a social mortgage on all private property.”

Third, Engage in Advocacy and Education on Behalf of the Poor

Within your work as members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, I urge you to engage in certain activities that go beyond the visitation of the poor and yet are in accord with the nature of the Society, such as advocacy and education on behalf of the poor. I am delighted that you are working with ISARC, and will be co-operating with their social audits.

In connection with this third suggestion of mine I want to conclude my remarks by saying something about one of the most important ways you can be an advocate for the poor, in the spirit of Blessed Frederic, and that is by combating false pictures of the poor. Though I am sure you know a great deal about the poor, perhaps it will be useful just to go over a few facts about the poor in Ontario.

First, what are the main causes of poverty among us? (a) The breakdown in family life. With nearly 40% of marriages ending in divorce, nearly one-quarter of families with children now have only one parent, usually the mother. One of the major problems for such mothers is lack of adequate daycare facilities. (b) The difficulties faced by immigrants in breaking into the labour market, especially since their foreign education, training and work experience are often undervalued. (c) Our low wage economy. 25% of full-time workers in Canada receive less than two-thirds of the median national full-time wage (Compare this with 5% in Sweden and 13% in Germany). Our good-paying, unionized manufacturing jobs have gone offshore. Today a two-adult family with children must put in 75 weeks of work a year at \$10.00 an hour in order to rise above the poverty line. Two-thirds of our workers lack a workplace pension. Employment insurance benefits have become very difficult to obtain, even though the money in the fund does not come from the government but from contributions of workers and employers! (d) The lack of affordable low cost housing. It is not unusual for people to have to pay 50-60% of their income on shelter. (e) The gap between rich and poor has been steadily widening, both in terms of income and of wealth. This affects many things, such as the cost of housing. (f) The mentally ill have been largely deinstitutionalized, but they lack adequate community support in many cases. (g) People suffering from alcohol and drug abuse find there are insufficient programs to meet their needs. (h) The new poor, those who have lost their jobs as a result of the financial crisis of late 2008.

Second, are the poor abusing the system? The Harris government thought so and it savagely reduced social assistance rates by 21%, made it harder to get on welfare, and installed snitch lines to encourage people to report cheaters. In spite of those snitch lines, only 430 people were convicted of welfare fraud in Ontario in 2000-2001, and only 393 in 2001-2002. This is less than 1% of those on social assistance. Last fall the Auditor-General in Ontario created serious misunderstanding by talking about the number of overpayments to welfare recipients. What he failed to point out is that the system

regularly generates overpayments; they are the systemic differences between “budgeted” and “actual” amounts of assistance based on normal changes in people’s lives. They also amount to only 1.4% of the costs of the system. We must also keep in mind that there are approximately 800 rules and regulations in the system, many of them punitive, and sometimes applied inconsistently from one caseworker to the next.

Third, do people on welfare want to work? Every serious study of the poor shows they have just as strong a desire to work and support themselves as the rest of the population. The mentality which claims that people would sooner live on welfare than work is based largely on three different myths: (a) The poor are completely responsible for their circumstances; poverty is the result either of character defect or family background. (b) The economy is truly competitive, with everyone having an equal chance. (c) As long as the economy continues to grow the results will trickle down to everyone (a view that serious economists have long since abandoned). Keep in mind that the vast majority of the poor in our province are in the workforce!

Fourth. Are the welfare rolls a huge drain on our economy? In fact the yearly cost of Ontario Works, plus ODSP disability payments is \$5 billion, out of a provincial budget of \$100 billion.

Fifth. Is life on welfare too good? At present people on Ontario Works receive 42.5% of the Low Income Cut-Off (or poverty line), and those on ODSP receive 67% of that line. It would take a 55% increase in Ontario Works to bring people back to the levels that were in place in 1993. On top of that the rules people face are enough to drive a saint to drink!

Sixth. Are our taxes too high? The “tax revolt” which started in California thirty-five or so years ago, and that is regularly promoted by such conservative elements as the Fraser Institute is based on a thoroughly indefensible and unchristian view of the nature of property. Taxes are not an attack on “my money”; they are the price we pay for a decent society.

Conclusion

I thank you for your attention. I repeat that it has been an honour to speak to people like you who so faithfully serve Christ in the poor.

Michael Ryan
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