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Reflections on Service to the Poor

BY

JAMES CORMACK, C.M.¹

Having spent seven years at Saint Vincent de Paul parish in Saint Louis, Missouri, involved in a variety of works of service for the area's poor, I pondered what it was that characterized my service when it best reflected the charism of Saint Vincent de Paul to evangelize the poor.

I must include some cautions. I do not serve perfectly, give completely, work flawlessly. No one does. So the question I ask myself is, "am I an example of the life and ideas of Saint Vincent?" Saint Vincent de Paul was a powerful man, strong and driven. If I measure myself against him, I am less. It is easy enough then for Vincent's goodness and holiness to become an obstacle rather than a call, to be an example of unusual divine intervention rather than an example of a human being like myself, called and open to the grace of God which transforms all creation.

Secondly, my understanding of Vincent's charism of service to the poor is born of experience. It comes from being a Vincentian, formed in the Vincentian spirit, and called to serve with other Vincentians. My understanding has also been influenced by others as well, most specifically Dorothy Day whose works I have read and whose spirit is alive in the Catholic Worker movement.

Ministry as a Call

I would begin with a few words about call to ministry. It is essential that a person know and experience his or her ministry to be a consequence of a direct call from the Lord. For some the call sounds like this: we are loved by the Lord and called to live a life of service. Our call to service is the preeminent experience in our lives of God's love for us.

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We do not serve simply because it is good to do, or because it is the liberal agenda, or that it will prove our goodness. We serve first and most purely because in love we have been called and our response is to choose to return love. We are not forced to serve; we serve because we are the Lord's, blessed with this call. This call is life for us. In short, we are given the gift of life. We answer yes to the call as fully as we can. We are then filled with yet more life.

To know our call requires faith. We are created in love, called to life in service of others. We see with the clarity of faith the reality of the Mystical Body. This perhaps more than anything else characterized the power of Vincent de Paul. In the poor, in those we serve, we see and know the Lord. We see the crucified, suffering Christ most often in the person of our brothers and sisters broken by unemployment and enforced idleness; struggling to feed, clothe, and house their children with little income and constant challenge. Those beset with the demons of mental illness, bound by cocaine addiction, or the loss of children, mirror the sufferings of Jesus. Our brothers and sisters who find the streets and alcohol the only reality they care to live anymore, running from hurt and responsibility, are members of Christ's broken body.

We believe, and because we believe we see. In faith what we see leads not just to fear or revulsion, anger or pity; in faith what we see leads us to love. As we have been loved and called, so do we love. As we love the crucified Lord, whose life is poured out for us, so do we love our brothers and sisters in whom we see that Lord, and so do we serve. As we serve we discover that our service leads back to faith. We serve and our faith is enfleshed. With faith enfleshed we see, and seeing we are called to love. Loving, we must serve. Our service is sometimes halting, fearful, always incomplete. But as we serve, we discover the Lord and our call. We serve, and our call is enlivened and invigorated. We deepen our faith; our vision is broadened; our opportunities to love grow deeper and more full, and in all this we are filled with life.

Hallmarks of the Charism of Service

In order to describe the Vincentian charism of service, we may ask a number of questions. These questions give shape and form to the charism. Though none of these is a direct quote from Vincent, I am confident that they are questions he asked himself and those he gathered around him to serve the poor of seventeenth century France. Let me pose these questions to help sharpen the image of what the charism of Vincent de Paul means.

Compassion

Can we see the Lord in our brothers and sisters and act with compassion? In Matthew 25:31-46 we read "as often as you did it for one of these the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me." What is our reaction to this? Are we able to see with the vision of faith, the presence of the suffering Christ in our brothers and sisters, the suffering poor? What do we see? What are we open to see? I have found that it is easy to romanticize here. The deprivation that marks poverty as telling signs of our selfishness and sinfulness is no uplifting sight. Such deprivation can mask the humanity of a person. Listening to the unconnected and mindless ramblings of a schizophrenic is not engaging conversation. Guiding an inebriated alcoholic to a seat at meals for the poor takes strength, but no great skill or wisdom. The human weakness, seemingly wasted talent, and willful neglect are more than opportunities for pity.

Vincent tells us to see more. We are to see, however dimly and haltingly, Jesus the Lord, broken, hurt, and in need. And so we see the Lord and we are not afraid to keep looking, no matter how searing or overwhelming the vision may be. We see the Lord, and so our hearts are moved beyond pity and sympathy to compassion. We move to a stance that believes that our lives join, some way or other; our hurts are shared, for we stand together. We join together to comfort, to relieve, to change, to confront. Those filled with the charism of Vincent de Paul know in a powerful way just what the Body of Christ is. We are all brothers and sisters in the Lord, a truth too terrible to believe if we see only deprivation. This is a truth filled with a terrible power when our vision in faith leads to compassion, a compassion that leads inevitably to real and lasting solidarity.

In every person called to serve, the gift of compassion is a live and growing trait. Compassion is not born full-grown in any of us, and it must be nurtured in order that it might grow. It must be encouraged and called forth. Much like a child learning to walk, whose first steps are taken carefully with fear of falling, so are our efforts to live compassionately. We begin and try, sometimes fail, and then grow in this ability. Our attempts to respond compassionately lead us to try again.

Weakness

I am convinced that Vincent asked himself, "Am I weak enough to serve?" Are we weak and needy, not sick or incapacitated? To be needy

means that we too are open to help; we are not self sufficient and absolutely independent. One who serves, a man or woman called in love to serve the poor, must be weak, must not be so strong that they do not need or can always help, always know what is right, or always have the resources and energy available. No one is so perfect or has everything that he or she does not question or hurt inside. More personally, how can I be open to suffering and pain if I do not know it myself? Saint Paul asserts that it is in weakness that the power of God reaches completion and is sufficient. So we know and live the truth that in our task of service the life of Jesus is enough.

Often a life of service with its demands can overwhelm. Trying to be clever, wise, powerful and resourceful is not an answer. We need to look first to the Lord who empowers us as we are and gives us what we need to serve in this broken world. A servant doesn't do everything, solve everything; a servant serves and trusts. In weakness he or she strains and struggles to help, to console, to change, to forgive. A servant who trusts is not afraid of weakness and therefore is not overcome by it. A servant who is weak and knows the Lord gives what is needed, gives and gives again, and is never used up. One who is weak enough to serve never quits, though tired; never despairs, though overwhelmed. One weak enough to serve trusts enough to join the dying of the Lord so as to bring the rising of the Lord to those to whom he or she is called and sent. Such weakness, while it rejects strength and self-sufficiency, does need courage.

Courage

And so next I ask, are we courageous enough to serve? Are we ready to begin what may well fail, or show no measurable or discernible results? It takes courage to risk not being foolhardy, but to be risky. To begin something we cannot control and to trust that there will be a way to find in the seeming madness, life and wholeness requires enormous courage. Life is risky, though we often try to change and order it so it will not be. We often try to do only what we know we can. Service to those whose lives are marked by deprivation is risky; deprivation can make life seem mad or illogical, random, senseless, and out of control. If we help one, three more call. This demands energy, wisdom, and resources. What do we do when we cannot change anything, when as on Calvary only love and presence are there. Service of the poor requires courage based on trust, not strength from externals. Small wonder that Vincent spoke often and powerfully about trust in Divine

Providence. It is no surprise that such trust rests in courage.

Commitment to Smallness

And if we are weak enough, courageous enough, and trusting enough, are we ready to change and give up what we must to serve? Most who answer the call of the Lord to serve and be with the poor, are not and never were financially poor. Most come from stable families, with economic security and opportunity. Many are well educated and have been given many opportunities to develop themselves, understand themselves, and dream about what might be. Service of the poor requires a commitment to smallness, to doing ordinary things, with people noted as ordinary. I came to Saint Vincent's from the faculty in a college seminary. I loved teaching and thinking. I was good on my feet and clever enough; I had a good vocabulary. I discovered that the poor did not need these and were not impressed. I found that what rewards I garnered from teaching I had to give away, and do this freely, or I could not be a servant to those I had been called to serve. It required a stripping, a painful changing. I had to become ready to give up doing "meaningful" and "professional" things so as to listen, to feed, to shelter, to be with the poor. Are we ready to give away and change, to accept the small and ordinary, and in faith see dignity? Can we give up quick and discernible rewards for our efforts? Sometimes our service seems to be so much band-aid help, helping little and changing nothing. Are we willing to be stripped of those hopes and dreams, those wants and desires that keep us from seeing full and real life with the poor? We can miss seeing the poor and their needs; we can miss hearing their call for support and compassion if we are too filled, or surrounded by too much, or need too much to succeed.

Schooled or not, every human person can be wise, able to know and understand what is important, what matters, why we are and where we are headed. Unfortunately, knowledge can spawn pride, and pride always blinds. Being stripped of the importance of gifts and talents, of their rank or status, can help us see and understand. Smallness can be freeing if it is embraced; there's nothing to fool us then, to seduce us with importance. Many "small" people are wise. Already stripped, they see and understand. They cherish and live. It is the great gift of simplicity that lets us really live. But simplicity comes only with a willingness to change, to give up, to be stripped.

Change of Heart

There is another stripping or changing that needs to be addressed. Vincent served his whole life, he did not do his required time and then pass on to something better. If we would serve our whole lives then we must be stripped of the hardness of middle life or experience. This is an acquired hardness of heart, often not malicious but hard nonetheless. We live with evil; the real and destructive effects of poverty and racism are all around us. We are not starry-eyed youths, not bleeding hearts. One doesn't trifle with evil. We grow hard, hard and smart, street smart. And it is this hardness of heart born of experience that must be stripped, or we cannot serve with the life and power of Christ.

We are not required to be stupid to serve, we are required to love. It requires a real letting go to love when our hearts want vengeance and our minds supply the ready and real rationale. Vincent's service, in imitation of Jesus, was one of faithful, effective, love. Vincent saw and was troubled. He knew the touch and power of evil, but he chose to love. The stripping away of this hardness allows the true servant to stand against evil always with power while not needing to conquer it. True servants are people who stand for what is right and who constantly and consistently call that forth in others. They are people who love and trust, forgive again and again, accept the harsh and dreadful truth of the cross, and find the fullness of life. Thus enlivened, they bring service that will not be measured or hard to those in need. Life teaches. But we ask, "Are we stripped enough to learn what both the truth and life of the cross is?"

The next question may seem unusual or even ironic, but it is central in a life of service. Are we loved enough? Are we loved and thus filled with life and power that must flow out of us? It is necessary to live and act in such a way as to know and experience God's love for all. The question is not just do we pray? Prayer, of course, is essential. We must trust the loving plan of God, look for its manifestations in the often small but real daily events, which are the marks of the Kingdom. We must see God's love reaching and touching us, filling us and holding us.

True love of self allows others to love us. Too often dedicated men and women allow their spirit and drive to dry up because they will not, or cannot know love. It can be such risky business, but there is no graced ministry without love and love's risks. We can love self not in a possessive, competitive way, not setting love for self as a threat for the love of others. We can cherish who we are, who we can be, and do and allow the love of others to strengthen us, console us, teach us to laugh

and allow us to weep. Will we stand alone, or will we stand with others, being a part of what is good in them, being more together than ever we could be alone? Our sisters and brothers in the body of Christ touch us, change us, soften us, and call us forward with their love.

Lastly, in this matter of love do we allow the ones we serve to love and respond to us as they are able? When we are worn and tired, pulled by too many needs and demands, by an endless array of sadness and sorrow, we easily can ask "who takes care of the caretakers?" And we must admit we often close the door of service and love to us because we say we must always be the givers, the ones who do for others. Many times we keep the ones we serve from helping us. We create structures of help that effectively keep any reciprocity of care at bay. Often we image the poor as being always in need, blind to the many ways they can give to us. They may not be able to give what we give, or precisely what we need at any given moment. But reciprocal giving does happen, if we look for it and are willing to see the poor as real, as Christ for us, and if we are willing to accept what they can give. The poor are our privileged place of God's revelation, calling us to faithfulness and a new vision.

People of Vision

There are more questions to ask in this matter of service. Are we visionary enough to serve? Are we able to operate not so much with answers or even programs, as necessary as they may be, but with vision, with hopes and dreams? Can we glimpse in moments of musing and prayer the kingdom God calls us to create? Life soon enough teaches us the gap between hopes and reality; but a servant of the poor never concedes the gap cannot be bridged. The one called to serve says the kingdom is being built, though incomplete. Persons of vision lead us to where we must go. He or she does not leave us lost in the brokenness, the pain, or the boredom of now. They draw us together and lead us forward.

The vision, these hopes and dreams, must be nurtured or they slowly evaporate. A people without vision, a servant without hope, cannot endure; they break apart and disintegrate. We can keep hopes and dreams fresh and alive through prayer. Prayer is that time with the Source, presence in the place where nothing is done, but all things conceived. Do we wonder about all that is and might be, about all we cannot understand or control? Friends who dream and hope with us, who share their own understanding and vision can invigorate us. Slowing down occasionally, changing places to remember how much

more there might one day be, can feed our spirits. Do we choose to touch what is good and great about being alive, and feeling, and knowing? As difficult and perilous as life may be, living it wholeheartedly, both weeping and laughing, falling and rising again can nurture life, hopes and dreams.

Are we willing to suffer the pain involved in being persons of vision? We often have to endure not only the laughter of those who cannot believe, but worse, the polite dismissals from those who know better. Visions and visionaries lead where we are to go, but the journey is never finished. We call and call again for justice. We answer over and over again the criticisms of the poor and their behavior when it is maladaptive. No one accepts. Still we call. Everyone thinks we are foolish, unrealistic, and unsuccessful. Still we speak of what might be if we live what we believe about being the Body of Christ, of what one day God's reign might bring.

This leads us to consider whether we can live and work and remain at peace, though we don't live in the harvest time. Not only do others dismiss us, but often our efforts seem to go nowhere, help no one, change nothing. Those we help leave. We are never finished, often too busy, sometimes no more than providers and not persons. What we value and treasure most is ignored or misunderstood. We work and work well, and our reward is simply more work. Granted, what I have just said is overstated, because there are people who are grateful and give support. Still the challenge to apostolic zeal is trusting that some things only God can repay and only in God's time. We may plant and water and never see the increase. Can we trust and keep on going? God will, surely and in time, bring about what is promised, what our dreams tell us is to be.

People of Desire

Finally we ask, are we persons of desire, swept up and swept away by the call God gives? We want, yearn for, desire to see, to hear, to love our brothers and sisters, to change the minds and structures that divide, to struggle daily for what is right. We desire that energy that feeds zeal. We desire and live with its surges, its movements, taking us farther and deeper than we would go if moved only by reasoned choice. The poor demand desire. If we would serve them, desire is required. Desire seems always a central mark of those who do great things; it shows grace incarnate, and it transforms our gifts, ordinary and commonplace, into something more. Desire is rarely neat, nor easily planned or

controlled; yet with all its risk, it fills us and allows us to touch, if only for a moment, the fullness we one day will have in the peace of God's kingdom.

Because I am a Vincentian minister and privileged to be called to be in service, I daily am called to live the charism of Vincent de Paul. If I live this charism I feel its power and grow as a loving servant. I ask myself these questions I have posed regularly to keep my heart and mind centered on my call and faithful to the genius of the saint whose path I follow. I offer these reflections to any like me who might choose to respond to the call of the Lord to be in service with the poor. I offer them not as an exhaustive list or an evaluative tool. Rather I offer them as a way to know the power of God which so moved Vincent de Paul, hoping that this knowledge can lead us to move forward in compassion, love and service.