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Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, Catholic to the Core: Spiritual Praxis as the Foundation for Social Change

BY

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“As a Vincent and Louise House volunteer, I come this year to give witness to the core Gospel message: to love one another. In this spirit, I dedicate myself to the task of putting LOVE INTO ACTION. Following the example of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, my challenge this year will be to grow in faith, service, intentional community, social justice, and stewardship through praxis.”¹

Every first Friday of September, these words echo radiantly from the second floor of the small chapel room at 1022 West Belden in Chicago. It is the last scene of a five-day orientation into the values and lifestyle that make up the Vincent and Louise House community, a residential faith formation program on DePaul University’s Lincoln Park campus. Each year ten newly selected DePaul students sign onto a covenant that professes the statements above, which usher in further commitments to engage more fully in the Christian faith, community service, social justice, and stewardship. Their verbal and written consent, made known in this liturgical ritual, is a powerful symbol of faith as they say yes to community accountability and yes to living more in solidarity with the poor and marginalized in society. With much hope and anticipation, mixed in with a bit of fear and anxiety, they enter into the mystery that is the V&L House experience.

The relationships between these ten students — who are oftentimes strangers from the beginning — are a welcomed form of companionship, and at times a necessary challenge for the growth and transformation that are desired outcomes of this journey. Just like the founding religious order that started DePaul University, the V&L’ers are also a community within a community, “gathered together for the sake of the mission.” Rooted in the lives and charism of those for whom the house is named, these students participate in weekly service, deepen their awareness of various justice issues, work at being better stewards of their resources, and most importantly, reflect theologically on

¹ Vincent and Louise House Covenant, adapted from the Amate House Covenant, at <http://www.amatehouse.org/Volunteers/ProspectiveVolunteers/Covenant.aspx>.

their experience walking with those who are poor and marginalized around Chicago and elsewhere. Having mined through the numerous books and essays written by and about Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, I believe that one of their many responses to global poverty rests in the education and active participation of Christians in the spiritual practices necessary to authentically living out the faith. In the midst of organizing and working in the field, many students find they have been greatly influenced on their own vocational discernment after a year at the V&L House. Hence, this essay will reflect on two movements that take place in this group of DePaul students, both of which are centered on the key themes of personal transformation and being sent on mission for the building up of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

First, a bit of history. The Vincent and Louise House is a joint effort between the Amate House of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the Office of Mission and Values, and University Ministry (specifically falling within the area of Catholic Campus Ministry). All of these contributors shape the program in various ways — but more importantly, they help breathe life into the words Catholic, Vincentian, and Urban. The V&L House has been a part of DePaul for thirteen years. Until two years ago it was called the Amate House of DePaul, affiliated with the Amate House of Chicago, which is a postgraduate volunteer program that currently has three other houses in Chicago. The word amate is Latin for the command to love, which implies a sense of urgency demanding action. This is the spirit in which the first house was founded twenty-three years ago, and it continues to be the theme that inspires roughly forty-three young adults each year to take action on behalf of the poor.



Vincent and Louise House, located on the Lincoln Park campus of DePaul University.

Photo courtesy of the author

As the years passed, the activism within DePaul's Amate house grew while the spiritual component dwindled, losing much of the Catholic identity in which it was founded. After several conversations within committees consisting of faculty and staff, however, the Office of Mission and Values responded by providing a majority of funding for full-housing scholarships. This financial support helped to strengthen and refocus the mission of the house by reclaiming its Catholic identity and infusing more Vincentian and Daughters of Charity (D.C.) resources to serve as the backbone of formation for the students. Out of the ashes of a frail program grew the newly renamed Vincent and Louise House in the fall of 2005. Many of its responsibilities remain the same. However, there is now increased exposure and partnership with Vincentian and D.C. communities throughout Chicago.

The V&L House model functions on a combination of certain programmatic expectations, as well as commitments deepened through community choices. In the following paragraphs I will reference pieces of the V&L covenant to explain further how the House mission is incarnated through these expectations and community actions.

Community service: "I will devote my time, energy, and care to help make life better for the people I encounter at my service site. I will accompany society's powerless and marginalized on their walk through life."² Every student in the house participates in a minimum of six community service hours each week at a Vincentian or D.C. service site. This year, the students have one common site at which they are expected to do a minimum of two service hours. The program staff and I made the decision to try something new in order to connect the students more deeply to our place of worship and have them contribute more directly to the parish outreach program. The soup kitchen, conveniently housed at the Saint Vincent de Paul Church, has proven to be one of the most favored experiences of every student in the house this year. The direct encounters with people who are homeless, or who are too poor to afford both rent and food, have changed the way all the students perceive and interact with people on the streets of Chicago. Our reflections and informal conversations are filled with stories of people at the soup kitchen, whom the students now see as integral members of the Lincoln Park community. New ways of relating with people from different socio-economic circumstances are beginning to take root in their hearts and minds. Moreover, the continued connection with Vincentian and D.C. communities through this partnership also adds an element of Vincentian formation. Each academic quarter, the students also have dinner with a different Vincentian and D.C. community within Chicago. The hope is that through these

² V&L House Covenant.

intentional relationships, the women and men who most deeply embody the Vincentian charism will serve as mentors and models of the Catholic and Christian call to serve and work for justice.

Spirituality: "I will welcome this year as an opportunity to explore my faith in prayer, reflection, and worship. I will remain open to different expressions of faith and to the way in which the Spirit is inviting us to grow and learn together."³ The V&L students are also held accountable to the faith journey through spiritual companionship with Vincentian priests, Daughters of Charity, or lay people within the Vincentian family who have significantly been formed within the charism of the order. As their conversations with these people continue throughout the year, it becomes quite evident to students that affiliation to the Christian religious tradition does not necessarily translate into one specific form of spirituality. While their prayer styles and other spiritual practices may run the gamut, the students do commit to attending weekly Sunday night mass and hosting two house masses per quarter. These forms of communal worship serve as a reminder to the students, and as an acknowledgment to the DePaul community, that faith and action on behalf of the poor are inseparable. These events also help convey the values of the House to the larger DePaul community through conversations about the mission. Throughout the years, V&L'ers have chosen to attend services of other denominations and religious traditions as a way of deepening their own engagement in matters of faith. They have also attended Lenten or Pentecost services crafted by Amate House volunteers to learn how these liturgical seasons can help usher in a deeper understanding of our connection with people who are spiritually or materially poor in our community and around the world. For example, the House presentation on the Stations of the Cross portrays the Passion of Jesus Christ through contemporary injustices that plague the human family.

Social Justice: "I will take part in the process of 'conscience-ization,' developing my knowledge, awareness of, and desire to change structures of injustice in society. I will work to promote change in our society toward equality, fairness and equitable distribution of resources and power."⁴ The diversity of personalities and interests among house members leads to a multiplicity of causes being discussed and challenged. Several students are heavily involved in immigration issues, environmental issues, and the crisis in Darfur. In years past, other students have helped organize the DePaul contingent to protest the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia. They have also taken time during community nights to write various governmental

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

representatives on issues ranging from homelessness in the United States to the global food crisis and issues relating to HIV and AIDS. Interestingly, these commitments to a myriad of justice issues sometimes provoke ideological and political contention amongst House members. Issues of war and militarism, or of abortion and women's rights, have been the subjects of some lively conversations. This seeming challenge, however, is also one of the beautiful and enriching aspects of community. The students, and myself, learn about the necessity of respectful dialogue and of valuing ideological and political diversity. Oftentimes it is through these conversations and their experience at service sites that the students learn which issues they are truly passionate about and are willing to commit to in the long run. Benefitting from its privileged central location on DePaul's Lincoln Park campus, the House has been a convenient meeting space for various service groups to host discussions or show documentary films on various local and global justice issues. This leads to the last piece of the covenant.

Stewardship: "I will use the resources that God has provided in a way that creates right relationship. In solidarity with the poor, I will live simply and mindfully."⁵ Not only do the V&L'ers share their house space with other campus service groups, but they have also hosted several service immersion groups from different universities. Welcoming "the stranger" with hospitality and providing free room and board for several days is one action that the students see as part of their commitment to stewardship. While this aspect of the community may not directly affect poverty reduction, it provides a safe and inviting space for peers to reflect and discern their own call to work for justice.

Furthermore, a recurring theme in our lessons and conversations at the House is the notion of our Christian faith calling us to be countercultural. While this is certainly manifested through the choice of living in an intentional community, the V&L'ers also live this out in other creative actions they have chosen to take on throughout the years. A few examples are a commitment to recycling, bringing reusable bags to the grocery and bringing Tupperware and traveling coffee mugs out to restaurants so as to lessen environmental impact, limiting showers to thirty-five minutes per week to be mindful of water usage, and cooking simple meals of beans and rice once a week while educating dinner guests about global poverty. All these actions are rooted in an understanding of Christian discipleship as it relates to hospitality, care of the earth, and solidarity with people whom society has marginalized.

Just as Vincent and Louise addressed global poverty by organizing and forming clergy and young women throughout France to serve the poor as a

⁵ *Ibid.*

faith-filled response to the crises of their time, the V&L program intellectually, affectively, and spiritually seeks to transform students so as to reshape their worldview and the way in which they understand their own particular vocation. Ultimately, the V&L program is designed to holistically transform the hearts and minds of young adults for this mission. The following are brief testaments from two former House members.

Nora Vail is a senior majoring in Political Science. She writes:

I find V&L is having a huge impact on my future plans. More short-term, I plan to apply to do Amate House again when I graduate next year. I feel a call to do a year of full-time service, and I know I already love the Amate House program and would like to serve the marginalized communities of Chicago. After that, I will possibly get a graduate degree. I'm not sure what... maybe social work, maybe law. I just know that whatever I end up doing in the future it will entail service to the poor.

Jackie Lorens is a junior majoring in Political Science and minoring in Journalism. She writes:

Living in the Vincent and Louise House has made me a lot more socially conscious and aware of the various issues marginalized groups face every day. Not only am I aware of injustice occurring throughout the world, but I am also aware of the constant disparity within our own neighborhood and what must be done to empower the marginalized. I have realized that each and every person, no matter their socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, or religious background, has the inherent right to their human dignity, and the greatest injustice of all would be to take that dignity away from them. This program has really helped me grow into a more socially conscious person, a strong advocate for the poor and the marginalized, and an activist for life.

It would be a fallacy to dismiss the importance that the Catholic faith played in Vincent and Louise's approach to combating poverty both materially and spiritually. Sister Louise Sullivan, D.C., sheds light on Vincent's zealousness in being a witness to other priests regarding their calling as pastoral shepherds to the flock in Châtillon. She writes, "Once again we find the formation of the clergy at the root of Vincent's vocation and of his great works."

She goes on to quote Vincent's own words: "...in the plentitude of time [God] called upon us to contribute to the formation of good priests, to provide good pastors for the parishes, and to show them what they must know and practice." From this methodology, four other avenues of Vincentian faith formation came to fruition: retreats for ordinands, the Tuesday Conferences, spiritual retreats, and seminaries.⁶ The priests certainly understood the significance of integrated learning, for it is what gave them direction and purpose in fulfilling their vocational mission. The importance of theological instruction and its integration into practical life experience was likewise not foreign to Vincent and Louise, who constantly sought out educational opportunities for the poor. This was quite evident when Louise began working with Confraternities to educate poor country girls who, as a result of their training and formation, were then able to serve their own neighbors.⁷

Continuing this trajectory of education in the Catholic faith and virtues integral to praxis, the V&L'ers constantly are given opportunities to engage in theological reflection during community nights and retreats. During these events, students are drawn into discussion through storytelling, media, songs, poems, Catholic social teaching documents, scripture, and other relevant texts. Their analysis of the V&L covenant is further developed on an academic level through a mandatory winter-quarter course, "God, Justice and Redemptive Action," which is taught by the associate director of the community service area in University Ministry. This education, in turn, serves a vocational purpose within a larger context. V&L alumnus, Josh Grode, who is currently serving two years in Nicaragua as a Jesuit Volunteer, provides an example. He writes, "The best part of the program was the class associated with it. That has been the biggest catalyst for change in my life. I learned so much. It may be the most positive class I took in college. Also, through my experience in the house I have come to realize that I would like a career in the education (student services) or nonprofit sector. It really was a life-changing and life-forming experience. I am so blessed to have gotten the opportunity, not only to do good work for others, but also to experience a transformation in my own life."

The constant engagement in theological praxis certainly leads students to a more intricate view of service by unraveling its ties to systemic injustices, personal responsibility, and ruminations about God's presence amid the multiplicity of human experience. The outcomes of the course, retreats, and community night discussions, lead to an environment in which students can

⁶ Louise Sullivan, D.C., "The Core Values of Vincentian Education" (Chicago: DePaul University, 1997): 25-29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

question, struggle, discuss and experience together “the Word made flesh” throughout the V&L journey. Through these various avenues of education, students are formed in a framework of Vincentian values and given a language in which to articulate their relationship with the poor. In short, they are tutored in the practices of Christian discipleship, which hopefully will be a lifelong journey of deepening the values learned in this year of formation.

In keeping with the calling that comes inevitably with being a disciple of Christ, I return to the key word: transformation. This conversion of the heart and mind, ushered in by God’s providence, is the same spirit that led to the tradition founded on the life and works of Saints Vincent and Louise. Their lives shaped the Vincentian tradition in which I was formed, and which other University ministers and I now pass on to our students. Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were practitioners of the faith, their primary motivations rooted in a deep prayer life and relationship with Jesus Christ, which in turn inspired and demanded a love for the spiritually and materially poor. Hence, returning to my vocational response in reducing global poverty within the framework of a Vincentian spirituality, I see my work in University Ministry as being rooted in catechesis and evangelization — the formation of Christian young adults. I am simply passing on what I have been taught by mentors and peers who invited me into the prayer life and spiritual practices that make up the foundation of the Christian community. This certainly includes service and justice work.



Students engaged in the fall 2007 orientation, learning the values and lifestyle that make up the Vincent and Louise House community.

Photo courtesy of the author

In this same spirit, I eagerly invite students into an experience of religious tradition and an intimate encounter with Christ that has relevance to poverty, war, homelessness, environmental destruction, and other issues that affect the human family in our time. Here in Chicago, one connects students to Christ by having them serve and work with undocumented immigrants, homeless people, children whose parents are struggling on less than a livable wage, and senior citizens who are strapped for medical and housing resources, just to name a few. This is where my work and vocation intersect with DePaul's mission: Catholic, Vincentian, and Urban.

More specifically, my work is tied to the Vincentian values that influence our mission as a whole in University Ministry: we are people of prayer and action. These values are quite evident at our staff meetings, student programs, retreats, and special university-wide events like New Student Service Day and Vincentian Service Day. The formal prayers with which we open these events then guide and inform the way in which we live out the foundational value of human dignity. In fact, Vincent understood social action itself as a form of prayer — a response to God's love. As university ministers, we strive to transform individual lives through this form of Vincentian personalism while building community and forming students, staff, and faculty to reflect and act on behalf of the spiritually and materially poor. We provide numerous service opportunities in which hearts are broken and transformed to see the world in a different way, so that faith, from a variety of religious perspectives and traditions, means far more than merely an individual's personal relationship to God. This faith incorporates the core values of service, justice, and solidarity with the poor into non-negotiable spiritual practice. The Reverend Edward R. Udovic, C.M., writes about how Saint Vincent's Catholic faith influenced his view of France's bustling cities. He writes:

His keen eyesight unflinching found what he was looking for: countless poor people who were more likely than not forgotten, marginalized, and even despised and feared by the world that surrounded them. As Vincent de Paul walked through these streets, everywhere he looked he saw homeless people and beseeching beggars. He saw hungry people. He saw children and elderly men and women who were neglected. He saw sick people without health care. He saw refugees from warfare. He saw people who were spiritually abandoned and without hope. In these people he found those whom he had been looking for: his brothers and sisters in Christ. Vincent de Paul was profoundly dissatisfied with what he saw because he knew it was at odds with his

ideal vision of the “good news” of the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus Christ to the poor; a place where each human being created in the image and likeness of God possessed an inestimable dignity and value as a person.⁸

It is this dissatisfaction that stirs and reawakens students to a more integrated understanding of their role in the world, and how the values of a religious tradition might shape their view of personal vocation. Rebecca Ickes, a sophomore art major, reaffirms the progression of faith she experienced after a year of V&L when she writes:

I have learned a lot about what it means to be Catholic in seeing the various ways my housemates live out their Catholic faith. Our house is a small example of how inclusive the Catholic tradition really is. Also, this year has really strengthened my faith by tying my “Jesus and me” relationship of attending church and praying privately to the greater relationships between myself and others. I’ve learned there is no way I can have a balanced private faith life. It’s all about our relationships with others! I have relearned the connection between my Catholic faith and our call to serve others and work for social justice. I have learned what the phrase “God is love” truly means. My faith relationship has only just begun to change and grow.

It is no surprise that DePaul is home to people of many faiths, including agnostic seekers. The common thread that binds us is membership in the Vincentian family — whether explicitly and proudly proclaimed, or as a lowest common denominator among all who attend or work for DePaul. Either way, the Vincentian mission permeates and gives meaning to the culture at this university. It is a mission centered on the scriptural reference read aloud by Jesus when he first began his ministry, as recounted in the Gospel of Luke:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

⁸ Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Ph.D., “St. Vincent de Paul: A Person of the 17th Century. A Person for the 21st Century” (Chicago: DePaul University, 2006): 1.

and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

There is no doubt that the good news continues to be fulfilled in the students' community life, in their classroom curiosity, in the beauty of liturgy at their night mass, and in their encounters with the urban poor. As chosen members of this intimate group formed by, and called more deeply into, the Christian mission, the V&L'ers take their stand among other laypeople, vowed religious, and saints immersed in the language and community practices outlined by Vincent and Louise.

While it is not necessary for everyone to partake in an intense year-long formation program in order to grow in Christ-centered values, the V&L House exemplifies the power of community accountability and intentional choices to grow in a faith that is rooted in service and justice. Formation within a particular community is an essential component to every Christian narrative that contains the theme of being sent on a mission. Through which communities are you being spiritually fed and formed? Do their practices consistently engage you in relationships with people who are poor and marginalized? Does your community welcome the challenge of a variety of voices adding an enriched perspective to the whole group? While the work of service and justice can certainly lead to moments of desolation and frustration, the Christian faith and community can provide life-giving hope during these times of struggle.

The foundation built more than 400 years ago by a Catholic priest and a faith-inspired laywoman still has astounding relevance and meaning to our contemporary endeavors in a broken world. This is made evident by the V&L students who are eager to learn about and encounter a loving and universal God through life-changing relationships within a community of believers committed to serving the spiritually and materially poor. The V&L House is centered on one's continued search for God and oneself, which is deeply intertwined with the rest of the world. It is about helping students see life through a particular faith-based lens and giving them the motivation, language, and support to take action. As is evidenced by many of the V&L alumni, the year-long formation that students receive in the House is one that can either move them toward a life rooted in social responsibility or fuel the activism that is already present. The many relationships and experiences they encounter throughout the year can deepen their compassion and commitment to the poor, deconstruct judgments and stereotypes, introduce creative ways to live more simply, and raise critical questions about mainstream societal values. This condensed period of teaching and training in a set of Christ-centered values promotes social engagement, for one cannot be

a serious follower of Jesus and disregard his special attention and love of the poor. The faith that propelled Vincent and Louise in their work is, in the end, the same mission that has been passed on through various members of the Vincentian family, and that V&L students have received generations later.