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# The Complex but Necessary Union of Charity and Justice: Insights from the Vincentian Tradition for Contemporary Catholic Social Teaching<sup>1</sup>

BY

MEGHAN J. CLARK, PH.D.

*Caritas* or charity is at the heart of the Gospel. And yet, despite the fact that charity is a word Christians hear and use often, sustained reflection on charity as the pervasive and umbrella virtue has waned in popular religion. Concerned with “the ways in which charity has been and continues to be misconstrued and emptied of meaning,”<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI chose *caritas* as the central theme both of his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, and his first social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. In so doing, he brought renewed attention to the relationship of charity to justice, especially as it relates to the mission of the church in contemporary society. The two are inextricably linked, as *Caritas in Veritate* recognizes, “If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them,” and “to desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity.”<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI’s approach stirred significant debate concerning the proper relationship between these two integral, yet distinct Christian virtues.

What is the proper relationship between charity and justice? In order to answer this question we should consider Pope Benedict XVI’s two encyclicals focused on *caritas*, then turn to examples from the Vincentian tradition which illuminate the ambiguous relationship of charity and justice through organization. In particular, the examples of Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Louise de Marillac, and Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, offer a rich and integrated approach to charity and justice through organization. First, like Benedict XVI, Vincent de Paul placed charity at the heart of Christian life and his programs for social transformation. Second, the ministry of Vincent de

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate: of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the Bishops Priests and Deacons Men and Women Religious the Lay Faithful and all People of Good Will on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth*, no. 2, at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html) (accessed 31 May 2012).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 6 and 7.

Paul, and those he inspired, focused on justice and the many injustices within society. Finally, Vincent applied organization to the discussion of charity and justice. Solidarity with our neighbor requires it. Vincent de Paul and the Daughters of Charity were engaged in community organizing, recognizing that the poor often “suffered a great deal, more through a lack of organized assistance than from lack of charitable persons.”<sup>4</sup> What emerges is a model of cultivating solidarity through justice and charity as integral to the life of Christian discipleship.



Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI (b. 16 April 1927).  
*Public Domain*

## Charity and Justice in Pope Benedict XVI

*Caritas* is love which moves beyond emotion, it is lived, practiced,

<sup>4</sup> Document 126, “Charity of Women (Châtillon-les-Dombes) November-December 1617,” *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-13a & 13b (New York: New City Press, 1985-2009), 13b:8. Hereinafter CCD.

a virtue, and for Saint Thomas Aquinas, ultimately friendship with God.<sup>5</sup> However, in common conversation and contemporary culture, charity is often used not to refer to the broad Christian tradition of *caritas* but the narrower practice of almsgiving. Thus, that which Aquinas identifies as but one practice of the virtue of charity becomes the entire frame for charity, leaving Christian charity as highly individualized, limited, and largely divorced from any discussion of justice. After an extended meditation on the philosophical and theological nature of love, *Deus Caritas Est* examines the “unbreakable bond” between love of God and love of neighbor. Pope Benedict explains, “only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be open to what God does for me and how much he loves me.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, Benedict turns to “*Caritas* — the Practice of Love by the Church” as *diakonia*, the practice of the ministry of charity, one aspect of the three-fold ministry of the Church laid out in *Acts of the Apostles*.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Benedict affirms that “the parable of the Good Samaritan remains as a standard which imposes universal love towards the needy whom we encounter ‘by chance’ (cf. Luke 10:31).”<sup>8</sup>

Charity, then, generally “connotes direct service to those in need, as exemplified in the traditional corporal works of mercy. Such acts of kindness and compassion are voluntary in nature, springing from the heart of one moved with pity for the plight of others.”<sup>9</sup> While *Deus Caritas Est* was lauded for its treatment of charity, it created significant debate and controversy for its somewhat narrow interpretation of the relationship between charity and justice.<sup>10</sup> Focusing almost entirely on political justice and the State, *Deus Caritas Est* emphasized the Church’s concern for justice and identified it as an indirect duty — placing justice and politics as primarily the responsibility of

<sup>5</sup> Meghan J. Clark, “Love of God and Neighbor: Living Charity in Aquinas’ Ethics,” *New Blackfriars*, Volume 92, Issue 1040 (July 2011), pp. 415-430.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est: of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the Bishops Priests and Deacons Men and Women Religious and all the Lay Faithful on Christian Love*, no. 16, at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html) (accessed 31 May 2012).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Massaro, S.J., “Don’t Forget Justice,” *America Magazine*, 13 March 2006, p. 3. Online at [http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=4669](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=4669) (accessed 31 May 2012).

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller treatment of the debate surrounding interpretations of *Deus Caritas Est* see: *Ibid.*; also, Avery Dulles, S.J., “The Indirect Mission of the Church to Politics,” *Villanova Law Review* (2007); Samuel Craig, “*Deus Caritas Est*: The Social Message of the Pope,” *Institute of Economic Affairs* (2006); Charles M. Murphy, “Charity, not Justice, As Constitutive of the Church’s Mission,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007), pp. 274-86.

the laity, charity the primary responsibility of the Church.<sup>11</sup> Charles Murphy explains, “As a faithful disciple of Augustine, Benedict sets forth forcefully these distinctions between charity and justice, church and state, the heavenly city and the earthly one”<sup>12</sup> — although he also asserts that the Church does not remain on the sidelines in matters of justice. From *Deus Caritas Est*, then, charity emerges as primary and constitutive of the Church’s mission, as an organized activity, and with a somewhat vague relationship to justice.

As a social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* offers a more systematic explication of the practical aspects of charity, and its relationship to justice and solidarity in the context of contemporary issues. The “commitment to justice” and the “ministry of charity” are inseparable; Benedict explains “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 towards them... charity always manifests God’s love in human relationships as well, it gives theological and salvific value for justice in the world.”<sup>13</sup> Justice in relations is a precondition for living charity. I cannot love my neighbor if I am unjust towards them or complacent in their oppression. Both charity and justice are required for healthy relationships with God and neighbor. In addition, as Thomas Shubeck notes, both are commanded and both are graced actions.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, active work for the common good is a requirement in both charity and justice; “the more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them.”<sup>15</sup>

Practically, Benedict XVI uses economic life and financial crisis to offer an example of the necessary relationship between justice and charity, and he extends this to include solidarity. Developing his understanding of charity into a theology of gift and the principle of gratuitousness, he explains, “Because it is a gift received by everyone, charity in truth is a force that builds community, it brings all people together without imposing barriers or limits.... The unity of the human race, a fraternal communion, transcending every barrier, is called into being by the word of God-who-is-Love.”<sup>16</sup> Building upon this, solidarity and reciprocity should exist within economic activity, if it is to be a human activity.<sup>17</sup> Benedict states that “justice must be

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<sup>11</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Murphy, “Charity, not Justice,” 280.

<sup>13</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Shubeck, *Love that Does Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 36.

applied to every phase of economic activity, because this is always concerned with man and his needs,” highlighting the centrality of justice to the Church’s social doctrine.<sup>18</sup> Pulling together this application and further complicating the relationship between justice, solidarity, and charity, Benedict says:

In the global era, economic activity cannot prescind from gratuitousness, which fosters and disseminates solidarity and responsibility for justice and the common good among the different economic players... solidarity is first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone, and it cannot therefore be merely relegated to the State. While in the past it was possible to argue that justice had to come first and gratuitousness could follow afterwards, as a complement, today it is clear that without gratuitousness, there can be no justice in the first place.<sup>19</sup>

One reason justice needs charity is charity’s influence in “widening the focus of justice to include God and groups of people previously passed over.”<sup>20</sup> These three central virtues are inextricably connected for Christian discipleship and community; and yet, the relationship between charity and justice remains somewhat ambiguous. This relationship requires a delicate balance and yet there will not be uniform agreement as to what that precise balance should be. Each document in Catholic social teaching, and within diverse groups of Catholic moral theologians, seeks to prudentially balance the “commitment to justice” and the “ministry of charity.”

Despite the ambiguity in Benedict’s understanding of the proper relationship between charity and justice, a model of cultivating solidarity through them begins to emerge in *Caritas in Veritate* through the institutional aspects/nature of the Church’s ministry of charity; “this is the institutional path — we might also call it the political path — of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly, outside the institutional mediation of the polis.”<sup>21</sup> It is this *institutional* path of charity which I propose illuminates the relationship between charity and justice in the latest encyclical. And it is this *institutional* path, incorporating justice, demonstrated by the example of Saint Vincent de Paul and the movements he inspired.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 37.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Shubeck, *Love*, 131.

<sup>21</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 7.



Etching of Louise de Marillac.  
 Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

### **Charity and Justice in Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac**

Perhaps the most well-known example of “Christian charity work” is the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Started in 1833 by Blessed Frédéric Ozanam and his companions in Paris, the “Conference of Charity” placed itself under the patronage of Saint Vincent de Paul and was directly inspired by the Daughters of Charity.<sup>22</sup> Today, on the grassroots level, the Society is often the most common and recognizable example of Catholic charitable activity; demonstrated by the fact that currently there are “around 51,000 conferences in the world, with over 700,000 members. Working with the members, in particular tasks to help different groups of people (children, the elderly, the sick, schools, hospitals, etc.) are more than 1,500,000 volunteers, throughout the world... [in] 142 countries.”<sup>23</sup> Vincent, his companions, and the movements they inspired take their basic cue from Matthew’s account of

<sup>22</sup> “Blessed Frédéric Ozanam Biography (1813-1853),” Confédération Internationale de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul, at: <http://www.ssvpglobal.org/index.php/en/who-we-are/52-articulo-1.html> (accessed 31 May 2012).

<sup>23</sup> “SSVP: Who We Are,” Confédération Internationale de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul, at: <http://www.ssvpglobal.org/index.php/en/who-we-are.html> (accessed 31 May 2012).



the Last Judgment, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.”<sup>24</sup> In founding both religious orders and lay confraternities,<sup>25</sup> Vincent and Louise developed a model of organization that began with charity, responded to systemic injustice, and incorporated deliberative participation. And in examining Vincent’s understanding of charity, and Louise’s attention to structural injustice, we find a pragmatic model of cultivating solidarity through justice and charity with significant attention to institutional organization, which further illuminates the approach in Benedict’s encyclicals.

When founding these diverse communities Vincent de Paul took care to establish clear rules, incorporate with proper legal authorities, and to provide a clear definition of the aim/scope: “(1) To honor the love Our Lord has for those who are poor. (2) To assist poor persons corporally and spiritually.”<sup>26</sup> Vincent’s response to poverty and suffering was personal and direct, his mission “to serve the poor for the love of God.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, for Vincent, charity was commanded by both love of God and love of neighbor<sup>28</sup> This love of God, honor for God’s love for the poor, and love of neighbor are the motivation for all Vincentian communities; however, from the beginning, Vincent and Louise recognized that proper motivation was not sufficient to actually minister to those in need and at risk. This was evident in the experiences of the Charity of Women at Châtillon-les-Dombes in 1617:

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew 25:35-36.

<sup>25</sup> Most notably, the Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon-les-Dombes, founded 1617; the Congregation of the Mission, founded 1625; and the Daughters of Charity, with Louise de Marillac, founded 1633.

<sup>26</sup> Document 124, “General Regulations for Charities of Women,” CCD, 13b:1.

<sup>27</sup> Letter 2213, “To Guillaume del Ville,” 18 February 1657, CCD, 6:211. This is also found in the recollections of Sisters saying, “God has called us to serve the poor,” in Conference 50, “The Spirit of the Company, 2 February 1653, CCD, 9:463; and in Abbé Maynard’s formulation that “we are the ministers of the poor; God has chosen us for them. This is our principal object; all else is but accessory,” in Michel Ulysse Maynard, *Virtues and Spiritual Doctrine of Saint Vincent de Paul* (1877) (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 118.

<sup>28</sup> Vincent de Paul frequently elaborates upon this, for example, he states: “Now, it’s clear that He orders us to do all that: (1) in commanding us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Now, when He commands us to love our neighbor, He commands us to perform all the acts of love we can render Him, and there are fourteen of them: seven corporal and seven spiritual. The corporal ones, which concern the body are: feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, and that’s what you’re doing for the sick poor and the children. O Ladies! What honor you give to God in so doing! But what dishonor if you don’t!” in Document 194, “Perseverance in Good Works,” 6 April 1647, CCD, 13b:418.



Since charity toward the neighbor is an infallible sign of the true children of God, and since one of its principal acts is to visit and bring food to the sick poor, some devout young women and virtuous inhabitants of the town of Châtillonles-Dombes, in the Lyons diocese, wishing to obtain from God the mercy of being His true daughters, have decided among themselves to assist spiritually and corporally the people of their town who have sometimes suffered a great deal, more through a lack of organized assistance than from lack of charitable persons.<sup>29</sup>

The poor often suffer not from a lack of charity but a lack of organization — what does that mean? Motivation and practicing *acts of charity* in themselves are not sufficient. Vincent often reminded his communities that charity must be ordered by prudence and an active openness to the Holy Spirit, as well as a concrete connection to reality. This need for organization is an outgrowth of the need for charity to be based upon solid knowledge and evidence, and to be structured through engagement with the personal and social reality at the source of need. Vincent’s approach is a tangible example that “Charity is not an added extra, like an appendix to work already concluded in the various disciplines: it engages them in dialogue from the very beginning.”<sup>30</sup>

Effective charity requires a close examination of the situation of suffering; it requires both charity and justice in the process of organization. Three elements are clear in all Vincent’s lists of rules and regulations: the dignity of the poor; attention to particularity and context; and reminders of the connection of love of neighbor to love of God. In this way, Vincent’s doctrine of charity is a fine example of Benedict XVI’s approach as “Testimony to Christ’s charity through works of peace, justice and development, is part and parcel of evangelization because Jesus Christ, who loves us is concerned with the whole person.”<sup>31</sup> This attention is manifest in the set of instructions accompanying each of the Daughters of Charity’s ministries: education, care of the sick, care of the elderly, visiting the imprisoned, care of children, etc. For example, there are detailed regulations regarding the seventeenth-century practice of blood-letting, demonstrating attention to both the care of the sick as well as the standards of medical practice at the time.<sup>32</sup> Hallmarks

<sup>29</sup> “Charity of Women,” CCD, 13b:8.

<sup>30</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 30.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 15.

<sup>32</sup> This is evident throughout the collected documents within CCD, as well as the portrait of Louise de Marillac found in Margaret J. Kelly, D.C.’s, “Louise de Marillac: The ‘Gentle Power’ of Liberation,” *Vincentian Heritage* 10:1 (1989).

of this Vincentian approach — attention to both the spiritual and corporal needs of the person and a deep commitment to the belief that the poor and sick are equally created in the image of God. In a society full of suffering and upheaval, “the social mission of Saint Vincent de Paul was to restore these victims of war to their dignity as human persons, to their proper stature as children of God. His program for the reconstruction of society was simplicity itself.”<sup>33</sup>

Latent within the focus on effective charity and proper organization is a deep concern for justice in society. In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict reiterates, “Charity always manifests God’s love in human relationships as well, it gives theological and salvific value to all commitment for justice in the world,”<sup>34</sup> and this is clear in the ministry of Vincent and Louise. As Margaret Kelly, D.C., notes, “Louise also had a firm conviction that each person is a steward of his or her talents and that all gifts must be used generously in the service of others in the Kingdom.”<sup>35</sup> While their works began as a deeply personal and direct endeavor, both were committed to developing just structures within society and established their charitable activity based upon the needs created by unjust social structures. In response to the marginalization of women, Kelly notes, “Louise lamented the lack of opportunity of women and the abuses and deprivations of young girls and adult women [was to be] a priority work of the Daughters if the social and moral conditions for women were to be improved.”<sup>36</sup> Not only did the creation of the Daughters of Charity radically change opportunities for women to practice both charity and justice, the systematic focus on training those Daughters to be qualified to educate and run schools made them a vehicle for both.

The relationship between justice and charity, at the heart of Vincentian organization, is also found in the Daughters' hospital and social work. *Care of the sick* was not limited to acute illness; Louise saw to it that in Paris “before a young girl was discharged from the hospital there, the sisters assisted her to find suitable work so that she would have a means of support and would be able to live in dignity.”<sup>37</sup> It is in this concern for a sustainable and dignified future for these women that the unity of justice and charity is found. Responding to the direct need of the sick is an act of charity; attending to the future of these women is an act of justice. An effective ministry of charity required organization and seeing to the demands of justice.

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<sup>33</sup> Most Reverend James A. McNulty, D.D., “St. Vincent de Paul and His Social Mission,” *Saint Vincent de Paul: A Tercentenary Commemoration of his Death 1660-1960* (Jamaica N.Y.: St. John’s University Press, 1960), 62.

<sup>34</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Kelly, “‘Gentle Power’ of Liberation,” 31.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

This deep relationship between charity and justice was clearly demonstrated by one particular instance of conflict among the Ladies of Charity and the care of “foundlings.” Repeatedly, Vincent reminded that it would be “great evil to allow work to die out,” arguing for perseverance in all their pursuits and demonstrating a strong concern for the sustainability of programs.<sup>38</sup> At a conference of the Ladies for the Foundlings between 1640 and 1650, both the extreme needs of these children and the moral responsibility of the Ladies were reiterated: “There’s only enough food for them for six weeks, and the means must be found to provide for their needs: (1) Because they are in extreme want; in which case you are obliged to provide of that. ‘*You did not feed them, [and so] you killed them.*’ A child can be killed in two ways: either by a violent death, or by refusing to feed him.”<sup>39</sup> While at first glance this may sound shocking, it was the reality; there is no value in illusion. Vincent leaves no room for misinterpretation: there is extreme need, grave injustice, and the Ladies have accepted a vocation/ministry from God to care for these children. Thus, he reminds them of the reasons the charitable organization for the foundlings began, detailing a long list of social sin and systemic injustice.

The care of these children is not simply a matter of charity, but of justice. Not only were the children starving, they had also been drugged, poisoned, abused, and sold off like cattle. Vincent reminds the Ladies that these “are the motives that moved you to take on the work. Providence then has made you the adoptive mothers of these children... If these poor children are abandoned by you, they will, of necessity die. Who is going to prevent them? Until now, the police have been unable to do so. If you can’t, who will?”<sup>40</sup> Are these statements harsh? Yes, but Vincent’s concern is reality and the dire situation of children suffering injustices, on the brink of starvation. If you do not feed them, they will die. This is a clear, unquestionable example of the inseparable bond between *commitment to justice* and the *ministry of charity*.

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<sup>38</sup> Document 192, “Perseverance in Good Works – I,” 22 December 1645, CCD, 13b:412.

<sup>39</sup> Document 195, “The Work of the Foundlings,” Between 1640 and 1650, CCD, 13b:421.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

The Ladies of Charity assumed responsibility for these children, thus the continuation of support, while an act of charity is more properly a question of justice. Despite Vincent's stark question, the objections of the Ladies are detailed and engaged seriously. Vincent indicates, but does not detail, that concerns for the future and sustainability are being addressed, as well as recognizing their legitimate feelings of being overwhelmed in the face of such suffering. They must choose to continue their work. The strength to fulfill one's obligations in charity and justice, he argues, comes from the recognition that this is "a work of God and not a human work."<sup>41</sup> There appears to be a deep connection between vocations from God and assuming the human responsibilities of the Ladies of Charity. This mirrors Benedict's insistence that "a vocation is a call that requires a free and responsible answer. Integral human development presupposes the responsible freedom of the individual and of peoples."<sup>42</sup>

Finally, the Vincentian way represents not only the call to practice justice and charity, but contains within it a model for cultivating solidarity through two key elements briefly mentioned above. First, the entire Vincentian model is built upon the fundamental commitment to the full and equal dignity of every human person, regardless of poverty or infirmity, as a child of God and brother or sister in Christ. For Vincent, this is the reality of the mystical body of Christ. He states, "God has told everyone to help others as members of the same mystical body."<sup>43</sup> A common theme throughout the Christian tradition, which is also integral to the Vincentian mission, is that the unity of the Christian community means not only do we feel sympathy with our neighbor but that they are an extension of ourselves. To be Christian is to feel pain with those in pain as well as joy with those who are rejoicing. This is the heart of loving one's neighbor as oneself.<sup>44</sup>

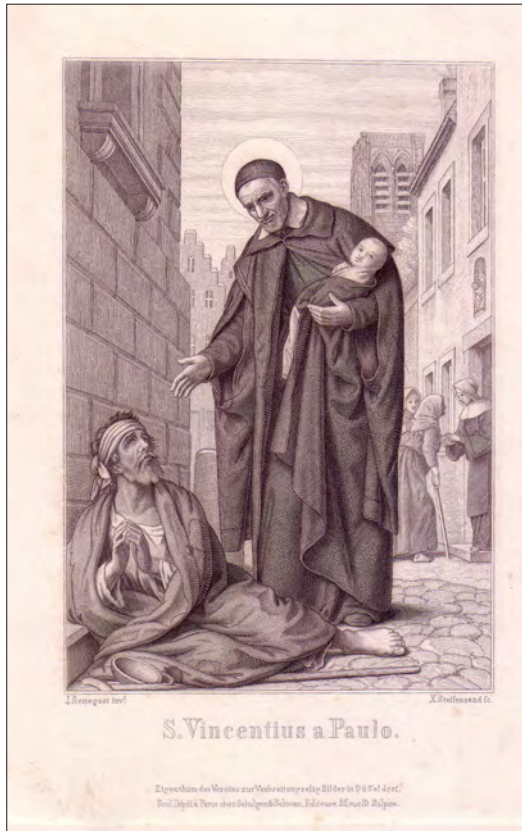
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<sup>41</sup> Document 198, "Report on the State of the Works," 11 July 1657, *CCD*, 13b:431.

<sup>42</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 17.

<sup>43</sup> Document 117a, "Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission," 17 May 1658, *CCD*, 13a:439.

<sup>44</sup> One example is in the emphasis Maynard places upon this in his early work honoring Vincent; Maynard, *Spiritual Doctrine*, 132.



Saint Vincent de Paul as depicted with the foundlings and the impoverished.  
 Behind him, the Daughters of Charity come to the aid of the elderly.  
*Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute*

This level of sympathy and compassion, developed in the theology of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, is a clear precursor to the later development in Catholic social teaching on the virtue of solidarity. In particular, Vincent and Louise require compassion and sympathy to be motivated by the recognition of equal dignity, a strong attitude of humility, and mutual respect. This is evident not only through the attention the Daughters of Charity placed on education and long term opportunities for young women, but also through the high value of deliberative processes within the structures of Vincentian conferences. Furthermore, through ministry to the poor and marginalized, and the creation of the Daughters of Charity as well as the Ladies of Charity, there was a clear and effective effort to incorporate and develop compassion and sympathy among all levels of French society at the time.

Currently, we place agency and participation at the center of solidarity — bottom up engagement of the poor and vulnerable with charity and justice. In their day, Vincent and Louise fostered long term works to the extent it was possible. This was continued by Frédéric Ozanam; “The knowledge of social well-being and of reform is learned, not from books, nor from public debate, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man’s garret, sitting by his bed-side, feeling the same cold that pierces him.”<sup>45</sup> To practice charity and justice, we must cultivate solidarity with the poor and marginalized through listening and encountering them as equals.

Balancing this personal encounter with institutional organization and an eye to creating a more just society is at the heart of the Vincentian charism. For Vincent and Louise, charity was at the heart of their ministries to the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized. Charitable action was participation in divine justice, as well as divine love, and it was effective in its simplicity and engagement in the realities of the world. The two saints were able to work to transform social structures. Their example provides confirmation of the active relationship between charity and justice and the necessity of institutional charity. Both of which provide historical evidence to what the institutional path of charity is, living out what *Caritas in Veritate* calls “an ethical imperative for the universal church, as she responds to the teachings of her founder the Lord Jesus, concerning solidarity and the sharing of goods... Hunger is not so much dependent on lack of material things as on a shortage of social resources, the most important of which are institutional.”<sup>46</sup>

However, Vincent and Louise also embodied an understanding of justice which, while it included political justice, reached well beyond politics. They targeted the social order as a whole, recognizing justice as a complex and rich virtue which cannot be limited to the realm of politics. Justice, like charity, is a virtue which needs to be operative at every level of society, both personal and institutional. Following the French Revolution, Ozanam mobilized and empowered Catholic students arguing:

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<sup>45</sup> Raymond L. Sickinger, Ph.D., “Faith, Charity, Justice, and Civic Learning: The Lessons and Legacy of Frédéric Ozanam,” *Vincentian Heritage* 30:1 (2010): 101; cf. John Honner, Ph.D., “Love & Politics: The Revolutionary Frederic Ozanam,” *Ozanam Lecture 2007* (Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Victoria, Australia), online at: <http://www.vinnies.org.au/files/VIC/Events/Ozanam%20Lecture/2007%20Ozanam%20Lecture%20Speech%20Book%20final.pdf> (accessed 1 June 2012); also, Louis Baunard, *Ozanam in His Correspondence*, trans. by a member of the Council of Ireland of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (Australia: National Council, 1925), 279.

<sup>46</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 27.

The problem which divides people today is not a political problem; it is a social one. It is a matter of knowing which will get the upper hand, the spirit of selfishness or the spirit of sacrifice; whether society will go for ever-increasing enjoyment and profit, or for everyone devoting themselves to the common good... Many people have too much and still want more. Others do not have enough, or do not have anything at all, and they want to take by force what is not being given to them. A war is threatening between these two groups. On one side, the power of wealth, on the other the force of desperation. We must get in between these two groups, at least to reduce the impact if we cannot stop it.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, these words ring as true today as they did in nineteenth-century France.

## Conclusion

Pope Benedict XVI has chosen charity as the organizing theme for his contribution to Catholic social doctrine. He is concerned with how the virtue of charity has been neglected, misconstrued, and emptied of meaning. Properly understood, charity should infuse every action, every interaction, with God and neighbor. As Edward R. Udovic, C.M., notes, "Whether in the seventeenth or twenty-first centuries, Vincentians have understood that some form of organized local, national, and international political advocacy for specific systemic poverty reduction efforts has to be incorporated into their efforts."<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, because of how charity has been misconstrued, it has been placed at odds with justice, with community organizing, and institutional or structural questions. Within the United States, one need only perform a brief survey of the debates over private charity versus public programs, the series of attacks on Catholic community organizing efforts, most notably the Catholic

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<sup>47</sup> "Our Heritage: Frederic Ozanam: Words," Vincentian Center for Church and Society, St. John's University, online at: <http://www.vincenter.org/node/130> (accessed 1 June 2012).

<sup>48</sup> Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Ph.D., "'Our good will and best efforts.' Vincentian Perspectives on Poverty Reduction Efforts," *Vincentian Heritage* 28:2 (2008): 74.



Campaign for Human Development, to see that there is a serious perception problem regarding the requirements of charity and its relationship to justice.<sup>49</sup>

For the Christian, the choice can never be simply *charity* or *justice* in a holistic sense; as Vincent reminds us, “charity embraces justice.” Benedict XVI emphasizes this in *Caritas in Veritate*, making clear that charity without justice is impossible and through emphasizing institutional charity. The Vincentian tradition of integrating charity, justice, and organization offers a concrete historical example of how these mutually dependent virtues come together. Effective charity requires attention to justice and engagement with our social reality. True justice requires that charity must care for those, like the foundlings, passed over and unseen by the dominant culture. What we learn from Vincent de Paul and the Vincentian tradition is that *personal* and *institutional* are not mutually exclusive approaches. In order to cultivate solidarity, one’s approach must be both personal and institutional. It must involve charity, justice, and organization.

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<sup>49</sup> A brief survey of groups like Reform CCHD Now indicates that the controversy surrounding the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Catholic Campaign for Human Development is a clear contemporary example of the bifurcation of charity and justice (which the Vincentian model rejects completely). The necessary connection between justice and charity (and in particular the role of community organizing) so integral to the work of Vincent de Paul, and clear in Pope Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate*, has continually been maintained by the USCCB in their consistent support for CCHD and its mission. For more detail, see: *Catholic Campaign for Human Development: Review and Renewal Document*, at: <http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/Who-We-Are/review-and-renewal.cfm> (accessed 1 June 2012).