



# **Fostering a Vincentian Identity in Parish Work**

## **Some Practical Suggestions**

Rev. Anthony F. Kuzia, CM & Marian O'Brien, MTh

*"We must be full reservoirs in order to let our water spill out without becoming empty, and we must possess the spirit with which we want them to be animated, for no one can give what he does not have."*

*~ St. Vincent de Paul*

## **Fostering a Vincentian Identity in Parish Work Some Practical Suggestions**

By Rev. Anthony F. Kuzia, CM and Marian O'Brien, MTh

A Catholic parish is the living presence of Jesus here on earth. Parishes exist to nurture the faith of the baptized and to call them to participate fully in the Mission of Jesus. Although the mission for parishes has remained consistent, parish life and ministry has changed drastically in the last fifty years.

Fifty years ago, nearly all Catholic families had a strong Catholic identity. Faith was inseparable from life and was passed on from parents to children. Because the parish occupied a foundational role in their lives, families were faithful about coming to church regularly.

How things have changed! According to a Pew survey conducted in 2012, only a fourth of all baptized Catholics consider themselves to be strong Catholics – the lowest level since they started keeping track nearly 38 years ago.<sup>1</sup> Of that number, only 20% participate in parish life beyond attendance at Mass. Many of the parents of families who attend regularly are not able to evangelize their children properly because they were not adequately catechized themselves. Although Vatican II called for the laity to take a more active role in the Mission of the Church, few know what that is. To be an evangelizing parish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means first finding an effective way to evangelize parishioners and do it with fewer clergy, fewer resources and dwindling incomes.

These are the same challenges we faced in each of the parishes in which we served over the last twenty years. Two of the parishes were in severe financial straits. One of them had not been able to pay its diocesan assessment for months and owed \$40,000.00. Formation programs beyond regular religious education for children were practically non-existent. Little effort was given to recruit quality catechists and no attention was given to their formation. Buildings were in disrepair, many with leaking roofs and basements. The restrooms in one of the churches looked like they belonged in an abandoned building in a bad section of town.

Many of the people in these parishes remembered a better day but few had any hope for a positive future for their parish. Since our Vincentian Charism calls for us to be where there is a real need, these parishes were good places for us to be. This article will relate some of the pastoral processes we used to help these parishes refocus on the Mission of Jesus by walking in the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul.

### **An Essential Ingredient - The Importance of a Pastoral Partner**

The job of pastoring a parish is a very involved one. To instill a Vincentian Missionary Spirit through the daily pastoral care of a parish is challenging because every task and every situation should be discerned with a Vincentian perspective. This is a difficult task for just one person. A pastor needs a trusted collaborator, one who has a theological and pastoral background and who has personally integrated a Vincentian Missionary spirit. The value of this shared perspective cannot be overstated. Although we might propose differing options to a given problem, each option had been shaped by the Vincentian charism.

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/03/13/strong-catholic-identity-at-a-four-decade-low-in-us/>

Our collaboration was a fruitful one. We discovered that the following additional axioms were central to our ministry together;

- A shared philosophy of the Mission influenced by a Vincentian Missionary Spirit;
- A shared passion for bringing people to Jesus and involving them in his mission;
- A shared commitment to prayer – both personal and in community;
- A shared understanding of the importance of analysis and planning;
- A shared commitment to detail and desire to see a job well done;
- An ability to examine issues from more than one perspective;
- An ability to work together harmoniously including the ability to respectfully disagree;
- An ability to come to consensus;
- A readiness to provide the other with moral support;
- An ability to supply the other with motivation when necessary;
- A shared relationship of confidence and trust.

Finally, as partners in mission, we were able to draw on a collective intelligence and a set of experiences, knowledge, resources and abilities. We made a greater contribution to our mission by working together than we could have made through our individual efforts alone.

### **Bringing a Vincentian Missionary Spirit to Parish Ministry**

In 2010, the General Assembly asked the Superior General for a study concerning Vincentian work in parishes. A questionnaire was developed and sent to all the provinces asking the membership to share their thoughts about what might characterize a Vincentian Missionary Parish.

A synthesis was made of the responses and returned to all the provinces. From the comments made, it was clear that fidelity to the Vincentian Charism was to be a central component of all parish activity. These parishes should be easily identifiable as Vincentian parishes.

St. Vincent often said that it was through the providence of God that his mission was revealed to him. His mission evolved over time and in response to new situations. Two of Vincent's extraordinary abilities can help us as we respond to promoting the Mission of Jesus in parish ministry. The first is the ability to see God's direction in the signs of the times; the second is his ability to find a creative response to further the mission. \*

\*For example, as a pastor in Chatillon, St. Vincent was moved by the poverty of the poor villagers. His response was to organize charities that employed the active participation of lay people. When confronted with the laxity and ignorance of the clergy, St. Vincent responded by providing opportunities for formation and prayer through his "Tuesday Conferences." Later he would establish the Lazarist Seminary in order to provide a solid moral, theological

### **First A Word About Parishes**

In his apostolic exhortation, "Evangelii Gaudium" Pope Francis wrote about the role of the parish. He said;

While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be, 'the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.' This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. It all its activities the

parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey and a center of constant missionary outreach.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis returns to the topic of the parish. He speaks of the need for parishes to be schools of discipleship for its membership in order to make them “environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.”<sup>3</sup>

As anyone who has worked in more than one or belonged to more than one can tell you, no two parishes are alike. While they all have many things in common, they also have a certain personality. How often have we heard that a certain parish in a particular city is the “friendly parish,” the “conservative parish,” or perhaps (and perish the thought) the “unwelcoming parish.” Some parishes are vibrant and others are literally “dying on the vine.”

Regardless of the personality of the parish they all share the same goal, they must be engaged in the Mission of Jesus – the mission St. Vincent placed at the very center of his life’s work. For those of us whose ministry is played out in parishes, our goal must be to collaborate with the baptized faithful in bringing each and every member of the faith community to an understanding of their role as a missionary disciple. Sometimes the challenges to the fulfillment of this goal can seem insurmountable. We found that some of the things that work in one parish may not always work in another.

How did we know that our efforts were bearing fruit? The individual stories of people whose lives were touched by others; the stories of personal and spiritual growth, the ways in which people came to understand and acted upon their role in the mission were, truly, the most important indicators. Pope Francis speaks of the importance of a personal encounter with Christ.<sup>4</sup> How well parishes provide an environment that fosters individual experiences of Jesus is the real measure of fidelity to the mission in parish ministry. Unfortunately, there is no real way to quantify these experiences.

Oftentimes, parish statistics can provide us with a measure of our effectiveness in these areas. For instance, by the time we left our most recent parish, attendance figures at Masses were up by more than 9%.\* Lay leadership bodies in the parish had been reorganized and refocused to provide a more collaborative framework for moving the mission. The number of adults attending regular formation opportunities increased from under 50 individuals to nearly 300. Our Teen and Junior Youth groups logged over a thousand hours of service each year in parish ministry and outreach programs to the community. The renovation and rededication of the food pantry led to a significant increase in the number of individuals and families who received assistance.

\* The 9% increase was based on the attendance figures requested by the Diocese during a four-week period in October and compared to the previous year. We, however, took attendance each week. Based on the figures for a full year, our increase in attendance at weekend Masses was actually just over 13%.

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<sup>2</sup> Evangelii Gaudium, Pope Francis, Vatican City, 2013. No. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. No. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. No. 1.

So, where do we begin when our goal is to foster a Vincentian Missionary Spirituality in parish work? Since no two parishes are alike, no single approach will be successful everywhere. Resources, such as campus facilities, parish staff, the parish's financial situation and dozens of other variables are going to have an effect not only on the challenges the parish presents but they will also shape the approach that is taken to meet those challenges.

### **Three Parishes – Tailoring the Approach to Meet the Challenges**

Even parishes that are doing well must meet the challenge of ongoing renewal, particularly in light of emerging circumstances and an ever-changing culture. The greatest challenge affecting our first parish was occasioned by the clergy shortage, an emerging circumstance that would soon be impacting parishes all over the United States. The New England Province was asked to assist in the consolidation of three parishes in a small town in Maine. When the process was complete, there was to be one parish complex to be served by one priest as pastor.

Our second assignment was in a parish that had been Vincentian since 1982. For the first year our focus was to provide ongoing renewal of programs. At the end of the first year, the bishop asked us to take on a second parish after the retirement of their diocesan pastor. Things changed drastically now that two parishes were being called upon to share a pastor.

The third assignment was in a parish that had been dealing with several transitions in leadership. In the previous five years they had been assigned an administrator pending the appointment of a pastor. Then, their pastor was with them for only eighteen months when he collapsed at Mass and died soon afterward. The diocese appointed another administrator until a new pastor could be found. This administrator was there until we arrived.

Each parish had unique challenges but all were called to the same mission; the Mission of Jesus. If it is St. Vincent de Paul who animates you, then you are going to be seeing the challenges, analyzing the situations, thinking and planning solutions in a manner that reflects his wisdom.

### **Getting Acquainted**

Earlier in the article we used a quote from the Holy Father, Pope Francis I, on the role of parishes. In it the Holy Father said that missionary parishes (the ones that are adaptable and capable of self-renewal), are the ones that are in contact with the lives of its people.

Whether we are called to ministry in a parish that has previously been served by diocesan priests or in one that has been Vincentian for years, the first task remains the same. We must become familiar with all aspects of the parish. This requires a commitment to providing a forum for hearing what people have to say. Before we can provide the mechanisms and initiatives that will animate people and prepare them for the mission, we have got to get to know them.

Members of parish leadership bodies (Parish Councils, Finance Councils, Stewardship bodies), should all be encouraged to speak freely about their concerns for the parish and the wider community.\* Parishioners should be provided with a forum where they can say

\* In the parishes in which we served we scheduled regular listening sessions. At the first listening session in each parish we asked those who attended to help us get to know them. We asked them what they thought made their parish great and what were the challenges the parish faced. Occasionally we had an agenda; a topic or project for which we wanted input. We created a working document from what we had heard at these meetings and made serious attempts to act on what we had learned.

what is on their minds. We welcomed constructive criticism and resisted the temptation to be defensive. We found that criticism could bring negative situations or problems to our attention so they could be remedied. We also found that being open to criticism allowed us to correct misinformation or dispel rumors.

Because a majority of parishioners will not accept an invitation to an open forum, there must be other mechanisms in place to make a connection with them. We made ourselves available to the people before and after Masses and at the celebration of the sacraments. We attended programs the parish sponsored, ministries the parish encouraged, formation programs the parish offered and we listened to the members of the community.

This process was very effective and had very positive outcomes. For instance, one of the parishes we served in had a food pantry that was housed in a donated trailer on the parish campus. By visiting the pantry during its hours of operation, by talking with the clients and volunteers, it was discovered that the facility was too small and falling apart. Often, there were too few volunteers and too little donated food. The volunteers and clients also helped us get a picture of the economic reality of community where the parish was located. Although many residents were considered to be economically well off, there were also homeless veterans, marginalized families and children who went to bed hungry.\*

Here was a pastoral project that could benefit greatly from a Vincentian Missionary Spirit. By making the food pantry a priority, we were able to provide a new facility for the pantry, improve its operating procedures and raise its visibility in the parish faith community as well as in the wider community. The project mobilized other parish organizations to help and engaged town businesses by encouraging them to support the work of the pantry. As a result, the food pantry wound up with an influx of new volunteers and healthy, ongoing donations. The pantry was now able to support many more individuals and families who would have otherwise gone hungry. The whole process provided us with an opportunity to form parishioners about what it meant to be missionary disciples as well as provide them with a way to live out that mission.

\* Not all parishes have a food pantry. Perhaps a neighboring parish or faith community already has an active pantry that serves everyone in the area. Visiting them and speaking with them still presents an opportunity to acquire an understanding of the local economic challenges. While you are there, you might find out how your parish might assist in the ministry.

Parishes that are interested in exemplifying a true Vincentian Missionary Spirit that advocates for the poor will also become acquainted with government programs for the poor in the community. Knowing what public assistance can provide allows you to stretch parish outreach dollars to cover those things, or people, that the local social services cannot.

By acquainting yourself with your parishioners, you may be able to identify professional people in your faith community that are familiar with how the social service system works. We had just such a person in one of our parishes. Her expertise was a valuable asset in our programs to assist the poor.

Keep in mind that the art of listening and an attitude of openness and availability should also apply to individual people as they tell us their stories; including their struggles with faith and disappointments with the Church. Resist the temptation to be judgmental. These exchanges can provide an opportunity to learn something valuable. Since everyone is called to care for one another in this way, your manner in this regard will provide a model for others as they learn to serve each other.

Every facet of parish life presents challenges. The only way you can provide support to meet those challenges is by 'Getting Acquainted' with them all.

## Parish Leadership

In November of 1965, the Second Vatican Council released the document, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* – The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People.<sup>5</sup> The decree declared that every baptized Catholic is called to be engaged in the Mission of the Church. Following the Council, Bishops were encouraged to establish pastoral councils in parishes to assist in the Church's apostolic work. "Through these councils, the Christian faithful, along with those who share in the pastoral care of the parish, ...give their help in fostering pastoral activity."<sup>6</sup> These councils were to advise the pastor on all matters affecting parish life and mission; they were to call forth the gifts and talents of all the lay members of the parish in service to the apostolate.

Three centuries before Vatican II, St. Vincent de Paul already understood how important collaboration with the laity was in moving the Mission of Jesus. A Vincentian Missionary Parish, then, is characterized by its efforts to form the laity and prepare them to be effective collaborators in the mission.

A good place to start is to assess the leadership councils that are in place in the parish; primarily the Parish Pastoral Council and the Finance Council. Do these Councils have a Constitution and By-Laws, blueprints for how they choose members and guidelines that enumerate function and duties? Do they have a Mission Statement and a process for setting goals and a vision for the parish? Members of parish leadership councils have to be aware of the Church's mission and prayerfully discern how their parish will faithfully respond to the mission.

The Pastoral Council must be able to communicate the mission effectively to others. This council must be aware of the pastoral needs of the parish and of the local community. They have to know the parishioners well enough to be able to call them to active participation in the mission, to match their gifts and talents to various aspects of the mission. Most importantly, they must be aware of the presence and the role of the Holy Spirit in all aspects of their leadership ministry. To do this, members must have an adequate formation in their faith and opportunities that encourage their spiritual growth.\*

\* Providing the necessary foundation for the members of a Pastoral Council is a complex task. Fortunately, we found a very helpful book called, *Revisioning the Parish Pastoral Council* to use as a guide. Because the process outlined in the book is very time consuming, we tried to streamline it. We found that it was better to follow the process, no matter how involved.

1 Mary Ann Gubish, Susan Jenny and Arlene McGannon, *Revisioning the Parish Pastoral Council* (New York, Paulist Press, 2001)

The function of the parish Finance Council is different from that of the Parish Pastoral Council. It is the duty of the Finance Council to be stewards of the parish's monetary resources and physical plant, utilizing them in ways that ensure the viability of the parish. The Finance Council supports and facilitates the actualization of the vision and goals for the parish that have been set by the Pastor and Pastoral Council. In a Vincentian Missionary Parish, the Finance Council understands the importance of the parish's commitment to the poor and makes sure parish funds are allotted for the benefit of the poor.

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<sup>5</sup> The Decree on the Lay Apostolate, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. Vatican II, November 18, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> Code of Canon law, Canon 536



Once the leadership councils have a clear understanding of their role, they can be effective in other ways. Since they have been formed and are familiar with the idea of Missionary Discipleship the members have their eyes and ears open to recognize the needs of others and are able to bring those needs to the attention of the pastor and the parish. This information can guide the development of the social and charitable dimension of the parish in service to the poor.

Because members of these councils are lay men and women who are engaged in the world in a way that clergy are not, they are able to touch the lives of others beyond the parish community especially in the workplace, for instance. The United States Catholic Conference of Bishops published a document called, Everyday Christianity: To Hunger and Thirst for Justice. In this document, the bishops discuss the unique value of the apostolate of the laity precisely because they are engaged in the world.

"Catholicism does not call us to abandon the world, but to help shape it. This does not mean leaving worldly tasks and responsibilities, but transforming them. Catholics are everywhere in this society. We are corporate executives and migrant farm workers, senators and welfare recipients, university presidents and day care workers, tradesmen and farmers, office and factory workers, union leaders and small business owners. Our entire community of faith must help Catholics to be instruments of God's grace and creative power in business and politics, factories and offices, in homes and schools and in all the events of daily life. Social justice and the common good are built up or torn down day by day in the countless decisions and choices we make."<sup>7</sup>

Through their engagement in the wider world, members are able to identify the needs of their community and; in performing their function as leadership councils, bring those needs to the attention of the parish. In this way they are instrumental in leading the parish to fulfill its missionary function and lead others to live out their role as instruments of God's grace in the world.

### **Formation**

On December 8, 1975, Pope Paul VI released his encyclical, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.<sup>8</sup> In it, the Pope said:

Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.<sup>9</sup>

The parish is meant to be a school of discipleship. St. Vincent understood this. His missionaries would go from parish to parish, sometimes spending many weeks or months in each. They taught the parishioners about their faith, and prepared them to receive the sacraments. They taught about Jesus' mission to the poor and about the role of all baptized Catholics in carrying on Jesus' mission.

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<sup>7</sup> *Everyday Christianity: To Hunger and Thirst for Justice*, USCCB. Retrieved from: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/everyday-christianity-to-hunger-and-thirst-for-justice.cfm>

<sup>8</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI, Vatican City, 1976

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* No. 14, p.12.

At the end of these missions, the priests of the Congregation of the Mission would always provide a substantive way for the people to participate in this mission. They did this through the establishment of charitable societies that served the poor and the sick. But Vincent understood that in order for people to participate in any meaningful way, they had to be formed first.

In 2004, the USCCB introduced the *National Directory of Catechesis*.<sup>10</sup> The main thrust of the directory was to stress that learning about one's faith is a lifelong process. Moreover, since parents are the first evangelizers of their children, the bishops now wanted the chief focus of parish evangelizing efforts to be adult formation. This was not to say that catechesis for children was no longer an important task for parishes. The new focus took into account the fact that many parents of school aged children had not, themselves, been adequately catechized. Many were not in a position to take up the responsibility of teaching their own children about the faith, or in reinforcing what the children had learned in religious education classes.

That being the case, it follows that many adults were not adequately formed to be effective missionary disciples. Experience bears this out. In the beginning, not many adults in the parishes in which we served knew enough about their faith to be able to share it with others. In order to engage adults in the Mission of the Church, it was necessary to take a serious look at parish efforts at adult formation.

The National Directory of Catechesis is the single most important resource any parish will use in making an assessment of parish formation programs. That is because it provides a benchmark for formation that is comprehensive for all ages and needs, including sacramental preparation. Because of the essential role they play in the formation of others, the guide stressed the importance of the particular training for catechists. The guide is also an effective tool for choosing new parish programs by comparing curriculums against the elements called for in the guide.\*

\* We prepared a document from the Directory that helped us to perform a systematic and comprehensive assessment of the formation programs in parishes in which we served. We were then able to use the results of the assessment to make decisions about changes or additions that needed to be made to the program. We included intentional additions that promoted Vincentian Missionary Ideals; such as a unit on poverty awareness for Confirmation preparation that culminated in an outreach program for the poor.

Our approach to crafting the curriculum for the Junior Youth Ministry and Teen Ministry/Confirmation Preparation programs can provide a good illustration of how we incorporated a Vincentian Missionary Spirit into a parish program.

There are hundreds of curriculum programs for Junior High and High School students on the market. We looked at many of them. Most of them are written to comply with the National Directory of Catechesis but they can differ significantly in how they balance the requirements. For instance, a program can place most of its emphasis on scripture, prayer or the Catechism as long as it also teaches something about the remaining goals of service, discipleship, evangelization and leadership. We found that, in order to put a distinctive

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<sup>10</sup> United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, *National Directory of Catechesis* (Washington, DC, USCCB, 2005).

Vincentian stamp on our program, social justice – particularly through service to the poor - must be a major component.

We divided the year into four instructional units. Each unit involved classroom instruction, often with guest presenters, and culminated in a service project. For example, one of our units was on poverty. We took the outline for the instructional units from the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops website.<sup>11</sup> We added additional information about St. Vincent de Paul's work with the poor as a method of living out the Mission of Jesus. Representatives from local food banks and homeless shelters were invited to address the young people about the work they do for the poor. Participation in the outreach project was mandatory. One of these was an "Empty Bowls" event. The young people contributed money of their own toward making a ceramic bowl. Then, they held a luncheon one Sunday after Mass. Those who came paid \$20 for one of the handmade bowls with soup and homemade bread. During the luncheon, the young people gave a presentation to those attending about what they had learned in the unit about homelessness and poverty. The money raised from the event was contributed to the parish Emergency Fund. This fund assisted people with many non-food needs such as medication, emergency shelter and fuel assistance, to name a few. Our Vincentian Charism was central to how we presented the components for youth catechesis outlined in the National Directory.

Parish websites and information centers in the church or parish center, can also be important conduits for formation for both parishioners and visitors. These centers should be updated regularly with materials that address the liturgical season, Church teaching, scripture, prayer, the sacraments and other formation topics. Because the role of the Blessed Mother is important to our faith and, in particular, to Vincentian Spirituality, we provided Rosaries and prayer cards instructing people on how to say the Rosary, in these information centers.

Essential to parish formation is the understanding of the pivotal role of preaching. For many, attendance at Mass is their only participation in the life of the parish. The Liturgy of the Word and the homily that follows represents the sum of the ongoing formation for this group. With this in mind, great care should be taken to provide a substantive homily that helps connect the Word of God to the challenges of our times. In March of 2013, the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project asked the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate to find out what attracted Catholics to the parish they attend. The top three responses from the more than 400,000 people interviewed were 1) a welcoming spirit, 2) the quality of the liturgy and 3) the quality of the preaching.<sup>12</sup>

## **Social Justice**

The social justice teachings of the Catholic Church and a Vincentian Missionary Spirit go hand in hand. Those of us who follow the Mission of Jesus in the footsteps of St. Vincent need to be on fire for those principals that bring justice to the world, particularly to those who have been most excluded from just treatment. As Vincentians, we must take the responsibility to help others integrate a sense of commitment to the Church's teachings on justice.

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<sup>11</sup> Ending Poverty in Community (EPIC), Retrieved from: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/who-we-teach/youth/ending-poverty-in-community.cfm>

<sup>12</sup> Largest In-Pew Study of Catholics, Cara – Georgetown University, Retrieved from: <http://www.georgetown.edu/news/cara-in-pew-catholic-study.html>

Part of this call to integration is imparting an understanding that love for others, particularly those who struggle with poverty, unemployment and homelessness, is not something we do out of the goodness of our hearts. There are over 2,000 references in the Old and New Testament where God commands us to care for the poor. It appears more often than any other command God gives us. Christian Charity is the duty and responsibility of every baptized Catholic. St. Vincent de Paul once said, "Charity when it dwells in a soul takes complete possession of all its powers. It never rests. It is a fire that acts ceaselessly." St. Vincent also said, "Charity is not charity if not accompanied by justice." For a parish to have a true Vincentian Identity, it must make learning about, and working for social justice a central component of the pastoral plan.

The measure of the Church's organized social ministry is not simply the teaching shared, the services offered, the actions taken, but also the support and challenge provided for men and women as they seek to live the Gospel in the world. Our community of faith needs to share its social teaching more clearly and comprehensively so that its principles can help shape the choices and actions of Catholics. Catholics also need to learn and further explore the links between faith and life, theology and ethics, what we believe and how we act every day. Catholics need to support one another as we take up these difficult tasks, helping each other to have the courage of our convictions, to stand up for what we believe and to practice in our own lives what the Scriptures proclaim.<sup>13</sup>

We have already mentioned the food pantry as one of the important ways that parishioners were encouraged to provide assistance to the poor. We also modeled St. Vincent's dedication to the poor through the way in which we assisted people who came to us for other forms of non-food help. Everyone that came to the door or called for help was able to speak to the pastor. Because we kept informed about all of the publically funded social services in the community and the work of private agencies, we were often able to direct people to someone who could help. For those occasions when help was not available, the parish kept an emergency fund to provide assistance.

Raising awareness about issues of social justice goes to the heart of Vincentian Missionary awareness, particularly in light of our mission to the poor. All of our formation efforts, including formal programs, preaching and publications should make it a priority to educate about the Social Justice teachings of the Church. This is particularly important when events in the wider world, such as the passage of laws governing social programs, call for the proactive involvement of the parish and parishioners.

## **Evangelization**

Jesus has given us a great commission. In chapter 28 of Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells us "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations..." One of the goals of formation in every Vincentian Missionary Parish is to impart a missionary spirit within people's hearts. "Pope Francis reminds us of this in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

"In our day Jesus' command to "go and make disciples" echoes in the changing scenarios and ever new challenges to the Church's mission of evangelization, and all of us are called to take part in this new missionary "going forth". Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us

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<sup>13</sup> Everyday Christianity: To Hunger and Thirst for Justice, USCCB. Retrieved from: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/everyday-christianity-to-hunger-and-thirst-for-justice.cfm>

are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel.”<sup>14</sup>

Spreading the Word about the Good News with others is central to our faith. Unfortunately, most Catholics do not understand the many ways that this is accomplished. A Vincentian Missionary Parish can help foster discipleship by providing concrete opportunities for parishioners to share their faith. One method is to include discipleship activities in parish programming, particularly formation programs. So that people will begin to recognize what an evangelizing effort is, these efforts have to be intentional and mentioning them as evangelizing events has to be deliberate.\*

\* For example, each year the Teen Ministry presented a Living Stations of the Cross. This event offered the young people of the parish an opportunity to participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church. As a result of their efforts, people came away with a moving experience of Christ’s passion. In one of the parishes in which we served, we were able to produce a video version of the Living Stations that was then shown during Holy Week on the local cable station. In another parish, our Saturday evening Mass was broadcast via the local public cable station.

Encouraging an increased presence within the wider community helps people understand how they are able to spread the word. Advertise a blessing of the pets on the Feast of St. Francis. Hold a Blessing of the Bikes and make sure word gets out to local cycling clubs and motorcycle enthusiasts. Sponsor special Masses to pray for Veterans and public service workers, like fire, police and emergency medical personnel. Participate in community food drives, memorial dedications, town celebrations and ecumenical activities.

Provide people with printed materials to help them. During the ‘Catholics Come Home’<sup>15</sup> campaign that took place during Lent of 2011, we distributed some very helpful pamphlets that describe non-threatening ways people could talk to others about their faith. The parishioners found these materials to be very helpful.

\*The Vincentian Missionary collection and other Missionary collections were actively promoted through reflections published in the bulletin and on our website.

Attention to the Mission “ad gentes” must also be kept in mind. Although this may take different forms, people need to understand that our discipleship extends beyond our parish, our immediate community, and our country. We are called to promote the Word of Jesus throughout the world. \*

We also actively encouraged and then gave financial support to young people who would commit themselves to missionary programs for a period of time, whether it was for their spring break or a year or two following college graduation.

## **Liturgy and Liturgical Environment**

The great pinnacle of our faith is the celebration of the Eucharist. Here we meet Jesus; we listen to his word and encounter him in the flesh. We share a meal where he is our food, a food that transforms us more and more into him. And this is our goal, after all; to be Christ for others in the world. This is a supernatural encounter because, out of time and space, there is only one Mass. We all participate in the Last Supper. Every time.

<sup>14</sup> Evangelii Gaudium, Pope Francis, Vatican City, 2013. No. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Catholics Come Home.org: Retrieved from: <http://www.catholicscomehome.org/>

Our liturgies, particularly the celebration of the sacraments, are encounters with Jesus. How many of the faithful attending Mass on a regular basis are able to sense or understand the supernatural encounter with Christ that is taking place? Perfunctory celebrations, bland homilies, poor music (or no music) and unfriendly or non-existent ministers of hospitality make it difficult for people to experience an atmosphere of the transcendent. Our celebrations should be just that - celebrations. They should provide the opportunity for a tangible encounter with Christ each and every time.

Even fallen away Catholics and non-Catholics attend liturgical celebrations in the Catholic Church: weddings, baptisms, confirmations, and funerals. These are opportunities for us as Church to speak effectively to them regarding our faith and our way of life. The preaching that takes place should provide another encounter with Christ by making the Word of God come alive for those who hear it. Our practice of hospitality and our concentration on the beautiful in our liturgy, should draw others to want to know more. Because the heart of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a healing encounter with Christ, every effort should be made to both form people about the importance of the sacrament and to make the sacrament available.

In a Vincentian Missionary Parish, all facets affecting worship should be in a continuous process of refinement. In the parishes in which we served we conducted periodic training and spiritual retreat for Eucharistic Ministers, Lectors, Ministers of Hospitality, Music Ministers, Altar Servers and members of the Liturgical Environment Ministry. We often included a teaching Mass where the parts of the Mass were 'broken open' and explained.\*

\* Our sense might be that people will be inconvenienced when asked to attend training and retreats because it takes time from their busy schedule. Our experience was just the opposite. Most participants told us how grateful they were; many with tears in their eyes. The key was how much time and effort was put into planning these events. We knew that to be effective, they had to be meaningful. There was no such thing as 'good enough.'

People, no matter how well intentioned and dedicated, will not always know how to be hospitable. Because liturgical ministers, particularly greeters, are usually the first face the parish puts forth to visitors, we made sure they were well acquainted with the Church building, the parish facilities and how to contact the parish staff.

Remember, all prayer is an encounter with our Triune God and prayer should be a part of each and every event, even the less obvious ones. Prayer should be used to help people make the mental and spiritual transition from the outside world to a holy place – even if the meeting is in a school cafeteria and the topic is going to be a clean up of the parish grounds. Meetings should begin with a liturgy, a prayer service complete with readings. The use of candles and other objects helps to create a prayerful mood. The prayer should suit the meeting that is taking place. For instance, the prayer we used with the Finance Council evoked a commitment to using our resources for social justice and care for the poor.

## **Communication**

All your efforts can be for naught if you cannot communicate them effectively. Our Sunday Visitor conducted a survey to find the most effective medium for getting news to people about events taking place in the parish. The least effective method turned out to be the parish bulletin. The same study showed that if you want your message to reach the most people, you had to communicate it in seven different ways. For example, our Lenten schedule was prepared many months in advance. Obviously, we advertised it in the bulletin but we also put it up on our website, sent reminders home with the children through the religious education program and sent a letter to every registered parishioner along with a

schedule. We also put brightly designed informational posters on the bulletin boards of the church and parish center. The programs were mentioned at all parish social functions in the months leading up to Lent. We didn't always get all seven, but we tried to make sure we did as many as we could. We outline below some of the communication tools we have used.

A good parish website is a very valuable tool for reaching both your parishioners and the wider community. Websites can help make things easier for both parishioners and staff by streamlining registration for the parish and parish events. It can serve as the first point of contact for people who want to be married or have a baby baptized. It can offer assistance by listing the hours of operation for your food pantry and provide directions so people can find you. We were also able to use our parish website to offer online formation courses for parents that encouraged discussion with an online blog. During Lent we provided an online retreat with a blog to encourage discussion. We provided links to Catholic periodicals and one to a website that broadcast daily Mass.

In one of our parishes we created a directory of ministries and events. Each entry in the directory contained a brief description about its operations and its purpose. A separate, enclosed page was provided with the name of the person who was the point of contact for each ministry or event. This page was updated whenever there was a change. The text of the directory was also made available on our website.

We developed a relationship with the local media, newspapers and television. Many of our parish events were covered in the newspapers. Because we had established a relationship with the press, they would come to us for stories at Christmas and Easter. It was not uncommon for our news to be carried on page one and in full color.

Not everyone will make use of your website, no matter how good it is. Direct mailing to all households in the parish is a good way to ensure that everyone hears the same thing at the same time.

Regardless of how many different ways it is done, there should be a mechanism in every parish to gather and report what is going on in the parish. This includes regular events, such as Mass times and more infrequent events such as a parish picnic. Although he may find a responsible person to take on this task, the pastor must make sure that the different groups within the parish communicate with the parish about their events and impress upon them the importance of having them publicized.

### **Vincentian Identity**

Establishing a Vincentian Identity in a parish results from creating countless, intentional opportunities. In addition to the methods already discussed, we celebrated Vincentian Feast days and our parishes participated in Vincentian missionary collections. We called attention to these in our bulletin and on our website. We put together a presentation called *Ministering to the People of God in the Manner of St. Vincent de Paul* for a parish that has previously been served by diocesan priests. We spoke of the Vincentian family and featured them on our website along with a biography of St. Vincent de Paul. Icons of St. Vincent and St. Louise were placed in prominent places on the parish campuses.

Because Marian Spirituality is an important part of Vincentian Spirituality, raising awareness of the role of the Blessed Mother is a component in imparting a Vincentian Identity in a parish. Our efforts went beyond simply supporting the various parish groups who had a devotion to the Mary. We incorporated Marian feast days into our formation curriculum and

we encouraged the wider participation of the parishioners in the students' events such as May crowning processions.

In both informal conversation, formation opportunities and in preaching, the life of St. Vincent can serve as an excellent model for living out the message of the Gospels. Every time we take the opportunity to provide examples from St. Vincent's own life to help people better understand how they are to participate in the Mission of Jesus, we strengthen the Vincentian identity within the parish.

## **Conclusion**

The process we have described in this article is an amalgamation of the successful programs we used in establishing a Vincentian Missionary Spirit in the parishes in which we served. Along the way we made mistakes. We tried programs that didn't work but the lessons we learned helped us to provide programs that did work.

We also had help. We sought the wisdom of others and made use of the abundant resources that are available in print and on the internet. We kept our eyes and ears open for opportunities to make a difference in the lives of our parish and our community.

Conversion is a gradual process and takes place one person at a time. We built relationships with people and were open to assist them with their needs, both spiritual and physical. We understood that many people are lost and need help finding their way to God. We tried to be true instruments and to form others to be the same.