

## Spiritual Reflection

Today, I would like to share with you a reflection that I have been thinking about for some time, The role, if any, of Catholic Christians, and in particular Vincentians, in the evangelization of our church and our neighbours. Evangelization seems to be a big word. It has its original during the Roman times whenever a new battle was won and more land conquered, someone would be tasked to “evangelize the event or to spread the good news among the Roman citizens”. It was therefore a positive idea in a happy occasion. However, in today’s secularised culture, this word seems to have a negative connotation in that It may conjure up the idea of having to preach to others from a “holier than thou” perspective and should be avoided. Some of us may also feel guilty talking about our faith because we feel we have not learned enough from the bible and we are afraid that somehow we may embarrass other Catholics or people outside the Church. It is certainly understandable that Catholics, especially cradle ones like myself, do not generally have a tradition of seriously studying the bible like our other Christian brothers. We think that we have our consecrated brothers and sisters to explain our faith if necessary. Yet, it really is very clear from the beginning, that Jesus commands all His disciples of which we definitely are as baptised Christians, to spread His Good News. As Pope Francis says in his Joy of the Gospel “All the baptised, whatever their position in the church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization... Every Christian is challenged here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization or spreading of the Good News”

I am sure that you will agree with me that both within the Church and outside, there is a great need to really understand in a personal way this Good News of God’s love, forgiveness and redemption. We see all around us Catholics of our own families falling away. Ever increasing numbers of young generations are declaring to be “nones”, that is non-associated with any Faith. Yet, there is apparently a great hunger in search of a real meaning in life and despair is evident in many areas of our Western society. It seems that the more materially affluent we get, the more spiritually poor or needy we become. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta says: “.. the spiritual poverty of the Western World is much greater than the physical poverty of our people in India. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love... It is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality... what they are missing really is a living relationship with God”. If we Christians, have the knowledge of and experience with, what we claim to be the true meaning in the resurrected Christ, why do we want to hold back in sharing this with others?

On an individual level, It would be natural for us to want to share good news with people, especially among friends, like a wedding in the family, a new baby, or landing a good job. The more the news impresses us, the more difficult actually it is to hold back on sharing. Therefore, it is a valid question to ask why we may not be comfortable to speak about this amazing Good News of the all powerful God coming to the humankind in history, showing us His loving nature in giving us the way to eternal life and happiness while promising all the help that we need along the way. Do I really understand what this means? Do I really believe it? Do I feel that Jesus is real in my life? Each one of us does face these questions and should have a personal answer. It seems to me that, as Christians, we have to reconcile our state of mind and heart to these questions in order that we may have peace in this apparent contradiction. Indeed, we are not like the early Christians who had the opportunity to actually witness the signs that Jesus performed, to see and touch His resurrected body, nor could many of us expect the direct, miraculous interactions that some saints experienced of Christ throughout history? Yet, we now have 2000 and more years of cumulated knowledge and experience about Christ, we have the steadfast Church in its teaching of the Faith and her

sacraments, and we also have the explicit promise from Jesus that if only we ask, we have the help of the Holy Spirit to open our minds and hearts to understand and experience His presence in a unique and personal way. We are often confused about sharing the Good News with others as having to convince or convert others through our speech. In fact, nobody can convert or convince anybody without the explicit grace of the Holy Spirit, which is His sole privilege. We are simply called to acknowledge what we already should be happy about - the faith and the hope that we have in Christ, in the way we live, in our actions and where appropriate in our words. As St. Peter advises “we should be ready to give an account of our faith and our hope”. Still, in our human nature, we find it difficult to articulate this faith and hope. Therefore, as Pope Francis says “we need first of all to let ourselves be “constantly evangelized, ... and as part of the maturing process, we want to have better training, a deepening love and a clearer witnessing to the Gospel” and “our falling short of perfection should be no excuse; on the contrary, this call is a constant stimulus not to remain mired in mediocrity but to continue growing... as Saint Paul says “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil 3:12-13)

On the St Vincent de Paul society and community level, members come together for the chosen mission of “living the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice and joy”. To the extent that we have “clothe the naked, feed the hungry, welcome the homeless and visit the prisoners”, we can hope to fulfill Christ’s expectations at the last judgement separating the sheep and the goats. However, what makes these deeds valuable in God’s eyes, are the attributes with which we do them, that is, love, respect, justice and joy. Justice allows us to see the person served as deserving as a son or daughter of God. Just perception generates respect, respect can awaken love if we ourselves carry God in our hearts and joy is a natural result of actions out of love. The Good News of God as lived and demonstrated by Jesus is that God is love, the unlimited, unconditional Love. And What is Love? It is the selfless will for the good of the person being loved and served. As Saint Paul says, “I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, this does me no good” (Corinthians 13:3). Therefore, in all our acts of service, Love or the presence of God has to be our guidepost and condition, otherwise, at the best, we may become another secular social services organization and at the worst, our services are but a beguiling instrument for self-ego and pride.

How do we ensure that God is present while we perform our services to the poor? We ensure it by the fact that we can only give what we have. Therefore, it requires that our society, fundamentally, should be a vehicle by which the members can help one another to grow in the knowledge and love of God. In another word, evangelizing and being evangelized among one another. As Jesus commands “you should love one another as I have loved you” and “they will know you are my disciples by your love”. In practice, evangelizing is not so much teaching one another the knowledge of God, rather in caring for and sharing our individual experiences of how God works in our own lives and in encouraging one another in our faith. How we actually do it is up to our imagination and vary among conferences and circumstances

One day, Peter and John went to the temple and they saw a man who was lame, and presumably poor all his life, and beg for money from people passing by. Peter said to him “I have no money at all, but I can give you what I have: in the name of Jesus Christ, get up and walk” we know what happened then. What would a Vincentian do in that situation? We would probably give him money, food, perhaps clothing and shelter if necessary. These are all good things. But which one of us do not see that the best gift of all to that person would be the ability to walk again and who among us

would not wish that we can do the same for him? No, we cannot, we say, we do not have enough faith, and God does not work that way anymore. Yet, perhaps if the lame person can have a glimpse of God in us, perhaps he can see and feel the joy we have in caring for and giving whatever we have to him, perhaps he can learn through our sharing that God loves him as much as anybody else and that his suffering is valuable in God's eyes. The miracle can still happen but perhaps from the inside out.

As in this example, we can agree that we would want to give the best gift to the poor. In our society today, the best gift is more likely to be the experience and the hope of a living relationship with God as observed by Mother Teresa of Calcutta. What we can achieve in providing material comfort to the poor is important and good, but we are really missing the mark if we do not see the need of the spiritually poor. After all, it is very clear that Christ has wanted us to spread the Good News to the poor – to show love with whatever appropriate we can give at the time, but most of all, to share the Good News of God's love and hope for the world by the way we live, the way we speak, the way we act and to the best we can, by the way we articulate an account of our faith with reference to our own experience.

During each of our meetings, we pray that our founder Frederick Ozanam to be canonized some time to be our patron saint and model. Do we really think that he would be a saint if he had just established a large successful social service organization to provide for the poor like the Red Cross or World Vision? Probably not, but it would be because of how he was able to spread God's good news of love and redemption to the poor through what he already has in his heart – a joyous, vibrant relationship with God in Jesus Christ. After all, evangelization should not be a strange a concept for Vincentians. It really is at the heart of why we do what we do and how we can achieve our goal and mission.

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Spiritual reflection given a at the Western Regional Council AGA, May 11, 2019