



THE CALL AND CHALLENGE OF DISCIPLESHIP AMONG VINCENTIANS

The following content was used in the April 13, 2024 retreat for and by the National Council Board members and committee chairs held in Ottawa, Ontario:

Opening prayer: Let us take a moment to quiet ourselves... place our needs and our very selves into to the loving arms of God...Let us begin our time together, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Through baptism, we all as members of the People of God have become missionary disciples, with us Vincentians through *our service to others*.

The Call and Challenge of Discipleship, is broken down into two sections, both based on the Gospel of St. Matthew. Part 1 – **The Call** takes on the scriptural and personal perspectives, the latter particularly with the reflection questions; in Matthew 4, we find an account at the same time, and underscore the power of the Lord's call.

Part 2 – **The Challenge** dwells into what our Vincentian vocation has called us at the Society's beginning through present day, firmly anchored on Matthew 25.

The issue is never the absence of the call but at times the lack of acceptance and response on our part.

Part 1: The **CALL**

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their net, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. (Matthew 4.18-22)

Preliminary Reflection

The practice of “entering into the Gospel” belongs in a particular way to the Jesuit or Ignatian (after St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the religious order of the Society of Jesus) tradition. This means reliving the Gospel story, making it real, seeing yourself in the picture, and imagining the scene and your impressions and feelings.

“Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

Imagine for a moment...

Perhaps in itself a mystery, your encounter by the shore of Sea of Galilee started it all, a turning point in your life of a fisherman. You were unknown and of low status – living a quiet life but trusted Jesus as He began his public ministry. You were ready to let go your hold on the circumstance of your life, and embark on an uncharted phase.

You left behind your trade and family, and saw your routines initially supplanted by unfamiliarity. As you and the rest of the disciples journeyed with Jesus, you became lightning rod for scribes' criticisms. The need for Jesus to suffer and die – the coming of His hour – remained obscure to you all. Yet like the great crowds that followed Him in towns and villages in Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon, you were greatly in awe over signs and wonders, and His preaching about the reign of God. You witnessed, and your heart was touched by Individuals – the blind, the leper, those with unclean spirits -, coming to believe Him, all in His embrace of peoples' sufferings.

With your mission set, you went off, preaching the Good News and need of repentance, expelling demons, and restoring to health those stricken. The mission cost some of your fellow disciples their lives. Your persecution and their martyrdom led early believers to be stronger in as well as moved more people to the faith.

And who was Jesus to you? In His humanity, he was a stranger, one you hardly knew... Jesus' many precepts and life's new meanings might initially have been vague yet you understood His holiness.

Your choice by other people's standards then and as these are now could be untenable. You had every moment to quit yet you chose to be united in and true to Him through His final days and beyond to be healer to others and evangelist to the world, casting a wide net to shores well beyond the Sea of Galilee. In so many respects, your reason and evolution could be transcendent and deeper than being told to follow Him.

After all, Jesus mentioned in John 15:8: *My Father has been glorified in your bearing much fruit and becoming my disciple.*

With their sense of calling and purpose, the first disciples of Jesus – those Called, Chosen, Sent – have offered us lessons for our pathway to holiness and brand of discipleship.

Reflection Questions

1. Recall a moment when you felt the Lord called you to follow Him. What and how life events or influences helped you respond to His call?
2. Describe a time you had made a commitment to change certain aspects of your life. Where did you see God in that time?

3. How do your actions reflect the grace to respond to His call? What might He be asking of you at this time?
4. Do you agree with Pope Francis that you must first feel the joy of God's comfort before you can be messengers of His consolation to others?

Part 2: The **CHALLENGE**

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcome me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw a stranger and welcome you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did to me.''" (Matthew 25:31-40)

Preliminary Reflection

'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did to me.'

The Gospel of St. Matthew on The Last Judgment sets the anchor of our Vincentian spirituality and vocation.

At the heart of that vocation is the missionary discipleship through service and hope-giving to our neighbours-in-need. We are bound by the common goal of growing in holiness by serving Him in our sisters and brothers.

Vincentians bring this vocation to life to every home visit. We see in our neighbours-in-need the reflection of the suffering Christ. We hear the Lord's call, convey that call to our neighbours through witness to our faith and caring for them. They call upon the Lord; He hears their voice. We come to their aid with some material, emotional and spiritual relief. Through us, they sense the Lord's abounding love. By compassion, openness of minds, attentiveness, friendship, good works and prayers, we assure, lift up and give them hope and help them find meanings in the midst of struggles. This is where the spirituality of a home visit inextricably lies – in a moment when both those we serve and us who serve find His presence, mercy and consolation.

Yet we know the graces we receive come, not from ourselves, but from Him and from those we serve. Our neighbours' resoluteness, endurance and resilience teach us how to bear as our own and share their needs, and deepen our intimacy with Him. In emulating St. Vincent de Paul's virtues of promoting love and respect for our neighbours-in-need, we as His channel engage them in simplicity, humility, gentleness, selflessness, and zeal in witness to our Vincentian vocation. How we serve others also transforms our views on difficulties we ourselves face. All these point to a clear sign for discerning our spiritual growth.

This spirituality extends to another moral and social responsibility - upholding individual's right to dignity as sacrosanct. Our advocacy brings to public consciousness and view the need to vest in single human person his or her full worth. We must continue to speak and act on behalf of those who are left out, denied and beaten down by injustice, apathy and self-interests.

Home visits and advocacy bring forth in our actions and choices a salient response of fostering and protecting the well-being, dignity and fulfilment of the human person.

In our neighbors' world, their needs are without parameters, their issues complex and systemic, and changing, and growing. Families continue to struggle, immersed in and daunted by anxieties and pains; many others face uncertain future. The physical, emotional and psychological strains they experience affect those around them, our communities and institutions, and us.

BLESSED FRÉDÉRIC OZANAM saw the tentacles of poverty, degradation and injustice, understood the stakes and willed his vision of charity in and well beyond France. The challenge of living the Vincentian vocation – our spirituality - remains upon us all. The vocation with its depth should make the Society zone-free of mediocrity, complacency and indifference.

Reflection Questions

1. How many ways can you share what you have with the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, afflicted and those in prison?
2. How do you view a home visit? What are some takeaways from your home visit experiences? How do you approach home visit? Is there anything you might change in your approach?
3. Which of the virtues of **SIMPLICITY, HUMILITY, GENTLENESS, SELFLESSNESS** and **ZEAL** do you struggle the most? How does the Vincentian vocation affect your everyday lives, feelings, attitudes and actions?
4. As Vincentians, how do you adapt to changing conditions affecting your neighbours-in-need?

Concluding prayer: As our over-all reflection together comes to an end, let us pause to look back on the inspirations that have come to us during this time ...We conclude our time together, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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About the writer: Jose is a chartered professional accountant. He is a member of Saint John of the Cross, Mississauga, Ontario Conference, a member of the Greater Toronto Central Council Spirituality Committee, and President as well as Spiritual Facilitator of the Peel North Particular Council. He has been recently appointed as member of the Catholic Family Services Peel-Dufferin (CFSPD) Board of Directors.

For those interested in contributing spiritual reflections, please email jose.torres@rogers.com. Also, for current and past months' reflections that may be used in group meeting's spirituality segment, please check out Spirituality - Society of Saint Vincent de Paul - National Council of Canada (ssvp.ca).