

Society of Saint Vincent de Paul Annual National Formation

"Servants of Hope"

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to bring greetings to the National Convention of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul as bishop of the Diocese of Calgary. As Vincentians you gather here from across Canada as servants of hope for the poor in our country. As the current president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) I am also pleased to welcome the liaison bishop for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Bishop Yvan Matthieu.

The theme that you have asked me to speak on is that of your motto or vision – *Spes Servi* – servants of hope or serving in hope. I would like to offer some reflections on this theme in light of the *Synod Synthesis Report no. 4 People in Poverty Protagonists of the Church's Journey*, secondly how this theme is addressed by Pope Francis in *Evangelium Gaudium* and then finally in light of the upcoming Jubilee of Hope.

Synodal Experience of the Church

The basic thrust or goal of the Synod in its various stages has been expressed as the desire of the Church to be closer to the lives of her people, to become less bureaucratic and more relational. It is to be seen as an expression of the dynamic and living tradition of the Church that is called to meet the evolving pastoral needs of the world through the witness and teaching of Christ. The Synod however has also raised among the faithful the legitimate fear that Church teaching will be changed. It is important to note that the Synod experience is one that is inviting us to reflect on the mode or way of being Church that seeks to integrate the aspects of communion, mission and participation into the very life of the local Church for the sake of evangelization. In its essence is about walking together in communion with Christ toward the Kingdom of God with all of humanity.

The practice of synodality is not necessarily new. It involves spiritual and pastoral practices of reciprocal listening, open and honest dialogue, communal discernment, prayer, conversation in the Spirit, co-responsibility and participation that guides the Church in taking decisions. The challenge is to expand participation in the synodal way of being Church and overcome the obstacles to participation that have emerged. For the Vincentians this challenge of increased participation within the mission of the Church is for the sake of people in poverty those who you are being called to walk with in hope.

Synod Synthesis Report – People in Poverty Protagonists of the Church's Journey

The preferential option for the poor is implicit in a Christological faith i.e., in being a follower of Christ. Jesus was poor and humble, he befriended the poor, all people in poverty, he shared his table with them and always spoke against the social and communal causes of poverty.

Today the many faces of poverty are seen in the following people, out brothers and sisters:

- Migrants and refugees
- Indigenous peoples
- Those who suffer violence

- Those facing addictions and mental health conditions
- Human trafficking
- Exploited workers
- The underemployed or working poor
- The “new face” of those displaced because of war

Alongside those facing material poverty there is also the reality of “spiritual poverty” which is the lack of meaning or purpose, or of not being able to make sense out of one’s life, in being filled with despair or a lack of hope for the future.

Those who are in poverty, either material or spiritual, ask the Church, those who are Christian for love. A love that is demonstrated in practical human virtues of respect, acceptance and recognition. These are the virtues that must be expressed by each Vincentian in the providing of food, money, services and other forms of support. However, it is the poor themselves that must always be enabled to determine their own means of development and growth through the support that they are given. They must not become the object of the welfare action of others. Furthermore, Pope Francis stated that “the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care” (EG no. 200). And so, the preferential option for the poor in the life of a Vincentian must always include religious care which is expressed as being in solidarity with the poor.

Saint Vincent de Paul – Evangelium Gaudium - Solidarity with the Poor

Being in solidarity with the poor can be lived out and expressed in many ways. This must always accompany the providing of food, money, services and support. It is both personal and communal in its witness. Solidarity means the following:

1. Standing with the Poor – to be present and to be with those in need in the circumstances of their life
2. Addressing the Causes of Poverty – to listen to the voice of the poor, to their concerns, to understand the social structures and practices that exclude, stigmatize and marginalize them in their vulnerability
3. Drawing upon the Church’s Social Justice Tradition – it is important to analyze and critique the economic and social injustices that cause poverty in order to engage and respond in social advocacy from a Christian viewpoint that is informed by the Scripture and the Church’s teaching.
4. An Active Commitment of Participation – that is open to collaboration with other groups or agencies in building up the common good of society and of defending and promoting the dignity of human life in all existential circumstances.
5. Creating a new Mindset – it is not sporadic acts of generosity that is individual in focus but it presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and of the priority of all human life over the appropriation of material goods by a few (EG no. 188)
6. Transformation of Structures – the mindset, the convictions and habits of solidarity when put into practice have the possibility of transforming structures. The structures that can provide affordable housing, access to education and healthcare, and the opportunities for employment which directly impact those in poverty.

In Section III of the Synod Synthesis Report it talks about how the Church can build community by weaving bonds of relationships through listening and accompanying others. To listen and accompany others reflects the Christological nature of the Church. In listening to the poor and the marginalized we ourselves become evangelized. In being with and in solidarity with the poor we as a Church can go forward to evangelize with greater credibility. It reflects the desire of Pope Francis, “I want a Church that is poor and one that is with the poor”. What does this mean for the members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul? It is to be open to the

discernment of the Spirit, to see formation in the ministry of listening and accompaniment with the poor as being open to be evangelized and in discovering how to live out the charism of Society in new ways. To see the work of Saint Vincent de Paul first in light of the community, the parish, and the diocese. This mindset must challenge the Society in being not just a service to the poor or becoming too “task oriented” but rather in becoming a community that serves in hope those who struggle with the various forms of poverty.

Jubilee Year of Hope for Vincentians

In this upcoming year of 2025, Pope Francis has declared it as the Jubilee Year of Hope. In Rm 5:5 we read “Hope does not disappoint”. As Vincentians you have an opportunity to renew through your spirituality and apostolate this witness of serving in hope and of being servants of hope.

In the Apostolic Bull which inaugurates this Year it states that it is the Holy Spirit that illuminates all believers of hope with the flame of charity or service. It is the same Spirit that illuminates the Vincentians in being servants of hope who are filled with the zeal of charity in serving the poor. It goes on to state that in our current reality we need to practice the virtue of patience that is linked to hope. Patience that is reflected in perseverance when faced with obstacles and a confidence that trusts in God while at the same time not seeking to see the immediate results of one’s actions. The virtue of patience is essential if you are to be credible servants of hope.

As Vincentians the Jubilee Year of Hope can also be a time of renewal to see that your encounter with the many faces of the poor are the opportunities to be renewed as servants of hope. In the last Extraordinary Year of Mercy, Pope Francis commissioned “Missionaries of Mercy” to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. He is asking each bishop and local church to take advantage of this ministry again. I might suggest that as bishops we also commission a new ministry, “Missionaries of Hope” to which Vincentians could participate and in fact would become leaders. To go into prisons, hospitals, and to our communities where people’s dignity is impacted by poverty.

The Jubilee Year of Hope can be an opportunity to revitalize and renew the spiritual formation of Vincentians. You must remember that without this spiritual foundation, you can not give what you do not have to the poor. Through the lens of the Jubilee Year, you can also work to increase the profile of your ministry of hope. To explore how the synodal structures and practices might renew the communion, participation and mission of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in the life of the parish and the diocese. And finally, to allow the words of Scripture to always be a source of inspiration in your being with the poor. As Jesus said to his disciples, “I no longer call you servants but friends”. May your friendship with the poor be your source of friendship with Christ.

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