



Society of St. Vincent de Paul

Toronto Central Council

**Suggested Readings
and Reflections
for
Conference and Council
Meetings**

2010

Dear Conference Presidents;

Article 2.2.9 of the Rule provides:

“A meeting shall include a spiritual reading followed by an exchange. Vincentians are encouraged to participate actively in discussions on spiritual topics, particularly in the way they relate to the development of a Christian attitude towards the poor and to the development of the Society’s service ministry.” (The Rule 2.2.9).

We all know, of course, that the prayer and spiritual reading can sometimes become mechanical and routine and perhaps devoid of any real meaning.

Choosing a reading that is meaningful and relevant can be difficult. Encouraging members to reflect on and discuss the reading can be even more challenging. In this regard we need to keep the following points in mind:

A reading/quote/excerpt needs to be carefully selected. It needs to speak to the members as Christians and as Vincentians and to the realities and challenges of their service to those in need.

Generally a shorter selection, with only one or two key points, will be much more effective than longer, more complex readings.

The reading should be followed by (or, in some cases, preceded by) some carefully developed guide questions. These questions should help the members to absorb and reflect on the key message in the reading and to share this with the other members of the conference in discussion. Such questions and the subsequent discussion help make the message real, relevant and personal.

A few suggestions:

1. Depending on the reading, you may wish to allow a few moments after reading it to allow the members to reflect. Then ask the first question. At the appropriate time ask the next question. For other readings it might be more appropriate to allow a few moments of quiet reflection after the discussion of the reading, to allow the members an opportunity to reflect on how it can affect their service to their neighbours in need.
2. Prior to the opening prayer and reflection, you may find it helpful to do the following:
 - a. Sit quietly, feet flat on the floor, hands in your lap, eyes closed drawing deep breaths, for about 20-30 seconds. This may allow the members to relax and get focused and more open to the prayer and reflection.
 - b. Don’t be afraid of silence after the first guide question is asked. Resist the temptation to immediately jump in and say, “Okay, if there’s no discussion or comment, let’s get down to business.” Members may need time to reflect a little and to get their thoughts organized. Give them that time.

Following are a few suggested readings and discussion questions.

Sincerely
Cecilia Gallivan
Chair, Spirituality Committee

1 Peter: 7-11

⁷ *The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.* ⁸ *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.* ⁹ *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.* ¹⁰ *Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.* ¹¹ *If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*

What does Peter mean by, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins"?

What gifts might we have received that would assist us in our service to our neighbours in need?



And when the angel had come to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with the, Blessed are thou among women." (Luke 1, 28)

Here we get an opportunity to reflect on our humility. It helps reminds us that we need to be ever mindful of practicing this much needed but difficult virtue.

What does humility mean for us as Vincentians?



Vincentian Meditation:

Frederic wrote to Father Pendola of Tuscany, who had just started a Conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, desiring that the young be introduced to the living reality of Christ in the world: "You have amongst your children many who are rich, Reverend Father-oh! What a salutary lesson, how strengthening for those soft young hearts, to show them the poor, to show them Jesus Christ, not in pictures painted by great masters or on altars resplendent with gold and light, but to show them Jesus Christ and His wounds in the person of the poor!"

(Ramson, Praying with Frederic, p.96)

Discussion:

(Share thoughts on the readings after a moment of silence)

How can we better "strengthen soft young hearts by showing them the poor and showing them Jesus Christ and His wounds in the person of the poor" so that they will also hear the words "whatever you did to the least of mine, you did for me"?



Do not look forward to what may happen tomorrow; the same everlasting Father who cares for you today will take care of you tomorrow and every day. Either He will shield you from suffering, or He will give you unfailing strength to bear it.

Be at peace, then. Put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations, and say continually: "The Lord is my strength and my shield. My heart has trusted in Him and I am helped. He is not only with me but in me, and I in Him."

- St. Francis de Sales

How might reviewing this reading prior to a home visit affect that visit?

On which occasions might you especially need to remind yourself of St. Francis de Sales words?

"You will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket. But you will keep your gentleness and your smile. It is not enough to give bread and soup. This the rich can do. You are the servant of the poor... They are your masters, and the more difficult they will be, the unjust and insulting, the more love you must give them. It is for your love alone that the poor will forgive you the bread you give them."

- St. Vincent de Paul

Mother Theresa, like St. Vincent de Paul, reminds us to perform our works of charity with joy and a smile.

Is that easy for us to do?

What helps me to keep that sense of joy and that smile genuine?

How would you summarize the main message of the following reflection in one sentence?

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

Amen.

(Attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero)

This prayer gives us hope. We cannot predict the type of fruit that might be produced from the seeds we plant during our home visits. What seeds did I plant during my last home visit?

Does our engagement and demeanor help sow seeds of hope and love, or of indifference and despair?

This prayer stresses the fact that not being able to do everything is in some ways liberating. When we realize that we, as Vincentians, do not have the power or resources to remedy and repair all of the effects of poverty we see, we can then concentrate on what we can do, and do it well.

What are some of the small things we can do that might lay the foundations for the “master builder”?

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out in a loud voice: "Blest are you among women and blest is the fruit of your womb: (Luke 1, 41-42)

This scene helps us to reflect on how we show charity to our neighbour, and how difficult it can sometimes be. Here we have a 15 year old women, 3 months pregnant, putting all her own cares aside, travelling all alone on a donkey, a dangerous distance to help her cousin, a neighbour, whom she feels is more in need of her help.

In what ways is Mary a model for us as Vincentians?



Philippians 2: 1-11, 14

Imitating Christ's Humility

¹*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,* ²*then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.* ³*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.* ⁴*Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* ⁵*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:* ⁶*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,* ⁷*but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* ⁸*And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!* ⁹*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,*

¹⁰*that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹*and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

¹⁴*Do everything without complaining or arguing.*

Our Rule also teaches about the need for humility. Is our humility evident in our actions and words as we serve our neighbours in need?

What does it mean to look with humility at those I serve?

And when the angel had come to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with the, Blessed are thou among women."(Luke 1, 28)

Here we get an opportunity to reflect on our humility. It helps reminds us that we need to be ever mindful of practicing this much needed but difficult virtue.

What does humility mean for us as Vincentians?

“Never Let Your Hymns Drown Out the Cries of the Poor”

(Diane P. Baltaz, Social Awareness Director, Diocese of Hamilton)

How would you state this in your own words?

Can you imagine Christ saying something like this?

What do these words mean for our service?

The passage is taken from Celtic Treasures (Daily scriptures and prayer), J. Philip Newell 2005 Novalis, p. 222

You have taught us O Christ, to love our neighbour as our self.

You have taught us to see our neighbour as part of our self.

Let us see ourselves in those who are hungry.

Let us see ourselves in those who are frightened.

Let us see ourselves in one another and in every creature.

For you have taught us, O Christ, that we are one body.

What does it actually mean to “see our neighbour as part of our self”?

International Rule (p. 129 of the Rule)

7.1 The Society gives immediate help but also seeks mid-term and long-term solutions.

The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it. It is, therefore, committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and to contributing to their elimination. In all its charitable actions there should be a search for justice; in its struggle for justice, the Society must keep in mind the demands of charity.

Extend your mercy towards others, so that there can be no one in need whom you meet without helping. For what hope is there for us if God should withdraw His Mercy from us?

How can we, as Vincentians, in our day-to-day service to our neighbours in need, “contribute to the elimination of the root causes of injustice”?

How can we do it as a Society?

If you judge people, you have no time to love them.

- Mother Theresa

As good stewards of donated funds we must make judgments. Mother Theresa, though, is talking about being judgmental.

What are some indicators that I’m being judgmental?

How can we help each other to avoid being judgmental?



St Basil the Great said:

*“The bread you set aside belongs to the hungry;
the coat you store in your wardrobe belongs to the naked;
the money you keep hidden belongs to the needy.*

From those things that God gave you, take that which you need, but the rest, which to you are superfluous, are necessary to others. The superfluous goods of the rich are necessary to the poor, and when you possess the superfluous you possess what is not yours”

- St. Augustine

“When you give to the poor, you give not of your own but simply return what is His, for you have usurped that which is common and has been given for the common use of all. The land belongs to all, not the rich; and yet those who are deprived of its use are many, more than those who enjoy it.”

- St. Ambrose

Each is saying essentially the same thing. What is it?

How do these quotes fit with the common view of society?



Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be
consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Like many familiar passages that we hear or sing, we might not stop to reflect on what is actually being said, and what it can mean to me in my daily living and in my service to neighbours in need.

Do we bring hope where there's despair, light where there's darkness, joy where there's sadness?

What do we receive in giving?

The street will be long and unfriendly, the stairs and the poor often ungrateful. You will soon find charity a heavy burden, heavier than the jug of soup or the full basket. But you will still be pleasant and smile. Distributing soup and bread is not everything. The rich can do that. The poor are your masters and you will find them terribly exacting masters. So the more unattractive and dirty they are, the more rude and unfair they are, the more you must lavish your love upon them. It is only by feeling your love that the poor will forgive you your gifts of bread.

- St. Vincent de Paul

How can we reconcile in our minds and hearts the apparent contradiction in "the poor will forgive you your gifts of bread"?

How do we deal with our frustration (and, perhaps, anger) when some we serve don't seem the least bit grateful for our efforts.?

The Daily Decalogue of Pope John XXIII

The Church's holiness and human wisdom are expressed very clearly in what is called The Daily Decalogue of Pope John XXIII:

- 1. Only for today, I will seek to live the livelong day positively without wishing to solve the problems of my life all at once.***
- 2. Only for today, I will take the greatest care of my appearance: I will dress modestly; I will not raise my voice; I will be courteous in my behaviour; I will not criticize anyone; I will not claim to improve or to discipline anyone except myself.***
- 3. Only for today, I will be happy in the certainty that I was created to be happy, not only in the other world but also in this one.***
- 4. Only for today, I will adapt to circumstances, without requiring all circumstances to be adapted to my own wishes.***
- 5. Only for today, I will devote 10 minutes of my time to some good reading, remembering that just as food is necessary to the life of the body, so good reading is necessary to the life of the soul.***
- 6. Only for today, I will do one good deed and not tell anyone about it.***
- 7. Only for today, I will do at least one thing I do not like doing; and if my feelings are hurt, I will make sure that no one notices.***
- 8. Only for today, I will make a plan for myself: I may not follow it to the letter, but I will make it. And I will be on guard against two evils: hastiness and indecision.***
- 9. Only for today, I will firmly believe, despite appearances, that the good Providence of God cares for me as no one else who exists in this world.***
- 10. Only for today, I will have no fears. In particular, I will not be afraid to enjoy what is beautiful and to believe in goodness. Indeed, for 12 hours I can certainly do what might cause me consternation were I to believe I had to do it all my life.***

"Every believer in this world must be a spark of light, a core of love, life-giving leaven in the mass: and the more he is so, the more he will live, in his inner most depths, in communion with God."

L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO NOV 8/06

Which one point most strikes a chord with you and your service to our neighbours in need?



Matthew 11:28-30

Rest for the Weary

²⁸ Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Selfless service can be exhausting, physically and emotionally.

Where or to whom do you go when you need rest?

Frederic Ozanam

founder of the St. Vincent de Paul Society

Professor Bailly, the spiritual leader of the first St. Vincent de Paul conference, told Frederic and his first companions in charity, "Like St. Vincent, you, too, will find the poor will do more for you than you will do for them."

"Those who mock the poor insult their Maker" (Proverbs 17:5). Frederic Ozanam never demeaned the poor in offering whatever service he could. Each man, woman and child was too precious for that. Serving the poor taught Frederic something about God that he could learn only there.

What has your service to neighbours in need taught you about:

1. yourself
2. your God

The Work of Christmas

*When the song of the angel is still,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the wise women and men are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To feed the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.*

Sometimes we, as conferences and Vincentians, work so hard to help make a nice Christmas for our neighbours in need that we, for a time, become less aware of their day-to-day needs and struggles.

How can we keep an appropriate balance between our Christmas basket program and our timely response to ongoing needs?

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out in a loud voice: "Blest are you among women and blest is the fruit of your womb: (Luke 1, 41-42)

This scene helps us to reflect on how we show charity to our neighbour, and how difficult it can sometimes be. Here we have a 15 year old women, 3 months pregnant, putting all her own cares aside, travelling all alone on a donkey, a dangerous distance to help her cousin, a neighbour, whom she feels is more in need of her help.

In what ways is Mary a model for us as Vincentians?

A Vincentian's Prayer

Lord, help me to grow.

Help me to be a better Vincentian today than I was yesterday.

Help me to be a better Vincentian tomorrow than I am today.

Lord, help me to grow.

Help me to be more compassionate today than yesterday.

Help me to be more respectful of our neighbours in need today than I was yesterday.

Help me to be less judgmental today than I was yesterday.

Lord, help me to grow.

Help me to be more humble today than yesterday.

Help me to listen more fully today than yesterday.

Help me to be more patient today than yesterday.

Lord, help me to grow.

Help me to grow in faith so that I can see you in all of those I serve.

Help me to be generous with my time and my gifts in my service to those in need.

Help me to serve you better today than yesterday.

Lord, help me to grow.

Help me to be a better Vincentian today than I was yesterday.

Help me to be a better Vincentian tomorrow than I am today.

We are asking God to help us “grow” as Vincentians. What does it mean to “grow as a Vincentian”?



“It is our duty to prefer the service of the poor to everything else and to offer such service as quickly as possible. If a needy person requires medicine or other help during prayer time, do whatever has to be done with peace of mind. Offer the deed to God as your prayer. ... Charity is certainly greater than any rule. Moreover, all rules must lead to charity. With renewed devotion, then, we must serve the poor, especially outcasts and beggars. They have been given to us as our masters and patrons.”

St. Vincent de Paul

What des St. Vincent de Paul mean by ... “all rules must lead to charity”?

"It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed toward 'having' rather than 'being'...."

Pope John II
Centesimus Annus

*"The world would become better off if people tried to become better..
And people would become better if they stopped trying to become better off."*

Peter Maurin
Co-founder of *The Catholic Worker*

What implications do these words have for us as Christians and for our service to our neighbours in need?



Gospel: (Matthew 25:31-46)

Jesus said to his disciples:... “the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come you who 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 drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?’ and the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

Reflection:

Christ exercises his sovereignty, his kingship, in the right to judge. The basis for his judgment of us is whether we care for the least of our brothers and sisters. Growth in discipleship and living the paschal mystery is measured by the extent to which we look upon the other as Christ, loving that person as Christ, doing for that person as Christ. This is how we come to joy. This is how we “share in the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world.” Think about it: from the first moment of creation, God planned for us to share in God’s everlasting life and joy. (Living Liturgy, p. 280)



1 Corinthians 13

Love

¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. ¹¹When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. ¹²Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

*Does it surprise us that God would say through Paul, “But the greatest of these is love”?
What does this passage teach us about our service to our neighbours in need?*

The DASH Poem

*I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral of a friend.
He referred to the dates on her tombstone from the beginning to the end
He noted that first came her date of birth and spoke the date that followed with tears.
But he said what mattered most of all was the dash between those years
For that dash represents all the time that she spent on earth.
And now only those who loved her know what that little line is worth.
For *it* matters not how much we own:- the cars, the house the cash
What matters is how we live and love and how we spend our dash.
So think about this' long and hard.
Are there *things* you would like to change?
For you never know how much time is left, that can still be rearranged.
If we could just slow down enough to consider what's true and real
And always try to understand the way other people feel.
And be less quick to anger, and show appreciation more.
And always try to understand the way other people feel.
And be less quick to anger, and show appreciation more.
And love the people in our lives like we've never loved before.
If we treat each other with respect and more often wear a smile,
remembering that this special dash might only last a little while.
So, when your eulogy is being read with your life's actions to rehash - would you be
proud of the things they say about how you spent your dash?*

- By Linda Ellis

This piece encourages us to reflect on how we are and how we intend to spend the rest of our "dash". It perhaps is also an opportunity for us to consider how we are contributing to the dashes of those we serve.

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