

# THE VINCENTIAN TRADITION OF CHARITY, JUSTICE AND SOLIDARITY<sup>1</sup>

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Early in September of this year, I reflected<sup>2</sup> on the first part of an article by Meghan Clark titled *The Complex Necessary Union of Charity and Justice: Insights from the Vincentian Tradition for Contemporary Catholic Social Teaching*<sup>3</sup>. In this reflection I restricted myself to looking at an Meghan Clark's presentation of how the basis for extending the virtue of charity to include the virtues of justice and solidarity is set out by Pope Benedict in his encyclicals *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate*.

In this reflection now, I would like to focus on how Meghan Clark, in the second part of her article, sees charity, justice and solidarity being linked in the organised charity of the Vincentian Tradition.

## Justice and Solidarity

The justice that Megan Clark links with organised charity in the Vincentian Tradition is that of a justice which upholds and supports human dignity. The solidarity which she speaks of in organised charity in the Vincentian Tradition is a solidarity which is prepared to take responsibility for the human dignity of our neighbour:

*We might extend this concept (of justice) to the whole universe which touches our collective social conscience today in terms of how human activity has rendered the state of the universe so vulnerable.*<sup>4</sup>

These are concepts of justice and solidarity that Clarke sees as being present in Vincentian works of organised charity.

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<sup>1</sup>In this Reflection, I am indebted to Sr Margaret Armstrong DC (Province of Australia) for ideas in her own reflection titled *Justice and Charity* presented at [Marillac](#), Melbourne in 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Williams CM, T., *Charity, Justice and Solidarity*, Sydney, 2014. (Accessed on the site of The Vincentians Oceania Province on September 6, 2014 at : <http://vincentians.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Charity-Justice-and-Solidarity.pdf>).

<sup>3</sup>Clark Meghan J. "The Complex Necessary Union of Charity and Justice: Insights from the Vincentian Tradition for Contemporary Catholic Social Teaching", *Vincentian Heritage Journal*, De Paul University, Chicago USA, 2012, Vol.31, Issue 2, pp 24-39. (Note: Dr Meghan Clark is Assistant Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at St John's University, New York USA. Her areas of specialisation are Catholic social teaching, social ethics, medical ethics, human rights, and solidarity.)

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong , *Justice and Charity*, p 1

## Vincent, Louise, Frederic and Rosalie - Charity with Justice



When Vincent de Paul set up the first Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon les Dombes in 1617, he recognised that it was not the unwillingness of people to help that was the problem, since people were already helping some of those in need. It was organisation of these people that was required. As he said in a document pertaining to the Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon les Dombes late in 1617:

*.....some devout young women and virtuous inhabitants..... have decided among themselves to assist corporally and spiritually the people of their town who have sometimes suffered a great deal, more through a lack of organised assistance than from lack of charitable persons.<sup>5</sup>*

Individual acts of charity are good and necessary, but organisation and a systemic approach will also address the loss of human indignity which people in need endure, a state which is a matter of injustice for them. So Vincent made sure the Confraternities of Charity had detailed rules to observe, to ensure that the Confraternity would continue to function and alleviate the injustice of the situation. Central to all Vincent's work was his commitment to organised charity based on solid evidence in terms of the social and personal realities which lie at the source of suffering and need. Charity is not merely almsgiving or sharing of one's surplus goods. The issue of real respect for human dignity implies that "the ministry of charity requires organisation, and attention to the demands of justice."<sup>6</sup>

Louise firmly made this same point when she instructed the Daughters of Charity in their care of sick young women in hospital. She advised that prior to being discharged from hospital, the sisters should assist young women to find work, so that they "should have a means of support and be able to live in dignity."<sup>7</sup> It is in this concern for a sustainable and dignified future for these women that the unity of justice and charity is found. Responding to the direct needs of the sick was an act of charity; attending to the future of these women was an act of justice. An effective ministry of charity required organisation and seeing to the demands of justice.



The relationship between justice and charity was also shown by a particular instance concerning the Ladies of Charity and the question of the care of the "foundlings". Repeatedly Vincent reminded the Ladies that it would be great evil to allow the work to die out, demonstrating a strong concern for the sustainability of programs. He argued in favour of looking after the foundlings, not only because they were in need, but because they would otherwise die. This is a clear example of the inseparable bond between commitment to justice and the ministry of charity.

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<sup>5</sup> Coste CM, Pierre, "Charity of Women" (CHÂTILLON-LES-DOBES), *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* (CCD), Ed. Sr Marie Poole DC al., Trans Sr Evelyne Franc DC et al., New City Press, New York, 2003, Vol 13b, No 126, p 8.

<sup>6</sup> Clark p 33.

<sup>7</sup> Clark p 33.

While both Louise and Vincent began their work as personal and as direct endeavour, they were both committed to developing a just structure within society, and established their charitable activity based upon the needs created by unjust social structures. In response to the marginalisation of women, Louise lamented the lack of opportunity for women. The abuse of young girls and adult women was to be a priority work of the Daughters of Charity if the social and moral conditions for women were to be improved. The creation of the Daughters of Charity in 1633 radically changed opportunities for women to practice both charity and justice, and the systematic focus on training those Daughters to be qualified to educate and run schools made them a vehicle for both.<sup>8</sup>



The Saint Vincent de Paul Society, set up by Frederic Ozanam with a group of men and the assistance of Sr Rosalie Rendu DC, is well known for its work with the poor and needy. The Society is an international organisation which not only carries out the ministry of charity in a variety of ways through individual charitable action, but also works through organised charity and advocacy. And so the members of the society demonstrate how justice in regard to restoring human dignity is a part of their work.



### **The Challenge of Solidarity**

There is no doubt that Vincent and Louise were in solidarity with the poor and their needs. Their work throughout their lives makes that clear. For Vincent, assisting the poor, no matter who they were, was a commitment of his belief in the love of God and love of neighbour, since he saw everyone as part of the mystical body of Christ. He expressed this to his Missioners in 1658 in these words:

*God has told everyone to help others as members of the same mystical body.<sup>9</sup>*

While Vincent was talking to members of the Congregation of the Mission in this case, it is clear from the context that he is saying that it is all people, whether within the Congregation or outside it, who are our neighbours.

Frederic Ozanam is quite concrete and down to earth in his understanding of being in solidarity with the poor:

*The knowledge of social wellbeing and of reform is learned not from books, nor from public debate, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man's garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him.<sup>10</sup>*

This is quite a challenge to all of us. For justice and charity to be fully effective, we must cultivate solidarity with those in need in a practical way.

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<sup>8</sup> Clark, p 33.

<sup>9</sup> Document 117a, *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, May 17, 1658, CCD Vol 13a, p 439.

<sup>10</sup> Clark, p 37.

## Conclusion

Following a time of revolution in France, Frederic Ozanam argued:

*The problem which divides people today is not a political problem; it is a social one. It is a matter of knowing which will get the upper hand, the spirit of selfishness or the spirit of sacrifice; whether society will go for ever-increasing enjoyment and profit, or for everyone devoting themselves to the common good ... Many people have too much and still want more. Others do not have enough, or do not have anything at all, and they want to take by force what is not being given to them.....* <sup>11</sup>

These problems still exist today in our world. Denial of equal access has been institutionalised, and we have an ethical imperative, in justice and solidarity, to challenge structures in our society which cause such inequality.

However, personal and institutional charity are not mutually exclusive approaches. They belong together. Personal charity often comes before organised charity in order to arouse consciousness of the justice that is lacking. Institutionalised or organised charity, which includes advocacy, is driven by the commitment of individuals, and begins to attend to justice in an organised fashion. This can develop further into systemic change, which, if successful, can result in actually changing the structures at the roots of poverty and need. All of this is part of the Vincentian Tradition of caring for people at the margins of society.

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### FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you see justice, in the sense in which Meghan Clark has used the word in her article, as being involved in the charitable work in which you are engaged ?
2. Where do you see injustice being perpetrated in Australian Society ? Can you suggest any way this injustice can begin to be addressed though organised charity ?
3. When a charitable work is suddenly abandoned, what happens to justice ?

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Clark, p 38.