

# **Change will come from below**

**Keynote Address to the Seventh  
Pacific and Asian Cooperation (Panasco) Conference,  
Goa, India  
14<sup>th</sup> September, 2010**

Dr John Falzon  
Chief Executive Officer  
St Vincent de Paul Society  
National Council of Australia  
[johnf@svdpnatcl.org.au](mailto:johnf@svdpnatcl.org.au)

Thank you, my dear sisters and brothers, for extending the kind invitation to share some ideas with you at this wonderful Asia-Pacific gathering.

I have been asked to speak about partnerships for progress.

When we hear this phrase we often think first of partnerships between NGOs, or between NGOs and government or business.

I am not going to reflect on these partnerships with you today, even though they are useful as means to an end. There is more than enough talk of this among the powerful of the world whose voices are heard and usually heeded.

No. Today I am going to reflect with you on the kind of partnership that lies at the heart of the story of the St Vincent de Paul Society. It is based on the simplest of questions and simplest of answers.

The question is this: How did God speak to Frederic Ozanam and his young companions?

And the answer is one that you already know: God spoke to these relatively privileged young men through the poor.

My message is very simple, therefore. Above everything else, we must listen to our sisters and brothers who are downtrodden and poor. We must learn from our sisters and brothers who are downtrodden and poor. We must stand on the side of our sisters and brothers who are downtrodden and poor.

We know that this message is dismissed by the so-called wisdom of the wealthy, industrialized global north as being too simplistic. There are some who go much further and condemn this message as being downright dangerous or subversive.

They are partly right. It is very simple but I must voice my certainty to you that far too often we allow complexity to be our excuse for inaction and so we divest ourselves of our real social responsibility.

They are right too to say that this message is dangerous. It is dangerous to those of us who believe it. It is dangerous to those of us who practice it. But most of all it is dangerous to those who have a vested, unchristian interest in defending a cruel and unjust status quo. They fear the conscientization of the poor. They fear that the poor will cease to accept their poverty as a matter of fate. They fear that the poor will begin to question and critically analyse the structural causes of their marginalisation.

You will remember the magnificent and saintly example of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador. None of us can forget that his own life was radicalised by listening to, and learning from, the poor. And none of us can forget that he paid the ultimate price for his revolutionary love of the poor. He was hounded, and eventually killed, by the powers that saw him as being a dangerous threat to an unjust status quo. I would like to share with you one of his beautiful prophetic utterances:

*“Even when they call us mad, when they call us subversives and communists and all the epithets they put on us, we know we only preach the subversive witness of the Beatitudes, which have turned everything upside down.”*

This, my sisters and brothers, is why I referred to our brother Oscar’s love as being revolutionary. Revolution literally means turning everything upside down. This is precisely what Christ’s Beatitudes challenge us to do, according to Romero. This is what Ozanam saw. This is what we too are challenged to see. Far from being a call to violence or hate, the Beatitudes are a call to love. But this is not a sentimental love or a patronising love. It is a hard and disturbing love. It is hard and disturbing to hear the Word-made-flesh, the God who pitched his tent among us, telling us:

*Blessed are you who are poor. Woe to you who are rich.*

*Blessed are you who are hungry. Woe to you who are full.*

*Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, revile you.*

*Woe to you when all speak well of you.*

This is a hard teaching. Over the centuries since these words were uttered we have done triple somersaults to avoid their simple and direct message, their startling, revolutionary challenge to turn everything upside down. The poor, the hungry, the excluded; these are the people of the earth whose choices have been taken away by unjust structures and histories of oppression. There is only one way forward, according to this teaching, and that is for those who have the choices to take the side of these sisters and brothers; to listen and learn from the poor. The key to improving the lives of the world’s destitute people lies in educating them and listening to them. It is not enough, according to the logic of the Beatitudes, for the powerful to try to impose solutions.

I will repeat this for I know how hard it is for us to hear it. We are called to engage in a revolutionary practice of listening, a revolutionary practice of humility, a revolutionary practice of obedience to the wishes and aspirations of the poor, the hungry, the excluded.

Obedience is an unfashionable word in the prosperous consumer societies of today’s world where the key value is individualism and the key practice is to do whatever you want.

The word “obedience” comes, of course, from the Latin term for listening. I put it to you that Frederic and his companions were obedient to God by listening to the excluded. Humility means sharing the same ground as the people who are broken. Cesar Vallejo, the Peruvian poet, described this brokenness poignantly:

*“There are people so wretched, they don’t even have a body!”*

These broken people are the Real Presence of Jesus, the wounded healer, the “*liberator wrapped in shackles*” who bids us to come follow him by listening to them.

This is what we are challenged to do. We are often tempted to think that the most important partnerships are those we might make with powerful governments or powerful businesses. These might be necessary from time to time as means to an end but the most essential, the most non-negotiable, partnership we can engage in is a partnership with the poor.

This is the most important partnership we can engage in; a partnership, a solidarity with, a learning from, our marginalized sisters and brothers. I do not mean a patronizing action that puts the poor in the position of grateful, deserving recipient. I mean a commitment to their liberation, a joining in companionship on the journey to God's kingdom of justice and compassion.

As Arthur Rimbaud, the young Belgian poet who experienced so much poverty and exclusion in his own life, put it:

*"Only with burning patience shall we conquer the splendid city that will give light, justice and dignity to all."*

This best thing also for prosperous nations to do is to listen to the nations of the developing world, the majority world, as well as to the people within their own countries who are condemned to live lives mirroring the conditions of the developing world.

As we speak, rather than being listened to, rather than being loved, the downtrodden in the prosperous countries of the world are being trodden on even more, whether you look at the Roma peoples in Europe or the refugees seeking asylum in Australia. We are not witnessing an outpouring of compassion. We are not witnessing an outpouring of justice. The powerful are anything but obedient to the poor. Rather, their futures are determined from above. We witness this especially in regard to the colonised Indigenous Peoples of prosperous countries. They are told from above what is good for them, how they must improve, without any thought for their stories of dispossession and pain, or their dreams of justice, or the power of their courageous love and undaunted hope.

The same, as you know, is true of the unequal power relations between the wealthy countries and the Majority World.

It is encouraging to see the church often speaking up against these forms of dispossession. The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia, along with key bishops, has criticized the treatment of refugees as well as the paternalistic control over Aboriginal Australians. Two French bishops in charge of the pastoral care of the people known as Gypsies, Roma or Travellers, Raymond Centene and Claude Schockert, published a statement at the end of July this year warning against *"the stigmatisation of Travellers who make ideal scapegoats, when in fact they are the principal victims of the ills of our society."*

Another example of how we have failed to listen is in regard to the natural environment. Far from being a fashionable, middle class, urban fad, real concern for the planet is a core issue for the most vulnerable around the globe. If anyone is unsure about this just ask the people

of Bangladesh or Kiribati! The quest for profits has supplanted the respect for nature that is so central to the wisdom of the forgotten peoples of the majority world.

The world of today has most things upside down. Together we must work to turn them the right way up. The richest 2 percent of adults in the world own more than half the world's wealth, according to a study released by the Helsinki-based World Institute for Development Economics Research.

The richest 1 percent of adults own 40 percent of global assets while the richest 10 percent of adults own 85 percent of the world's total assets.

In contrast, the assets of half of the world's adult population account for barely 1 percent of global wealth.

In addition to this, according to the International Labour Organisation we learn that women do 2/3 of the world's work, receive 5% of the world's income and own 1% of the world's assets.

The World Health Organization's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health two years ago released its report entitled *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health*. According to its findings: "Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale."

Sir Michael Marmot, Commission Chair said: "Central to the Commission's recommendations is creating the conditions for people to be empowered, to have freedom to lead flourishing lives. Nowhere is lack of empowerment more obvious than in the plight of women in many parts of the world. Health suffers as a result."

Similarly, Bishop Agnelo Gracias of Mumbai has recently echoed for us the prophetic words of Frantz Fanon:

*"What counts today, the question which is looming on the horizon, is a need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity must reply to this question, or be shaken to pieces by it."*

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, we have a massive battle on our hands; a battle against the causes of social and economic inequality and it is no surprise if we feel like we are outnumbered and outflanked by the powerful structures that dominate our planet.

The truth is this: our sling is the sling of David as we fight the monstrous Goliath of global inequality and injustice.

In fighting against inequality and injustice we do not wish to fight *anyone*. On the contrary, we yearn to bring liberation to both the oppressed and the oppressor. As Paulo Freire wrote:

*"The oppressor cannot find in their power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only the power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both."*

For us as Vincentians, we are urged by Frederic to consider the following wisdom:

*"You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis. You must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of long term improvement."*

This is why we are urgently required to familiarise ourselves with the reasons for so much unnecessary suffering and degradation across our world. We are in the world to change the world.

When we speak about social justice we go to the heart of what the St Vincent de Paul Society stands for. As we are bidden by the Book of Proverbs (31:8-9):

*"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, protect the rights of those who are helpless. Speak out and pronounce a sentence of justice, defend the cause of the wretched and the poor."*

We are called, as Vincentians, to feed, clothe, house and assist our brothers and sisters who are forced onto the margins of society.

We are also called to ask why they are left out and pushed out.

As Frederic said:

*"Charity is the oil being poured on the wounded traveller. But it is the role of justice to prevent the attack."*

So how can we join with the poor in meaningful solidarity and companionship to prevent the attack?

As Professor Ian Webster, a highly regarded physician who has had a long and generous relationship with the Society, put it so well at one of our recent Congresses in Australia: "Poverty... is an oppression from which we should aim to liberate our people."

The God of the Bible is a God who liberates, a God who takes the side of the poor and oppressed, a God who joins the poor in their struggle for dignity.

As Jesus proclaimed, when he read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, in the synagogue in Nazareth:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; release for captives, recovery of sight to the blind, liberation for the oppressed."*

The Rule tells us that: “The Society helps the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves. When they cannot, the Society must speak on behalf of those who are ignored.”

My sisters and brothers, do we fulfil this requirement of the Rule? Do we create the space and provide the resources and support so that marginalised people can speak for themselves? Failing this, do we even speak up strongly enough on their behalf? Are we a voice of the voiceless?

Or to put the question another way: are we obedient enough to the poor; do we listen enough to the poor; do we learn enough from the poor, so as to be able to speak for them and, more powerfully, create the opportunities for them to speak for themselves?

You are no doubt familiar with the wonderful 17<sup>th</sup> century story of Don Quixote by the Spaniard Miguel de Cervantes. Don Quixote seems sometimes to be an accurate caricature of what we do when we dream like this of a more just and egalitarian world. He is depicted as a deluded dreamer believing himself to be a knight running around, on Rocinante, his skinny horse, trying to be chivalrous while everyone laughs at him. You will also remember from this famous and beautiful story, however, that Don Quixote is not alone. He is, of course, accompanied by the ever-faithful, and ever-practical, Sancho Panza.

The Indigenous people of Brazil have a wonderful saying that:

*“When we dream alone it is only a dream but when we dream together it is the beginning of reality.”*

We need the idealism of a Don Quixote, the dreamer, as well as the pragmatism of a Sancho Panza. This is the dreaming together, and taking action together, that will be the beginning of a new reality in partnership with the marginalised and despised of the world. This will ensure that we truly fight the Goliath of injustice and inequality, even if we only have the humble sling of David at our disposal.

In the words of Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet:

*“Rise up with me against the organisation of misery.”*

I would like to leave you with the powerful words that St Paul wrote, describing Abraham, who believed, against all odds, in the promise that was made to him.

*“Against all hope he believed in hope.”*

May we make these words our own. And may we transform them into actions.

I believe that the most important stage in the history of humanity is beginning now. It is not too late to turn the globalised polarization of wealth and misery into a globalization of compassion, of social equality, of human solidarity, of holy tenderness.

Together then let us listen to, and heed, the wisdom of Lilla Watson, an Australian Aboriginal Activist, who wrote:

*“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”*