

# **The Excluded and Unknown**

## **Our Struggle for Social Justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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

My dear sisters and brothers, it is a joy to be here with you. I thank you for your kind invitation to share some thoughts with you on the centrality of social justice to our shared mission of love.

Some describe the St Vincent de Paul Society as an organisation or an institution. These descriptions can never do justice to who we are.

I would like to put it to you today that we are not a static organisation.

We are *movement*.

How else could you describe this great mass of people across the globe who participate actively in the ministry of justice and compassion?

We are not *only* a movement, however. We are a *progressive social* movement. We are committed to social change to create a more just and compassionate human society. We are, however, not just a progressive social movement. We are a *spiritual* movement. We are profoundly moved by the imperatives of the Gospel. We are deeply moved by our greatest treasure.

And what is our greatest treasure?

It is this: that we recognise the Real Presence of Christ in our marginalized sisters and brothers who are not only disadvantaged but also demonised and despised.

Our vision is one that is completely at odds with the values of the world. Those who are despised and called wretched and damned are, for us, those that will be blessed. In the provocative words of Christ:

*“Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God...  
But woe to you who are rich for you have received your consolation.”* (Luke 6:20,24)

We are often angered by the way in which our brothers and sisters are pushed to the edges of society. I am especially angered when people in power blame the poor for their poverty. We have recently had a situation in Australia where a Leader of a major political party said that there was little that could be done by governments to address homelessness because people choose to be homeless and you can't stop them from making bad choices. The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia, of course, was duty-bound to publicly refute this falsehood in the name of all that we hold sacred.

We refute these lies because we refuse to accept that poverty is something that we should accept. We believe that governments have an obligation to use all the means at their disposal not only to provide all the essential social services to people but also to take the necessary steps to prevent exclusion and poverty in the first place.

While we are committed to providing charitable assistance and while no work of charity is foreign to the Society, we must not perpetuate the situation where people have no alternative but to rely on

charity. We must, following the injunctions of our founder, Frederic, study the actual causes of poverty and oppression in order to prevent them rather than just attending to their consequences after the fact. Frederic put this to us very powerfully when he wrote that: “

*Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is justice's role to prevent the attack.”*

We are, at heart, a people of hope. We reject what the former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, said when she defended the negative impacts of unbridled globalised markets saying “*There Is No Alternative*”, a principle that has been shortened into the acronym “TINA”. We believe passionately that there is an alternative.

God has intervened in human history through the Incarnation. God has pitched a tent amongst us, to quote the Gospel of John.

This incredible reality, presented to us in the vulnerable Christ-child born on the edges of Bethlehem, is a whisper from the edge that another kind of world is possible.

And this is why we are a people of hope. This is why we believe that another kind of society is not only possible, but absolutely necessary if we are to ensure that our sisters and brothers are no longer locked out of the prosperity that is enjoyed by the world's minority.

Augustine of Hippo once wrote that:

*“Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the way things are and courage to make sure that they do not remain the way they are.”*

We are right to feel angry at the oppression of the poor. In fact we are not alone in thundering against oppressive structures. Listen to the mighty Prophet Isaiah:

*“Woe betide those who enact unjust laws and draft oppressive legislation, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, plundering the widow and despoiling the fatherless.” (Is 10:1-3)*

We are also right to seize on whatever courage we can muster. To have courage is, literally, “to take heart”.

But we are called to resist the temptation of staying with our anger. If we are to really take heart and if we are really to make hope a reality then we must commit ourselves to carrying at least a few grains of sand to the building site of new society, the building site of love. We recall the beautiful words of Blessed Frederic Ozanam in this respect:

*“All my life I have followed the poetry of love in preference to the poetry of anger.”*

I believe that that the poetry of love that Frederic embraced, that Frederic spoke, that Frederic followed, is simply the poetry of compassion, the social poetry of social justice. Why a *social* poetry? Why a *social* justice? Because we are called to immerse our lives in the heart of the social. This is where the poor and marginalised are made. This is where the poor and marginalised are struggling for a new society. This is where, in the words of St Vincent de Paul, “we seek, and find, our God.”

As a forward-looking progressive social movement we cannot afford to draw our poetry from the past. No; we must look to the future. We must draw our poetry from the future. This is where we will more accurately hear the music of what is happening now. It serves no purpose to hanker after a past that is gone. The solutions to poverty and social and economic inequality lie in a future that is radically different not only to the present but the past.

Because we choose to stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers who have been pushed to the edge we come face to face with degradation and yet we are driven by a seemingly hopeless hope.

As Paul of Tarsus said of Abraham, a man remembered by three world religions for both his experience of homelessness and his audacity as a builder of a new society: “*Against all hope he believed in hope.*” (Romans 4:18)

Remember those beautiful words in the Magnificat, uttered by a young girl who had just found out she was pregnant?

*“He has pulled down the mighty from their thrones  
And raised up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
But the rich he has sent away empty.”* (Luke 1:52-53)

This is the hope we are called to embrace.

But we must be realistic. As Paulo Freire, the great educational theorist and developer of mass literacy campaigns with the poor of Brazil, points out, we must engage in a prophetic denunciation of the bad news in order to engage in a prophetic annunciation of the good news.

The good news is that another kind of society is possible.

Freire also wrote:

*“The oppressor cannot find in their power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves.*

*Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both.”*

I believe with all my heart that it is the oppressed of the world who have the most to teach us. When we assist our brothers and sisters; when we stand in solidarity with them, they entrust to us their collective pain, their dreams, their sacred stories, their collective yearnings that another kind of world is possible.

The church has, I am sad to say, been guilty of sometimes assuring them that the only other world that is possible is the one that comes after death, thereby discouraging any kind of struggle for social justice.

When some years ago, the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia was accused of being communist because we dared to ask questions about the causes of poverty and inequality, we were able to quote those beautiful words of the Archbishop, Helder Camara, a man who was educated in the realities of exclusion by the marginalised in the North-East of Brazil:

*“When I give bread to the poor, people call me a saint. But when I ask why they have no bread, people call me a communist.”*

What were we doing? What is it we still strive to do? We are trying to follow the imperative of the scriptures:

*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.”*  
(Proverbs 31:8-9)

This, my friends, is what I believe we are called to. We are called to be signs of an alternative hope, a hope that another kind of society is possible. We cannot help but listen to the whispers from the edges of society, the whispers of hope that give birth to both our anger and our courage.

We are called to dream the possible in the face of the nightmares that plague the lives of our sisters and brothers across the globe. But our dreams are of little value if we approach this enormous mission merely as individuals. This is why we are blessed indeed to be part of a living movement in the St Vincent de Paul Society.

As the Indigenous Brazilian proverb reminds us:

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

We do not need to look far to find the people who are left out or pushed out. We do not need to go far to discover the fruits of the structures of dispossession and exploitation. The forgotten ones, the excluded ones, are here. There are right here, where it hurts.

The God we seek in them; the God we find in them; this God is a God who does not stand on the sidelines as a neutral observer. This God, the God of the scriptures, is a God who takes sides, a God who is unequivocally on the side of the poor.

Those who hold the reins of political and economic power in the prosperous industrialised world seek consolation in setting Christ's poor apart, literally pushing them to the margins on the basis of false moralizing discourses that blame them and paint them as lazy and dysfunctional. The truth is that they are actually set apart by the inequality of resources allocated to them by our society.

An extraordinary story emerged last year from Japan about a man who was experiencing long-term homelessness and who was regularly sending the most exquisite poems, written in strict accordance with traditional rules of composition, to a popular newspaper.

His poetry is indeed as beautiful as it is incisive in its social analysis:

*“Used to living without keys,  
I see through the New Year.  
Of what else must I rid myself?”*

The newspaper to which he had been sending his poetry asked him, through their pages, to make himself known, if only so that they could pay him.

He wrote back to them:

*“I am touched by your kindness, but presently lack the courage to make contact.”*

I wish to reflect with you about this story, especially through the prism of this man’s poem and letter.

Of course, there is absolutely nothing extraordinary about a person experiencing homelessness producing great poetry. Quite the contrary!

I recall, a couple of years ago, being interviewed by an Australian Television Programme on the issue of homelessness because there was a sense of shock and surprise about a story reported the day before in the press about a person experiencing homelessness providing excellent medical assistance to someone and then disappearing as the ambulance turned up. Such surprise can only be explained by the strongly ingrained presupposition that anyone experiencing homelessness must be completely lacking in any kinds of skills; that their entire being, history and function is captured by the term “homeless”. Quite the contrary!

I have chosen to frame this reflection under the title, “the excluded and unknown” for two reasons:

Firstly, because I wish to emphasise that social, economic and political exclusion is a systematic action that is done to people. It is not something that people simply happen into by means of bad luck, bad choices or bad karma. It is, to be sure, manifested in individual lives. It is, in every case, a unique intersection between personal narrative and the axes of history and structure.

Secondly, because while there may be a dominant discourse on the existence and persistence of exclusion it is a discourse that fundamentally un-knows the people, especially in terms of their collision with unjust structures and de-humanizing histories. It is this un-knowing that leads to the much-vaunted belief that the term “homeless” captures the entirety of a person’s story and that, therefore, they are denied the multi-dimensionality that apparently comes as a class-privilege to others in society.

Let us return to the beautiful words of our unknown Japanese poet:

*“Used to living without keys,  
I see through the New Year.  
Of what else must I rid myself?”*

In these three dense lines he provides us with a miraculous window into his exclusion. He teaches us that dispossession is literally imposed on him as a material, and therefore, spiritual reality. It is the chief social relation that he is subjected to. Contrary to the dominant discourse in which the person experiencing homelessness is at the same time blamed for their marginalisation and then denied any agency in determining their lives he is extremely aware of himself as a living ensemble of social relations in a specific historical context.

There is, of course, no solution to any social problem except one that follows from the very conditions of the problem. Approaches to social exclusion that are derived from a magisterial view of a purported moral underclass are destined to deliver the possibility of compliance but never the reality of social justice.

In the achingly beautiful novel, *A Sun for the Dying*, by Jean-Claude Izzo, a late 20<sup>th</sup> century French writer remembered primarily as an exponent of Mediterranean Noir, we find a rich and complex narrative of the social relations of structural exclusion and demonization in Marseilles. Before sharing a brief passage from this profoundly human book I have to recall with you one scene in which the main character describes his feelings of rage about a St Vincent de Paul soup kitchen in which people are aware that they will receive favourable treatment at mealtime if they first subject themselves to a gruelling hour of being preached at by the priest.

This imposition of religiosity is really no different to the other forms of moral imposition by the market and by the state acting on behalf of ruling interests. The mistake made by all of these apparatuses, however, is that they imagine that any form of compliance means that the battle has been won; that the real story has been erased, that the heart, the mind and the body have been conformed to the will of the powerful. The soup kitchen scene is a potent example of this myth, but you do not need to go into the soup kitchen to know this power relation. Neither do you need to experience homelessness. It is institutionalised and morally embedded. When any of us experience it we either seek to flee its significance or we engage with it, both personally and as a collective social reality that cries out to be subjected to a ruthless critique.

In the heart of these contradictions, however, lies the most powerful potential for love, fought for, like all things worth fighting for, under the guiding stars of struggle and hope.

Izzo puts it this way in describing his narrator’s feelings for another person on the margins of society:

*“He was thinking of another kind of fraternity. The kind that unites somewhere between rage and despair, those who have been rejected. Excluded. That, anyway, was the kind of closeness I experienced with him. Like father and son.”*

As I read this book for the first time early last year I remember feeling that it was bursting at the seams with sadness and recognition.

Sadness is important as a way of engagement with social inequality and injustice, especially when this sadness translates not into condescending pity or powerlessness but rather firms up into shame. The people who are discarded by society are the ones who are made to feel ashamed. But I put it to you that the shame is not theirs. It is ours. It is ours if we persist in failing to recognise our sisters and brothers and failing to correctly analyse the structural and historical causes of their marginalisation and exclusion.

Italian theorist, Domenico Losurdo has brilliantly observed that “Democracy cannot be defined by abstracting the fate of the excluded.”

It was Frantz Fanon who reminded us nearly 50 years ago:

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

We have been shaken to pieces by this question.

If wealth is correctly understood here as access to appropriate housing, health, education, childcare, transport, employment, social security and wholeness I would simply add that, in order to achieve this, there must be a massive redistribution of hope along with the redistribution of wealth.

I will never forget the first time I read the poem by Tomas Borge, a former Minister of Justice in the Nicaraguan Government. His wife had been raped and murdered before his eyes by the military regime he had fought against. In *Christianity and Revolution\** he tells us:

"After having been brutally tortured as a prisoner, after having a hood placed over my head for nine months, after having been handcuffed for seven months, I remember that when we captured these torturers I told them: 'The hour of my revenge has come: we will not do you even the slightest harm. You did not believe us beforehand; now you will believe us.' That is our philosophy, our way of being."

He then produced what I think are some of the most memorable lines of poetry in human history. A poem called *Mi Venganza personal (My personal Revenge)*, addressed to his torturers. He wrote:

*“I will be revenged upon your children when they’ve the right to schooling and to flowers....  
On that day I’ll greet you with ‘Good morning!’ and the streets will have no beggars left to haunt us....  
I will be revenged upon you, brother, when I give you these hands, which once you tore and tortured, without the strength to rob them of their tenderness”*

A redistribution of hope is not happening quickly enough as we begin the twenty first century. We are, however, witnessing the emergence of a new reality in which people are truly beginning to be united in their experience of exclusion along with those who stand in solidarity with them.

You are all no doubt familiar with the passage in the gospel of Matthew that depicts Jesus as the good shepherd:

“...when he saw the multitudes he was moved to compassion for them, because they were distressed and scattered like sheep without a shepherd.”

The phrase in ancient Greek for “being moved to compassion” is actually closer to the image of “tugging at the gut”.

This should resonate strongly for us. Are we not similarly moved, indeed are our stomachs not churned at times because we feel so strongly the injustice and indignity suffered by our sisters and brothers as a result of oppressive structures?

Do we not tremble with indignation at the hurt and injustice suffered by others?

Let us return to the passage from Matthew. The people are described as being distressed and scattered. We know from our first-hand experience of the human face of poverty that this sense of alienation, this crushing of the spirit, is central to marginalisation. People feel, especially in times of global prosperity; that they are devalued, left on the scrap-heap, and, worst of all, atomized, on their own.

The devaluation of the people is of incomparably greater significance than the devaluation of a currency. Yet more attention is paid to the latter than the former.

People are pulled apart by social and economic structures that de-humanize, that compartmentalize, that destroy, that humiliate, that blame. People are made to feel that lives are worth little, that their position at the bottom of the heap completely excludes and effectively disempowers them.

Throughout the early Hebrew narratives of the developing relationship between the people and their God we read the repeated reminder of identity:

*“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”* (Deut 5:6, Exod 20:2)

The God of these former slaves was identified not in terms of a static identity but in terms of a relationship based on *doing*. The action that was highlighted as an identifier of this relationship was the act of *liberation*. Intrinsic to this act of liberation was both an urgent love and a passion for justice.

This is so beautifully expressed in that precursor of the Magnificat, The Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:8): “He raises the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap.”

To paraphrase the Gospel injunction, we are bound to tremble with indignation at every injustice committed against our brothers and sisters, especially those who are regarded as being the least important in society.

This tradition of compassion and liberation gave birth to the St Vincent de Paul Society in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. It is more than a school of thought; it is a way of living whereby one’s life becomes a response to the question so poignantly posed by the Nobel Prize-winning poet and advocate Pablo Neruda:

*“Who loved the lost? Who protected the last?”*

Flowing from this poignant question I would like to pose four questions for our workshops as a catalyst for Vincentian action:

1. Do we allow charity to be a substitute for justice?
2. How can we, as a global movement, assert a global presence in addressing the causes of poverty and inequality?
3. How can we better hold national governments accountable for building a just society?
4. What steps can we take to analyse how our marginalised sisters and brothers see us?

These are hard questions. But we must ask hard questions if we are to embrace the future with confidence.

I would like to end on a note of hope. I will leave you, therefore, with the prophetic words of the poet, Pablo Neruda on our shared dream of a just and compassionate society:

*“We will win.  
Although you don’t believe it,  
we will win.”*