

By Dr Andy Marks

andy.marks@vinnies.org.au

21 December 2009

Celebrating diversity is the key to achieving a singular vision of social justice



The young man weaved his way through the clamour. Another mob of agitated people had gathered in the city square to hear a rousing chorus of spirited political speeches.

This sight had been increasingly common in recent times. Less than three months ago, parliament had been dissolved and the elected government overthrown. It seemed as though everything was on the brink.

As the young man crossed the square and entered the gates of the university, his startled young friend greeted him. "I'm glad to see you. I heard shouts and gunshots outside my window all night! Do you know what's happening?"

Less than three months ago, parliament had been dissolved and the elected government overthrown. It seemed as though everything was on the brink.

"I'm not sure", replied the young man. Deep inside, however, he knew the need for change had come. Indeed, the momentum for change was so powerful he felt apprehensive as to what it might bring, yet he was convinced some kind of positive change was needed.



St Vincent de Paul Society
NSW
good works





Seeking to make sense of the growing chaos enveloping the city, the young man and his Catholic student friends formed a debating group. Focussing on the turning points of history, the group were convinced they could find solutions to the modern travails engulfing them.

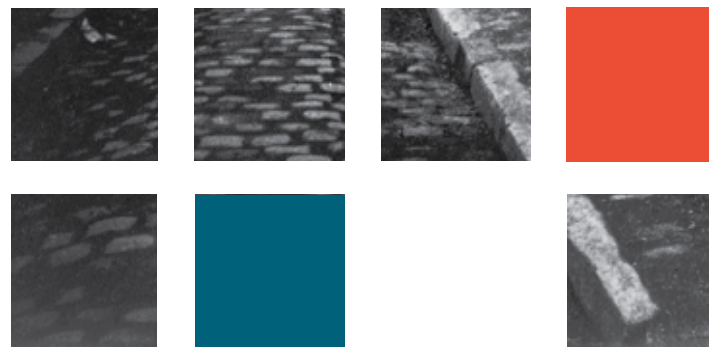
Philosophers, anarchists and devotees of a range of political systems took advantage of the group's open forums, joining in the discussion. Soon rational conversations descended into a dissent ridden cacophony little different to that which was occurring outside on the streets.

As news of the debating group's meetings spread, the once small meetings became tumultuous, crowded affairs. At one such meeting, the young man sat quietly among the throng of intellectual combatants watching as they clinically apportioned blame for all of the social and political inequalities they saw around them. Waiting patiently for his chance to take the floor and present his views, he calmly arose.

Striving to bring a Christian perspective to the divisive vitriol that filled the room, the young man declared, "The Church of Christ teaches us that the rich are but stewards of their wealth for the Supreme Owner God, and that in giving to the needy, those who have more than they require are making a just return to God."

The young man went on to talk about the extensive, yet little recognised work church orders conducted around the city in aid of the poor. Much of this work was done in secret, without the knowledge of the general public or the sanction of the authorities.

As is common among students of any era, the more rambunctious of those assembled at the debate were not satisfied by the young man's account. "You put all the burden of relief for the poor on your religious orders – then you wash your hands of the job! Tell us, what are you doing for the poor, you and your fellow Catholics in this room?"



"You put all the burden of relief for the poor on your religious orders – then you wash your hands of the job!"

"Just how charitable are you?" added a particularly provocative young student. "Come! Show us your good works!" With this challenge in mind, the young man in question, nineteen year-old Frederic Ozanam walked away from the meeting, convinced of what he must do. He rallied his companions from the debating group, the Conference of History, and together they developed the principles, mission and vocation of a little work of charity that would go on to be known as the St Vincent de Paul Society.





Just as Frederic recognised the importance of history, the manner in which the Society was conceived is of critical significance to understanding its position in the world today. Frederic's willingness to challenge and, more importantly, be challenged about the inequities and injustices he saw around him shows how a yearning for social justice and Christ's liberating love became the driving force behind the formation, growth and sustainability of the Society.

"It is the struggle between those who have too much and those in poverty which is shaking the ground beneath our feet. Our duty as Christians is to throw ourselves between those two camps."

It is perhaps no coincidence that the Society was forged in the wake of the "July Revolution" that swept through France in the early 1830s. This era of intense political and social upheaval ushered in a heightened level of awareness of the gross inequities and injustices that accompanied newly industrialised Europe.

Frederic and his companions found it impossible to reconcile the poverty they witnessed in the tenements and slums of Paris with the materialistic verve of the city's bankers and industrialists. In fact, it is precisely between these vastly different sectors of the community that he positioned the Society.

"It is the struggle between those who have too much and those in poverty which is shaking the ground beneath our feet", wrote Frederic. "Our duty as Christians is to throw ourselves between those two camps." Right from the outset, he was clear as to where the Society should be and what role it should take.

For Frederic, the act of giving assistance would not only be a social gesture, it would also be an act of justice. The two could never be separated. With this in mind we can begin to see how, in accordance with Frederic's vision, social justice is enacted wherever the Society serves the poor, regardless of how big or small that act of service may appear.





While social justice is embedded in everything the St Vincent de Paul Society does, it is difficult to find two members of the Society who share an exact opinion of what constitutes social justice. This needn't be a source of concern. In fact, it is this very spirit of challenge, inquiry and renewal that Frederic championed through his formation of a debating group; a group not just confined to Catholic opinions but concertedly open to ecumenical and secular voices as well.

“One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.”

Frederic never set out to provide all of the answers. Indeed, as we have seen, without the dissenting voices and the robust challenges of others, the Society would never have come into existence. So too today, Vincentians are aware that social justice is a highly contested and subjective term.

Look at any issue that provokes passion and fervour you will find advocates of opposing positions proclaiming to be on the side of social justice. The adage,

“one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter” is readily be applied to conflicting interpretations of social justice. It is only when we apply guiding principles based on various shared understanding to social justice that we begin to see key identifying themes emerge.

Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” It is difficult to find anybody who would outwardly reject this social justice statement, yet it is a principle in breach constantly throughout the world.

While the goals of social justice may not be readily attainable, they must be relentlessly pursued. This is a principle to which Frederic adhered. As a scholar, Frederic knew that one of the best ways to challenge injustice was to expose it. He was also wise enough to understand that research played a critical role in achieving social justice. “Two things may be demanded from a scholar”, said Frederic. “Firstly, that his belief shall be independent and intelligent, and Christianity requires no less. Secondly, that the desire to justify a conclusion shall not induce him to distort facts in order to produce the desired proof.” It is this spirit, and the commitment to “help the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves”, that continues to shape the Society's research and advocacy work today.





With so many complex and entrenched structures of injustice in existence in the world today and within our own communities, how can Vincentians enact Frederic's vision? The tenets of Catholic Social Teaching provide a pro-active and spiritually orientating guide to social justice issues. Its references to human dignity, common good, government, economics, participation and solidarity can be found in comparable secular statements, yet the Catholic articulation of these principles promotes a uniquely compelling moral, spiritual and ethical compulsion to act.

When seeking to locate and pro-actively respond to social justice issues as they occur in the course of their work, Vincentians may choose to adopt two different yet closely entwined views; the 'up-close' perspective and the 'broad perspective'.

It is difficult to find two members of the Society who share an exact opinion of what constitutes social justice.

Regarding the 'up-close' perspective, The Rule states, "The distinctive approach of Vincentians to issues of social justice is to see them from the perspective of those we visit who suffer from injustice." This means attempting to fully understand the personal impact of poverty on the people we serve. It is also critical Vincentians draw on experience yet remain open and non-judgemental, always asking themselves, "what is the person I'm listening to going through?" Adopting the 'up-close' perspective requires a heightened focus on listening, empathy, sharing experiences and reflecting on what we have encountered.

The Rule also encapsulates the fundamentals of the 'broad' perspective of social justice. "Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements." By standing back and examining the wider causes of poverty, members can actively engage in this form of social justice. In adopting the 'broad' view, Vincentians attempt to identify the causal aspects of the situations they encounter. They ask whether particular patterns or trends of poverty and disadvantage are developing in their area why certain changes may be occurring.





These days, much of the St Vincent de Paul Society's broad scale work in social justice is conducted through structured research and advocacy programs, but it will always remain the domain of members, those who see it most lucidly. As Frederic said, "The knowledge of social well-being and reform is not to be learned from books, nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to a poor man's garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, and sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind." This is the vision that Frederic had in his mind that morning he walked through the tumultuous streets of Paris reflecting on the poverty and upheaval he had seen. It is also the calling to draw nearer to Christ that he couldn't ignore **SI**