FAITH

Faith is the rose
that neither fades nor loses
its fragrance.
All things pale in the face
of its beauty,
as all things pale in the face
of its creator,
the Lord Jesus Christ.
Richard Cusack

TWO DETENTION POEMS

YOUSUF’S ARRIVAL

A pillar of cloud by day,
a pillar of fire by night,
it bore the face of Baal,
with its pumps and pipes,
its carrion smell.
In our stream each morning,
fish floated, faces up.
In our town we fought the alien god.
When the minions of the moneyed king
arrived to bomb and shoot and rape,
I was away from home.
Next day upon the oily stream
I found my mother and my father,
faces upturned, floating.
My wife, my little children, I did not find.
Some said they had left town,
others that they too had died.
I sought but did not find them.
No home, no safety there:
I have come to ask your hospitality.
Can you see in my eyes
the pillar of cloud by day,
the pillar of fire by night?
Sleepless I lie in your unpromising land.

YACOUB’S DEPORTATION

Jacob worked for seven years
to win his Rachel,
and they seemed to him but as a day
because his love was great.
I too have dragged out seven years,
not working,
but worked over
by idleness, by fear, by distance,
waiting for a wall to crack.
My Rachel
withered in the long summer heat
and like an autumn leaf,
was shaken
and taken on the wind.
Now I must leave,
despatched to a land no longer my own
whose words I do not speak,
and start a life where longing has died.
A voice is heard in Ramah:
the voice of Rachel weeping for her children.
She will not be comforted,
for they will be no more.

Andy Hamilton SJ
MEMBERS OF THE ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY, IN THEIR PRIVILEGED vocation, are asked to enter into a world where the poor are our masters. Our service is focused on home visitation, where we each ask of those in need or crisis what it is that they need, not apply a prescriptive formula of welfare.

Our Society members’ focus must always be on our mission to the needy. We must not be distracted by power or “fiddlers on the roof” dialectics on the Rule. The Society Rule is the golden guide and spirit through which we work; it should not be downgraded by subjective interpretations. The story of Martha and Mary in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 10:38–42) mirrors our Society’s radical notion of discipleship and mission. We see in Mary a woman who breaks with the culture and expectations of her time, although still within the spirit, in her radical discipleship. Martha, on the other hand, cannot move outside the letter of the law and let spirit achieve positive results.

We need money for carrying out our work, but it can never become something that overshadows our mission. Money does not do the work – our Conference members do. Our programs reflecting the love of Christ require no money. They call for the wellbeing of all members of the community, including the poor, the sick and children. We are challenged as Conference members to achieve this.

Conference meetings are “for better or worse”. Almost all of us have experienced that there are some that we find fruitful and others that we would be happy to forget about. Meetings can be a time of grace or a time when grace is threatened. When there is no listening, meetings can create strife and division. They disrupt, rather than unify.

There is a challenge for us all to make each meeting fruitful. ◆

**NO FIDDLERS ON OUR ROOF**

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**HOLY HUMANITY: THE LEGACY OF LOUISE DE MARILLAC**

Forthcoming book by Dr John Honner

THE CATALYST FOR THIS SMALL BOOK WAS THE DESIRE OF THE National Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society, on behalf of its 40,000 members and volunteers, to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the deaths of St Louise de Marillac and St Vincent de Paul.

In these times, we give great honour and praise to our heroes in all fields of sport. These two saints are our heroes, as they inspire our vocation as servants of the poor.

In our work, the St Vincent de Paul Society honours everyone, regardless of creed or race: the poor because they are the loved of Jesus Christ and our masters; the general community because they provide us with the means to do good for the poor.

I thank Dr John Honner, the author, for his diligent research and the lucid prose of the text. The book is an invitation to all who read it to be generous and courteous to the poor and marginalised. They are the masters of us all.

*Holy Humanity: The Legacy of Louise de Marillac* is currently being printed and will be available by mid October. Dr Honner is also the author of *Love and Politics: The Revolutionary Frederick Ozanam* (David Lovell Publishing, 2007.) ◆
By Stephanie Puls

IT WAS ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO THAT Tony Tome, now Victoria State President, was “tapped on the shoulder” to join the Donvale conference. Having retired after 40 years working in the wool industry, Tony knew he’d need something to occupy his time and mind, realising with a chuckle that “there’s only so many rounds of golf you can play to ruin a good walk.”

Motivated also by a desire to contribute to the community, Tony accepted the invitation and, before long, was Regional President for Ringwood. Following time as Eastern Central Council President, Tony then became Deputy State President in April 2006 and State President in March this year.

In his early days as a conference member, Tony’s eyes were opened to the breadth of the problems faced by people less fortunate than he and his family.

“I’d heard about it but until you really see the extent of the problem, you don’t realise just how tough so many people are finding it to get by,” he said.

Memories of a South Melbourne boarding house, including a vision of a group of men sitting together, drinking beer at 9am, and of families with literally nothing in the fridge, have stuck with Tony and serve as a reminder of the great need for the work of the Society.

Looking ahead to the future of the Society in Victoria, Tony sees a challenge in recruiting more conference members aged in their 30s, 40s and 50s.

“It’s that gap where we start to lose people. But it’s difficult because it’s a time when people are raising families and establishing careers,” he said. “They’re still there but we’ve just got to find better ways of engaging them.”

Extending, where appropriate, the trading hours of Vinnies Centres is one of Tony’s goals: “Aside from making welfare more accessible, it will spread the costs of running the Centres and thus increasing the surplus available for welfare use.”

“...until you really see the extent of the problem, you don’t realise just how tough so many people are finding it to get by.”

Broadening the advocacy work of the organisation is a project about which Tony is also passionate. “I’d like us to have more contact with government so we’re in a better position to lobby,” he said.

“Being a greater advocate for the disadvantaged people we work with, on a more strategic level, will help in the long term. We need to have a good rapport with the decision-makers so that they understand what we do and how we can work together to improve the situation for disadvantaged Victorians.”

In his short time as State President, Tony is enjoying getting out and about, meeting with members and volunteers. “Seeing their dedication, the amount of time and effort they put in, it’s just amazing. There’s a tremendous increase in the numbers we’re seeing. Keeping up with demand is a challenge but our people on the ground get the job done, it’s a great credit to them.”

As he awaits the birth of his ninth grandchild, Tony reflects on his family and their support of his work at the Society. “The kids understand why I do it. They don’t say too much but I know they’re glad I do it. And I think my wife’s just happy to have me out of her hair,” he laughs. “Things have fallen into place for us, so I guess it’s a bit of ‘there but for the grace of God go I’.”

And when the challenges occasionally feel insurmountable, it’s the dedication of members and volunteers that encourages Tony to ‘keep the faith’.

“It’s amazing work they’re doing. From conference members, to board and committee members, to Vinnies Centre volunteers, the list goes on. Looking at the big picture reminds me that I’m part of something very special.”

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Tony Tome
THE MARK OF EXTREME POVERTY is hunger and malnutrition. This occurs in Australia, but it is homelessness that is the universal mark of Australian poverty.

In Oliver Goldsmith’s poem, *The Deserted Village*, written in 1770, he writes, “Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, where welfare accumulates, and men decay.”

The theme was taken up by Tony Judt, late Professor at New York University, who gave a fine talk in New York in October last year, despite being desperately disabled with a motor neuron disorder at the time. (The address was broadcast in Australia on ABC Radio National.)

A remarkable book of his had just been published, which examined the way societies had lost sight of justice, fairness and the public good. The book’s title, *Ill Fares The Land*, came from Oliver Goldsmith’s poem and is a sentiment very relevant to Australia.

Among the many letters Professor Judt received, one from a young colleague was most telling: “What is most striking”, she wrote, “about what you say, is not so much the substance, but the form: you speak of being angry at our politicians’ quiescence; you write of the need to dissent from our economically driven way of thinking, the urgency of a return to an ethical informed public conversation. No one talks like this anymore.”

Charles Birch, who was Challis Professor of Biology at Sydney University, died last year, not long after his book, *Science and Soul*, was published. He reflected on his research in ecology and biology and the interactions he had had with philosophers and theologians. He was part of an international United Nations group that coined the idea of “ecological sustainability”. Significantly for the theme of working for the public good was his view that today there are few challenging theologians and philosophers with which to engage in public discussion and dialogue.

The 1988 Nobel Laureate for Economics, Amartya Sen, writes about justice, fairness and the place of reason. In *The Idea of Justice*, he contrasts two forms of justice: transcendental institutional justice, a high-level concept, with the form of justice acted out in the lives of people.

To a physician, this is something like the rules and principles of medicine: the treatment protocol versus the clinical decisions of doctors and nurses made in social predicaments in which they work, or the doctrines and dogmas of the Church compared with the imperatives of practical responses at the time and place of suffering.

It can be said that this is where the activities of the St Vincent de Paul Society are to be found: at the frontline of justice, assessing and responding...
to the capabilities of individuals and communities.

This is the path I want to take in this talk. This is where I will start and finish. Thomas Carlyle said, “Do not look to the far distant future, but do that which is clearly at hand.” I was affected by this statement when, as a 13-year-old, the local doctor gave me Sir William Osler’s book “Aequanimita: with other addresses” to read. (Osler is regarded as the father of modern clinical medicine.) In the frontispiece of the book was that statement from Thomas Carlyle.

The late Rev. Ted Noffs, of the Wayside Chapel in King’s Cross, had painted in huge letters around the walls of the Little Theatre: “If not now, when? If not you, who? If not here, where?”

This is the immediacy, place and practicality of Vinnies.

STRANGERS

Societies have always been uncomfortable about strangers – the vagabond, the homeless person, the rootless person. In the Middle Ages, a vagabond could be taken before a justice and be branded and enslaved and, if the person ran away repeatedly, put to death. Not so these days, but we nevertheless create barriers and obstacles to their lives within the community.

There are many strangers: refugees, asylum seekers, disabled and mentally ill people and the homeless. These are the groups for which Vinnies advocates and for whom the Society provides care and support.

MELBOURNE’S HOMELESS

In the 1960s, among young people in Melbourne, there was ferment about the marginalised and dispossessed: we would speak of “getting into the gutter” with them.

Alan Jordan, who tutored us in biology, to our astonishment disappeared from our network; we wondered what had happened to him. Later, we learnt he had gone off to live among homeless people. During that time, Alan compiled 1100 case histories of homeless men. He studied the circumstances of death on skid row, the case histories of alcohol-dependent patients at St Vincent’s Hospital, undertook a four-year follow-up of hospital records, examined coroners’ reports and the histories of 67 men brought up in state homes.

This work became a thesis for a higher degree at Latrobe University in Victoria and some years later, Alan Jordan was asked to look back on that work in the context of how Melbourne had responded to homelessness from the time of its foundation.

LOOKING BACK

In looking back, there was the initial response of the charities. At that time, Australia was determined not to repeat the pattern of the “poor house” and “work house” of Britain. The Victorian Government introduced the Inebriate’s Act and its associated institutions at the end of the 19th century, it ran soup kitchens in the Depression and, in recent years, it has subsidised the work of religious organisations and charities, as has the Commonwealth Government.

Over the years, I have marvelled at the asylum accorded the uncared for at Matthew Talbot: no ticket, no ID, no Medicare is needed – you are accepted for who you are.

WHY IS IT SO?

As Julius Sumner-Miller would say, “Why is it so?”

Anyone who gives half a thought to homelessness must ponder this question. In every homeless person the reasons are evident; the life story, the events speak for themselves. The homeless are working-class people for whom life chances have stacked up against them – in childhood, education, work, and in the ability to establish significant and continuing personal relationships. No society is without its marginalised people, its outcasts and strangers. Across the world, “skid row” is replicated with unnerving consistency.

The belief that “strangers” should be accepted and supported is a test of the good of society, for at some time we are all “strangers”. Such is the ethos of the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

MATTHEW TALBOT AND THE CLINIC

The Matthew Talbot clinic in Woolloomooloo, Sydney, has been my window into this world.

The medical clinic started in 1976, about the time of the Commonwealth’s Inquiry into Poverty in Australia. This was a time when some groups in Sydney, concerned with the conditions of Sydney’s homeless, decided to take concerted action. They were:
The Community Health and Anti Tuberculosis Association
Dr Charles Blower, a general practitioner from Windsor and Medical Superintendent of Sydney Hospital
Mental health workers and community psychiatrists from the Health Commission, which had at that time a homeless person’s team
Dr Neville Anderson, a general practitioner from Fairfield who had been appointed to direct the Department of Community Health at St Vincent’s Hospital, and
Matthew Talbot managers and staff.

The group decided to conduct a health survey and parked a converted, anti-tuberculosis x-ray van in Woolloomooloo, to do a comprehensive survey of the medical conditions of homeless men and some women in Sydney. The van had been converted from only doing chest x-rays, into a health screening unit that could do a range of health/medical assessments.

The medical findings were confronting: no-one was well; there were major continuing physical health problems that needed attention, not to mention the problems of mental health and substance use. It was all very well to find this out, but the load of illness and disability among the homeless meant that we should do something.

As a result, Dr Blower started the Haymarket Foundation Clinic which exists today, and Dr Neville Anderson started the Matthew Talbot Clinic, which also exists today. Since those early days, the Matthew Talbot Clinic for primary health care for the long-term homeless has evolved to become a model that would stand high in comparison to similar endeavours anywhere in Australia, if not internationally.

It started in a small, inconvenient room and has evolved into a set of arrangements for front-line clinical service delivery that works very well. It provides nurse practitioners, visiting doctors, psychiatrists, mental health workers, an optometrist, a podiatrist, and Centrelink staff working alongside the welfare and other workers employed by Matthew Talbot.

The key aspects of the clinic are:
- it is free;
- anyone can come;
- everyone is treated with respect and decency;
- it is always there; and
- above all, it is conducted in the environment of the homeless people themselves: not a pristine, stainless steel clinic for which you have to prove your eligibility and suitability to attend.

OVER TIME
Over time, the problems have changed from predominantly related to alcohol and physical illness and disabilities, to problems today of mental disorders, a range of drug problems and, of course, continuing alcohol problems. And there are the added new challenges of injecting drug use and the inevitable, blood-borne virus infections of hepatitis B and C and HIV/AIDS.

What is important about Matthew Talbot is there are no ulterior motives in the Society’s response and, especially, there are none in the Clinic. The purpose is simple: a decent response to those in need – no more, no less; no tickets required.

CONCLUSION
I return to where I started: the concern for a just and fair society.

The St Vincent de Paul Society, Vinnies, has a window into whether or not society is just and fair: front-line workers see the end results, and the organisation as a whole is informed by that knowledge; it has credibility to press for the reforms that are needed.

It is something that the leadership is doing very well, in my opinion

The Society can, for example, respond to the Government’s new housing policies for the homeless, The Road Home, and the practical implementation of the Social Inclusion Agenda, or for that matter, comment with authority on the National Mental Health Plan, or the National Drug Strategy or the National Suicide Prevention Strategy.

Professor Ian Webster is Emeritus Professor of Public Health and Community Medicine at UNSW. Since 1976, he has been honorary visiting physician to the Matthew Talbot Hostel for the homeless in Woolloomooloo.
JUST US:
A VIEW OF THE ELECTION
FROM BELOW

By Dr John Falzon

Shortly before this year’s Federal election, I took part in the joint launch of a Reconciliation Action Plan for two Canberra non-government organisations: the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) and Woden Community Service. Ngunnawal Elder, Aunty Janet Phillips, gave a beautiful Welcome to Country. One of the things she said in her welcome was that: “for Aboriginal Australians, there’s no such thing as justice; there’s just us.”

Aunty Janet’s words sound harsh. But they should come as no surprise. Rev. Dr Djiniyini Gondarra from the Arnhem community of Galiwin’ku, for example, has just arrived back from the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in Geneva. He reports that many aspects of the intervention in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities were heavily attacked as being unjust.

Some might also find Aunty Janet’s words to be lacking in hope. Nothing could be further from the truth. When she says “there’s just us”, this is not a cry of despair but rather a moral call to arms.

So these are the questions I believe we need to ponder, following the recent election:

1. Who do we think of as the “us”? The greatest cause of inequality and structural injustice is the acceptance of the false notion that “they” are the ones who are in the boats seeking asylum, or having half their meagre income being “managed” because “they” are Aboriginal or on a social security benefit; that “they” are young and jobless or old and isolated; that “they” live with a disability or are working hard to raise their children alone on an inadequate income; that “they” are living in their car because “they” couldn’t keep up their rent payments...

So who are “we”? Do “we” need to keep “them” out? Do “we” really need to punish and humiliate “them” for doing it tough on the fringes of the labour market?

Or do “we” want a society where there is no alien “other”; where there is, in Aunty Janet’s prophetic words, “just us”?

2. How can we turn this recent election into a building block for a more equal society?

The supplementary question is, of course, a matter of weighing up all policies to assess their impact on the growth of inequality.

At the heart of “us” there has to be, at the very least, a sense of travelling towards greater equality. Otherwise the “us” becomes a travesty. Forget the so-called rising tide that lifts all boats. Solidarity means being in the same boat.

Australia continues to be a highly unequal society. If we care to dig a little deeper through some of the rhetoric that calls on the people doing it tough to lift their game, we would discover that inequality of income and of access to essential services lies at the heart of disadvantage in Australia.

Australian National University economist Andrew Leigh and Oxford University’s Tony Atkinson have recently analysed a 30-year trend of rising inequality, with the rich boosting their share of Australian income significantly over the past five years. The trend for wealth inequality is worse, with the richest 20 per cent of households owning 63 per cent of the net wealth. It’s not just about income and wealth. There is the need for a redistribution of services and resources. We need to understand the basics of life as social goods, rather than as sources of profit. The right to live in affordable housing, for example, is enshrined in the United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights which says in Article 25:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of him/her/self and of his/her family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.”

The project for greater social equality is anchored in a redistribution of hope. Aunty Janet’s formulation creates powerful grounds for this fundamental redistribution.

The private rental market is notoriously bad at providing affordable access to appropriate housing for low-income families. Governments have a responsibility to do what markets cannot. But even when governments accept their responsibility, they do not give hope. The role of government is actually to create the legislative, social and economic frameworks in which hope can be realised.

Hope isn’t something given by governments, businesses or charities. Hope isn’t something that can be given from above. Like social change, it has to be created from below. As the poet, Bertolt Brecht, put so well: “the compassion of the oppressed for the oppressed is indispensable. It is the world’s one hope.”
Governments should be measured by the degree to which their policies create the space (and provide the infrastructure) in which this hope can be collectively made – by us! Those of us who are members of NGOs would do well to analyse our own contribution to a better society in these terms as well.

3. How can we work on the social equality project beyond the Federal Election?

There is an entrenched inequality in our midst. Our job is to generate the political will to address its structural causes rather than managing its manifestation. Italian theorist Domenico Losurdo put it this way: “Democracy cannot be defined by abstracting the fate of the excluded.”

We’ve got to remember something crucial here about the history of progressive social change in Australia. Without the organised analysis and agitation of ordinary people, we would never have seen gains in the fields of industrial rights, women’s rights, the establishment and public funding of refuges for women and young people, tenants’ rights, environmental justice, workers’ compensation, citizenship rights for Aboriginal people and so on.

In the years of the Great Depression, when the families of the unemployed were being thrown out of their homes by the landlords, a movement of resistance sprang up against these evictions. People gathered around the home of the soon-to-be-evicted family and fought back against the police force sent to carry out the law.

From home after home, the families were evicted by the law and the women and men and the children and their goods were forced to make the street their home, while their supporters had the intellectual honesty to never stop being shocked by this brutality.

People were radicalised by reality, by their concrete analysis of the concrete conditions.

Good policy was born from such struggles. As Pablo Neruda put it: “The word was born in the blood…”

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. 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.”

Hope isn’t something given by governments, businesses or charities. Hope isn’t something that can be given from above. Like social change, it has to be created from below.

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.

Rather than ensuring that the voices of our marginalised sisters and brothers are heard and heeded, 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.

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 criticised 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.”

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.”

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 NSW: “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.”

Dr John Falzon is the Chief Executive Officer of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council.

This is an edited and expanded version of an article that appeared in Eureka Street on 20 August 2010. (www.eurekastreet.com.au)
POVERTY IN THE WORLD
The Different Forms of Poverty

A Vincentian reflection on poverty and social exclusion by MIZAËL DONIZETTI POGGIOLI CM, written for the 350th anniversary of the deaths of St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac.

TWO UNEQUAL WORLDS
To speak of poverty in the world is to speak of social exclusion. The world, in its material aspect (welfare state), is divided into two big blocks.

The first is composed of countries that possess the lowest Social Exclusion Index. It is concentrated in Europe, the historical centre of the expansion of capitalism, and includes Japan, the United States and Canada, countries of later industrialisation but which instituted the agrarian reform and developed politics oriented towards the defense of national product. They are, therefore, the 28 countries with the lowest index of social exclusion. Four of these countries are in Eastern Europe and Canada, countries of later industrialisation but which instituted the agrarian reform and developed politics oriented towards the defense of national product. They are, therefore, the 28 countries with the lowest index of social exclusion. It is concentrated in Europe, the historical centre of the expansion of capitalism, and includes Japan, the United States and Canada, countries of later industrialisation but which instituted the agrarian reform and developed politics oriented towards the defense of national product. They are, therefore, the 28 countries with the lowest index of social exclusion. Four of these countries are in Eastern Europe and Canada, countries of later industrialisation but which instituted the agrarian reform and developed politics oriented towards the defense of national product. They are, therefore, the 28 countries with the lowest index of social exclusion.

Next come 60 countries with elevated social exclusion. They constitute 35.5 per cent of the world population and share 11.1 per cent of the revenue produced in the world. They have an average per capita revenue of US$2,300, taking into account the criterion of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). Of these 60 countries, 44 are in Africa and in Oceania, partitioned territorially in the 19th century by the Europeans pursuing their interests. There are 10 countries in Asia that were submitted to different forms of formal and informal occupation, six countries in Latin America, where political dependency, during the 19th century, did not always mean a real economic, financial and political autonomy.

One has also to underline that 80 per cent of the African population live in countries placed in the extreme zone of social exclusion, compared to 37 per cent in Asia, 19 per cent in Oceania and seven per cent in Latin America.

WHO ARE THE EXCLUDED?
Material Poverty
The countries that present the worst Social Exclusion Index, in great majority, are victims of poverty, inequality, low schooling, illiteracy, lack generalised access to health and suffer instability in the labor market. They are the countries that suffer even the consequences of the old social exclusion such as low income and high illiteracy, as well as the marks of the new social exclusion like unemployment, inequality of income, low third-level education and violence.

Political Poverty
In addition to material poverty, there exists a more acute form, that of political poverty. The concept of political poverty emerged in the context of social politics, in particular in the struggle against poverty. Today it is used widely in the descriptions of human development of the United Nations Development Programme, especially since 1997. It points out that poverty cannot be reduced to material deprivation, important that it always is, because poverty is fundamentally a phenomenon of political exclusion.

To be a poor person is less than not to have, less than not to be. To experience hunger is misery indeed, but even greater misery is not knowing that, first, hunger is invented and imposed, and, second, that, to overcome hunger, it is not enough to have a meal, but one has to be in a condition to procure for oneself one’s proper sustenance.

With this, ignorance is considered to be the centre of poverty. A poor person is, above all, one who does not know or who is prevented from knowing that he is poor. Irremediably poor is the person who does not even know that he is poor.
He lacks critical awareness, first, to “read” his reality and, later, to confront it within an alternative political project. Because he lacks this critical awareness, he fails to become a subject, master of his own history and, therefore, he just waits for a solution from others. The system takes advantage of this circumstance to maintain him as a “manipulated mass,” treating him as beneficiary rather than as a citizen.

A person is prevented from becoming a master of his history. Poverty, therefore, does not only imply being deprived of material goods, but, especially, being prevented from building one’s own opportunities, from taking one’s destiny in one’s own hands.

When one speaks of ignorance, however, we do not express what every educator knows does not exist, that is, every human being is hermeneutically and culturally determined, he develops his proper culture and shared knowledge, he maintains the legacies of history and multiple identities. Rather, we point out that ignorance is historically produced, maintained and perpetuated.

THE POOR AS SUBJECTS

The politics adopted by the World Bank do not satisfy the expectations of growth. When one measures the growth of a concrete population, what is taken into consideration is the economic growth in a big scale. When the Gross National Product (GNP) is observed to be growing in a particular country or region, it is taken to mean that the goal of eradicating poverty has been met.

That leads us to raise the following observations. First, the growth of the GNP is painfully slow and it can happen without in any way benefiting the poor. Second, when this happens, this growth can even be realised at the cost of the poor.

Consequently, in this conception of growth, the poor are considered or seen as objects; they cease to recognise their enormous potential, particularly those of women and children. In many situations, the authorities do not see them as independent agents and protagonists of their own development.

We know that the human being, within given structures, is capable of making interventions in those structures and in themselves, opening proper spaces for action; to a certain extent, he creates his own individual and collective history.

The human being is capable of unheard-of conquests that defy limits in every respect; he is capable of building his own autonomy.

THE ATTITUDE OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL

Many forms of poverty in the times of St Vincent de Paul, similar to today’s, were the result of the ambitious politics of governments. In the France of his time, Vincent de Paul accomplished a work effective in eradicating poverty. He set many forms of service to change the miserable conditions of the poor.

He organised the Priests of the Mission aimed at the evangelisation and service of the poor; with Louise de Marillac he gathered the Daughters of the Charity for the direct work with the abandoned; he founded the Volunteers of the Charity to visit the poor and the sick in their own houses; he invested in the conscientisation and formation of the clergy in order for them to take the side of the poor, founding seminaries, promoting the Tuesday Conferences,
sensitising them with the needs of the retired: he organised hospitals, houses of welcome for children, adolescents and patients; he established works that absorbed the children of the street, the abandoned children, the children who had neither house, family, meal, nor any type of protection.

His struggle in life was always to provide food to the hungry and to promote the dignity of the poor. He was indifferent to no hungry person; on the contrary, he showed indignation over the multitude of the hungry that hovered the streets. He worked at the galleys where the prisoners were condemned to work as rowers. He succoured the victims of war, pestilence and famine. One can affirm that Vincent de Paul accomplished the project “famine zero” in Lorraine, Champagne and Picardy, regions then devastated by war and famine.

From San Quentin in 1652, a Priest of the Mission writes to Vincent:

“The famine here is so bad that we see men eating dirt, chewing on grass, stripping the bark off the trees, and tearing up and swallowing the miserable rags that cover them. But what is horrifying – and what we would not dare to mention if we had not seen it – is that they are devouring their own arms and hands and are dying in this state of despair.”

From the letters sent by the Priests of the Mission to St Vincent, one finds stories of the consequences of the devastation of the War of the Fronde, which took place in 1648 at the end of the Thirty Years War. They narrate:

“We have just visited 35 villages of the deanery of Guise where we found about 600 persons, whose misery is so great, that they take dogs and dead horses, after the wolves have satisfied their famine on them. Just in Guise there are more than 500 patients taking refuge in holes and in caverns, places that are fit for animals rather than for human persons.”

A VINCENTIAN ATTITUDE

The Vincentian Family, persons and groups of persons closely linked to the charism and to the spirituality transmitted by Vincent de Paul, begins to reconfigure its work with the poor. It endeavors to return to the sources. The theme “Promotion of Systemic Change – Strategy to Help the Poor out of Poverty” is a system with precise diagnosis.

Three hundred and fifty years after the death of Vincent de Paul, we are re-discovering what was evident to him. We begin to rediscover the wise educational maxim that Vincent de Paul used working with the poor: dedication and service to them by assisting them materially and spiritually.

To help the poor out of material poverty implies helping them out of political poverty. One who is politically poor is not a true citizen because he does not have the capacity of organisation and, consequently, the power to introduce changes either for himself or for the group of which he is a part.

INSERTION AND COMMITMENT

For Vincent de Paul, one needs to know the reality of the poor person, to see his material conditions and to understand his situation as a human being. Vincent was always attentive to the respect of the person in the work with the poor. Vincentian work is to promote systemic changes in the life of those excluded, according them dignity and abundant life in all its human dimensions:

“If there are any among us who think they are in the Mission to evangelise poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead: ‘Come, beloved of my Father; possess the kingdom that has been prepared for you, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you assisted me.’ To do that is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, and that’s the most perfect way; it’s also what Our Lord did, and what those should do who represent him on earth.”

We would like to suggest that Vincentian work at present cannot address only the disastrous consequences that compromise the life of the poor, but also and principally, their causes. More than ever, in the Vincentian work, one needs to articulate strategies for change issuing from politicisation that leads the poor to:

- leave the historical process of ignorance.

On the one hand, to give him the necessary tools so that he recognises that he is living in poverty and, on the other hand, that he is himself suppressed to know that he is poor;
- cease being a mass and object of manipulation into becoming a subject of his own dignity;
- become a citizen who organises himself politically and which renders him capable of instituting significant changes in his life and in the life of the community; and
- gain awareness of his rights and construct the basic program of his own liberation.

Today, 350 years after the death of Vincent de Paul, we are invited to make a qualitative leap in Vincentian work.

FROM THE THOUGHTS OF VINCENT DE PAUL:

“To evangelise the poor doesn’t simply mean to teach them the mysteries necessary for their salvation, but also to do what was foretold and prefigured by the prophets to make the Gospel effective... Let the priests devote themselves to the care of the poor. Wasn’t that what Our Lord and many great saints did, and they not only recommended poor persons to others, but they themselves consoled, comforted and healed them? Aren’t they our brothers and sisters?...

“If there are any among us who think they are in the Mission to evangelise poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead: ‘Come, beloved of my Father; possess the kingdom that has been prepared for you, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you assisted me.’ To do that is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, and that’s the most perfect way; it’s also what Our Lord did, and what those should do who represent him on earth."

“To do that is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, and that’s the most perfect way; it’s also what Our Lord did, and what those should do who represent him on earth... This is what should cause us to prefer this to all other states and works on earth and to consider ourselves happier for it.”

Translated by MARCELO V. MANIMTIM, CM, Province of the Philippines. Source: www.famvin.org
LOVE IN ACTION –
A SAINT FROM COLLINGWOOD

By Br Mark O’Connor FMS

If you want to be universal, sing your village
– Leo Tolstoy

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN
words. For the St Vincent de Paul Society,
they always have. One of their ‘unsung heroes’ – from among a multitude here
in Melbourne – is the late Margaret Oats,
of the St Vincent de Paul Conference in
Collingwood.

Margaret worked quietly and generously
as a resident of Collingwood for years.
Among theorists, terms like ‘preferential
option for the poor’ and ‘solidarity’ are
sometimes in danger of becoming mere
slogans but for her they were precious
daily realities.

Appearing at the public hearings for the
Bishops’ Inquiry into Wealth in 1988,
Margaret spoke movingly of the plight of
the ordinary people of Collingwood. She
described it as a poor parish, with a large
Housing Commission area, and many
migrant families.

It has been like that for a long time now.
The only change is that, from time to time,
various waves of migrants arrive in the
area in the hope of finding work. They are
able to get a little money together and then
move out.

A disturbing recent trend has been the
actions of a few wealthy people who
buy houses in the area, renovate them
and then sell them at prices that have
disastrous ramifications for local residents.

As usual, it is money that quickly becomes
the all-consuming new god in these
situations, and the poor are the victims.

The work of the Collingwood St Vincent
de Paul Conference, like that of the
Society all over Melbourne, Victoria
and Australia, is extraordinary. Charity
and justice are an essential part of
evangelisation. For Margaret, that work
of charity and justice was just part and
parcel of life. The members of her group
would visit people in their homes and
come across all sorts of problems.

Margaret Oats

“Often girls will ring and ask if I can
possibly come early because they cannot
cut the children’s lunches and can
someone get there early with bread for
lunch. It is quite usual for people to visit
me in my own home to get food for the
evening meal or to help with money for
medicine for children,” she said.

“Sometimes, in winter, they have the light
or gas cut off and we give them part of
the money for the bill and try to get some
other agencies in the area to make up the
balance of the account.”

They were all disadvantaged people.
But often it is not just a question of not
having enough money to go round but
also inadequate housing, problems with
neighbours and sheer loneliness. That is
why Margaret stressed that “it is done in
love to let people see that, by going back,
someone does care and a God of love
does care for them. So we keep going back
many, many times.”

One of the most pernicious and dangerous
heresies (sometimes put forward by the
worshippers of money) is that God blesses
the wealthy and is somehow punishing
the poor for their sins. This is a heresy
condemned by Jesus and by every Pope
this century. Thank God, He sends down-
to-earth promoters of charity, justice and
peace like Margaret Oats, who have the
courage to stand up for the disadvantaged.

As she eloquently argued: “If we could
just get the Catholic community of
Melbourne, in particular, and everyone,
in general, on to Micah’s theme, to live
justly, love tenderly and walk humbly
with our God, we wouldn’t even need this
wealth inquiry.”

At one point in the inquiry, a speaker
asserted that Australians are mean,
which Margaret powerfully challenged.
“Australians are certainly not mean,”
she said. “They are extremely generous.
Australians lack awareness.”

It is wonderful that Margaret Oats’
spirit lives on today, especially in the
Margaret Oats Soup Van, which provides
friendship, company and square meals to
the homeless and disadvantaged people of
inner Melbourne, including Collingwood,
Abbotsford, Richmond and Fitzroy. As
well as providing a meal and a chat all year
round, the soup van holds special events,
such as barbecues and fundraisers.

In the Vinnies’ own words: “The Margaret
Oats Soup Van is a work of the St Vincent
de Paul Society, and as such we accept the
philosophy and rule of the Society: ‘the
visitation of the poor, the sick, the lonely
and the underprivileged and to treat these
people with love, with friendship, with
dignity and with respect: ‘This is done
irrespective of the colour, race, creed or
beliefs of the person in need.”

Margaret had, in overflowing abundance,
the special sort of awareness and energy
for love in action that the Margaret Oats
Soup Van represents: an awareness that
delights the Lord Jesus, Who must rejoice
in the fact that ‘unsung heroes’ like
Margaret Oats see Him in ordinary people
who just need to be loved.◆

Br Mark O’Connor is Director of the
Archbishop’s Office for Evangelisation, Catholic
Archdiocese of Melbourne.

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unsung hero | BR MARK O’CONNOR FMS
“MY INVITATION TO EVERYONE IS that in your everyday power, in your workplace, with your regular authority, with your everyday resources, turn your mind occasionally to what you can do, for the benefit of all Aboriginal peoples.”

– Professor Michael McDaniel, Wiradjuri man and a member of the Kalari Clan, August 2009.

“The Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you (the Aboriginal People) have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.”

– Pope John Paul II to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Alice Springs, 29 November 1986

It was this invitation from Professor McDaniel and the call from Pope John Paul II that formed the basis of a presentation by Vicki Walker Clark, a Mutthi Mutthi woman and Coordinator of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne, to the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council in Canberra on Saturday 24 August 2010. Here, she explains her vision for a new covenant between ACMM and the Society.

ACMM and the St Vincent de Paul Society are two organisations, with faith, love, truth, respect, justice at the heart of each. I believe the two could combine to bring about a new level of understanding and love that facilitates justice, Reconciliation and national healing.
seek advice from ACMM or utilise local Aboriginal community knowledge

Key Indigenous events could be celebrated and promoted, such as Reconciliation Week (27 May – 3 June) and remembrance of the Federal Government Apology on 13 February.

Work towards an understanding of Aboriginal Spirituality

Workshops could be offered to all levels of the Society on seeking similarities between Aboriginal spirituality and the Spirituality of Frederic Ozanam and St Vincent de Paul.

A prayer for National Reconciliation could be inserted into the Society’s opening and closing prayers. For example:

Lord, open our hearts to Aboriginal peoples seeking sanctuary within our society, without prejudice and with heartfelt welcome. May this sacred land be always etched into our hearts and our history. Bless and honour their Elders as we listen to the stories they have to tell. Help us to recognise the past and share the present with them as we work towards a better future together. Jesus, through your love, help us to continue this walk of faith and reconciliation together. AMEN

Explore the possibility of twinning with Opening the Doors Foundation, which supports education for Aboriginal children in Victoria from Prep to Year 12.

Some small steps have been agreed to, while others have been put aside for further thought. The Reconciliation Prayer will be put onto prayer cards, while some State Presidents will pursue introducing an acknowledgement to Country. Workshops may be offered first to National Council, then State Presidents may wish to take the process to their State and Regional Councils and all Vincentians.

Above all, it is hoped that by naming and actively pursuing a covenant between the organisations, the main result will be a heightened respect and awareness on behalf of the Society for Aboriginal Australians, and a growing love that will create a real desire for a lasting and truly just reconciliation in our country.

What a beautiful gift that has been offered to the Society of sharing Aboriginal and Vincentian Spirituality.

One can only hope that this small beginning will bring energy and commitment from the participants and that the Covenant isn’t a “quick fix” project.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35).

A New Commandment – to love one another – to understand one another – to respect one another. These are small beginnings for a New Covenant. May it bring truth, understanding, justice and love.

Vicki Walker Clark, a Mutthi Mutthi woman and Coordinator of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne.

The Society could insert Reconciliation into the daily fabric of its life and joyfully receive the contribution of Aboriginal people into the life of the Church and the Society.

that resonate with the words of the Society of St Vincent de Paul’s founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam:

“The order of society is based on two virtues: justice and charity. However, justice presupposes a lot of love already. Justice has its limits whereas charity knows none.”

In his book on Ozanam, Love and Politics, John Honner writes, “Ozanam the politician would have argued that the State is bound in justice to ensure the dignity and welfare of all its members. Ozanam the Christian, however, would also have argued that personal self sacrifice and human engagement are necessary if the wounds of society are to be healed.”

ACMM and the St Vincent de Paul Society are two organisations, with faith, love, truth, respect, justice at the heart of each. I believe the two could combine to bring about a new level of understanding and love that facilitates justice, Reconciliation and national healing.

The Society could insert Reconciliation into the daily fabric of its life and joyfully receive the contribution of Aboriginal people into the life of the Church and the Society. The concept of a covenant – a solemn promise to engage in a specified action, entered into mutually – could be an appropriate and meaningful tool to begin the process.

I invite the National Council to enter into such a covenant between the Society in Australia and Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne. A covenant would embrace national Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, including practical responses; to take up the opportunity to become more aware of the issues of Aboriginal Australia – past and present; and to explore the potential of sharing Aboriginal and Vincentian Spirituality.

There are a few key areas that could be included in such a covenant:

Cultural Recognition and Awareness

An acknowledgment to country could be stated at the beginning of every meeting and celebration.

Vicki Walker Clark
CHARITY AND JUSTICE

MONSIGNOR DAVID CAPPO spoke recently at the Vinnies Social Justice Awards for young Vincentians in South Australia.

WE LIVE IN AN AGE WHERE MEDIA images of juveniles committing crime and violence impact upon us regularly. We can easily succumb to the false notion that being young and crime and violence all go together.

This is so wrong. And gatherings like this speak to a larger reality. And that is, in our community an overwhelming number of young people show great generosity of heart; a deep sense of social responsibility; a desire to reach out and help those in need in our community. They display a maturity of spirit and are excellent citizens of our state and nation.

Tonight we formally acknowledge this generosity of heart and this commitment to help others in need.

Before we get to the important part of this evening, the presentation of awards, I would like to say a few words about the importance of charity and justice: how important both of these actions are and how they must always go together. And in my encouragement of works of charity and justice, I must give a word of caution. Quite often, charity and justice become separated and charity thus separated can become distorted and demeaning of people. We must guard against this happening. I will come back to this point.

But first let me say:

Our faith demands that we be people of charity and justice. And in the Catholic tradition, charity and justice is to be clearly focused on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in the community.

...we not only have an obligation to recognise the equal dignity of every person ... but to see that fulfillment for all is found in engagement and participation in the community.

Underpinning our lives of charity and justice are some basic principles that guide our lives:

Firstly, that every, I repeat EVERY, human person because we are ALL made in the image of God, has an intrinsic dignity. No matter who they are or what they are doing, ALL people share in this common, equal dignity by virtue of being a human person. There are very big implications for individuals and for the community as a whole in recognising and living out this principle.

Secondly, that we are made in the image of God who is TRINITY, that is, a communion of persons. That in the nature of God there is a dialogue of persons; in a sense, a community. And, as we are made in the image of God, we share in this identity. We too are made in and for community. We are meant to find our fulfillment in community.

Consequently, we not only have an obligation to recognise the equal dignity of every person in our personal attitudes and behaviour, but to see that fulfillment for all is found in engagement and participation in the community. Hence the imperative: to work towards ensuring that our society cares for those in need in practical ways, and that the structures of our society have, as a deeply rooted value, the inclusion of all people in the active life of the community, so that their dignity can be lived out.

You and I have responsibilities as disciples of Jesus and people of good will to assist others to find fulfillment, to live out their dignity. We do that by being people of love, of true charity. In a Christian context, we are bound by the law of love, Matthew 22:37-40, to love God and to love our neighbour. And we are to focus our love on the “least of these.” Matthew 25:40. “Whenever you did it for any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it to me.”

CHARITY AND JUSTICE

Charity, in many ways, can be seen as a response to immediate needs. For example, immediate shelter, food parcels etc. Justice, in many ways, can be viewed as a more long-term response to unjust social structures and the barriers they put up to hinder people living out their human dignity: skills training and employment structures, mental health systems, disability systems etc.
The key point: It is not a matter of “either”, “or”. It is about “BOTH”, “AND”. We have an obligation as disciples of Jesus and people of good will to be people of BOTH charity AND justice. But you can see that focusing only on charity as described doesn’t solve the social problem in which many people find themselves. And focusing only on justice can overlook the immediate needs of people.

To be people of love; of charity. To give to the poor and those in need. But as I have already said, we need to be cautious about how we are people of charity. Our charity must not demean others or treat them as second-class citizens.

Listen to this! "The demands of justice must be satisfied first of all; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift in charity" and listen to this! “The causes of evil and not merely their effects should be eliminated” Vatican II, AA8 and Catechism of the Catholic Church, #415.

Justice! and justice that eliminates the causes of evil, unjust social structures. Let’s not glide over these words without some reflection: “That which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift in charity!” Too often, societies deem the poor, the disadvantaged, to be either deserving or not deserving of charity, of the gift of those who have, to those who have not. We use moral constructs to decide who is deserving and who is undeserving. And often part of that construct is how grateful and thankful the recipient of our charity is. This satisfies our ego but it is a dangerous dynamic that we enter; a dynamic that diminishes the poor and even more so, diminishes us. Charity thus distorted becomes a great indignity, and a great injustice of the disadvantaged in society.

St Gregory the Great says a similar thing to St John Chrysostom:

“When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice.”

True love of neighbor, true charity, can be defined in this way, #1889:

“Charity is the greatest social commandment; it respects others and their rights; it requires the practice of justice;

and it alone makes us capable of it; charity inspires a life of self giving.”

Notice that last phrase… “a life of self giving.” That is the context of our charity and justice, not our own needs, but fulfillment in generous self giving to the needs of the vulnerable and the poor.

And in all of our works of charity and justice; in helping people who are on the margins of our society to live in dignity and by changing the unjust structures of our society to help make this happen, what are we doing? We are building up the common good; the community.

I trust these words have been of some help in understanding our place in responding with charity and justice in our community, and of the self-giving love we are asked by the Lord to live out for the good of all, particularly the most oppressed, disadvantaged and vulnerable in our community.

In loving service we must give food to the homeless; to organise shelters and daily care. But never see that this is enough and never see it as a gift we give, but rather a demand in justice where we serve the poor. And never see that this loving service, this charity, can be separated from the demand in justice to change the structures of society that cause homelessness and other social issues.

In working for justice and in focusing on bringing about changes in the structures of society, we respond to the human dignity needs that vulnerable people have; needs that must be responded to, as is their right!

So tonight, we celebrate this. The self-giving love of the young people before us for those in need; responding to the needs of people as is their right, to have those needs fulfilled.

We celebrate generosity of spirit, helping the vulnerable to live in dignity and building up the community in both charity and in justice.

He points to the equal human dignity that we all share, including the poor, and our obligation, society’s obligation, to ensure that they have what is necessary to live in dignity in community.

So let us not look to be thanked for what we give to the poor. Let us not look to feel the gratitude of others. This satisfies our ego but it is a dangerous dynamic that we enter; a dynamic that diminishes the poor and even more so, diminishes us. Charity thus distorted becomes a great indignity, and a great injustice of the disadvantaged in society.

Let us now celebrate the goodness of young South Australians whom we acknowledge and thank and encourage.◆

Monsignor David Cappo AO is Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Adelaide and South Australia’s Commissioner for Social Inclusion.
CREATIVITY: 
LINKING EFFICIENCY 
AND LOVE

By Margaret Lambert

At the Heart of Everyone Who offers their time for the good works of the St Vincent de Paul Society is the desire to make a positive difference in our community.

There are a range of reasons that people may choose to work for Vinnies. For many of the volunteers and staff, it is the desire to assist people who are doing it tough; for some, it is the desire to bring some brightness into peoples’ difficult or gloomy days; for others, it is the desire to bring about a change in conditions of poverty and injustice; and for others again it is the desire to be around and connect with people undertaking good works.

As a young university student who brought the Society into existence in 1833, Frederic Ozanam, challenged his group of volunteer workers: “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.” As Frederic challenged the volunteers of his time, so are we, who continue his work, also challenged to address both the needs of people in their poverty and hardship, and the larger political and social structures that either lead people into, or keep them in, impoverished conditions.

Since Frederic’s time, the St Vincent de Paul Society has expanded across the world and into domains of hardship that were probably never even perceived by Frederic, yet the focus to assist people who struggle in our community, with compassion, dignity and respect, has remained at the heart of Vincentian work. There is no doubt that our world has become more complex, and so too are the issues that present. As people who have, at the heart of their work, the desire to make a difference in the lives of people doing it tough, how can Frederic’s challenge be best accomplished in the complex world in which we live?

The contemporary mission statement of the Society in Australia expresses the ongoing commitment to Frederic’s challenge. It states that the Society “aspire to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.” In order to accomplish this mission in the greatest capacity, it is necessary for the Society to operate with great efficiency, together with great love. Efficiency maximises the extent to which the Society can reach out to people in need, to make a difference in peoples’ lives, and efficiency also ensures that valuable time and resources are utilised in the best possible way. Arguably the fundamental principle of every organisation is efficiency, as it is indeed also important in our personal lives to the extent that we are able to achieve more with greater efficiency.

The structure of modern society, based largely on the 1937 economic philosophy of Adam Smith, has us believe that efficiency is paramount. In the business world there is great emphasis on efficiency, but when was the last time you heard the word ‘love’ mentioned in the business arena?

Love, of course, can be implied in various policies and actions, but it seems that by far the greater emphasis in the business and economic world is on efficiency. Fundamental to efficiency is time, and the pressures of working within time-frames and rushing to meet deadlines can often be an impediment to love. Even in our personal lives, we can probably relate to love taking a back seat to efficiency, and to us being less loving for the sake of being efficient. There may be situations when we have not given enough time to listen to another’s story, or have become so focused on work that we have forgotten an important family occasion.

In his 1993 book, The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love You Need, Gerald May described efficiency as being the “how” of life: how we meet and handle the demands of daily living, how we survive, grow, and create, how we deal with stress, how effective we are in our functional roles and activities.” If efficiency is the “how” of life, what then is the basic purpose for it? Why do we strive for efficiency? May suggests that the reason for efficiency is essentially the reason for our existence, and that is love. He describes love as “…the ‘why’ of life: why we are functioning at all, (and) what we want to be efficient for.” May also suggests that, in striving for efficiency, we can lose focus of the purpose for our efficiency, and so love becomes a luxury or even an obstacle to efficient functioning. We become so efficient in our lives that we can easily forget the very reason for which we are being efficient.

As stated by May: “We are created by love, to live in love, for the sake of love.” Love is the essence of our being and love invites a response. For Vincentians, love is at the heart of the work that we do and is the very reason we desire to make a difference in the lives of the poor.
The Society makes explicit in its mission statement its work of love. As an organisation in the business and economic world, however, there are still the pressures of time and efficiency that, if we are not careful, can become obstacles to the very value that is espoused by the Society’s mission statement and is central to its existence. It is important to incorporate both love and efficiency into Vincentian work, with the focus being on love. With this focus, love is central in efficiency. How can the Society emphasise and embed love more into its efficient operation, not just in “serving Christ in the poor”, but also among our fellow Vincentians?

The Northern Territory Council of the Society has considered this question in light of a new paradigm that is based on creativity. It has chosen to support a theoretical construct which asserts that creative thinking is central to working with greater love and efficiency. This construct is significant when we consider that creativity and love are linked by a common source, our Creator. It is through creativity that love and efficiency can grow. Not only are new ideas and approaches produced by creative thinking, but listening to people’s ideas is also a way of valuing and loving them.

In embracing this new paradigm, the NT Council has taken on the challenge of promoting creative thinking on a wide scale across the Society. It is through the encouragement and communication of inspired and original thoughts that the Society can further prioritise and highlight love as its key value, both among members and in serving Christ’s poor, with the new approaches of love and efficiency that may emerge. Through creative thinking and expression, people are given an opportunity to present ideas that convey their desire to make a difference, which is at the heart of their involvement with the Society.

Traditional applications of creative thinking can be seen in the development of new programs or works and in the creation of long-term goals such as a strategic plan. Rather than placing a focus on creative thinking for specific and limited occasions, all members of the NT Society are now also being challenged to continually stretch their creative brains. As with all gifts and talents, it is only with frequent practice that greater achievements are realised and, conversely, if we never challenge our creative minds, we will never know the great ideas and gifts that may emerge!

In undertaking the good works of the Society, there is a renewed commitment to finding ways to progress with greater love and efficiency. There is an emphasis on developing creative ideas and thinking outside the box, and the invitation to be creative is extended to everyone, on an individual level and collectively. Conference and council meetings have allocated time to brainstorming ideas, and a “New Ideas” section is included on each Council member’s reporting template. People are free and are encouraged to explore any issue in new ways – the sky’s the limit!

After presenting the idea there maybe some discussion, and people may take it away from the meeting to consider further, maybe to add to the idea, or it may be that a different idea altogether is inspired. The ideas continue to be rolled around and refined over time until a more formal recommendation or proposal may evolve. Obviously, not all ideas will have an end point of being adopted and actioned, but the process makes room for the possible, and if just one idea moves into action, then we have already improved our efficiency and love.

Brainstorming ideas adds an element of love to the efficiency of meetings: there is time allocated to hear from those in attendance of any creative or inspired ideas that they may wish to throw into the ring. With encouragement, it is hoped that people will take risks, ask a lot of questions and challenge the status quo. The benefits of this are considerable, in respect to our members and those we serve, and as we continue in this creative way, we see love and efficiency working hand in hand, with love as the leading hand.

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**SOCIETY NEWS IN BRIEF**

**NATIONAL TREASURER APPOINTED**

DAVID BRESNIK, THE FORMER NATIONAL YOUNG ADULTS Representative, has been appointed the National Treasurer of the Society. David is an accountant with the firm, Ernst and Young. ◆

**PAKISTAN FLOOD RELIEF**

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL, ON BEHALF OF MEMBERS, HAS PROVIDED $20,000 towards flood relief in Pakistan. ◆

**NSW STATE COUNCIL**

THE STATE COUNCIL OF NEW SOUTH WALES HAS BEEN TEMPORARILY suspended and a Provisional State Council has been appointed by the President General. The work of the Society continues unimpeached in its mission to the needy. ◆

**MACKILLOP CANONISATION**

TO CELEBRATE THE CANONISATION OF BLESSED MARY MACKILLOP, the Society is helping the sponsorship of the musical, Mackillop. Timed to coincide with the canonisation of Australia’s first saint in Rome on October 17, this production will look at “making of a saint (and) the story of a nation.” It will be performed in Sydney and Melbourne in October by Artes Christi. The Society’s International President, Michael Thio, and Australian National Secretary, Tony Thornton will attend the canonisation ceremonies in Rome. ◆
An eye-opening journey to the Northern Territory

By BRENDAN LINDSAY

IN APPLYING FOR AND PREPARING to go on the St Vincent de Paul Society Immersion Program, I felt very naive and had little understanding about Aboriginal people and their place in Australian society. Having now returned after 10 days in a remote Aboriginal community, I feel somewhat embarrassed, as an Australian, to not have known really anything about the Aboriginal people: from their great sense of family and tradition, to their love of sport and art; from their own faith journeys, to their struggles of the past 200 years.

Having known that the missions went into Indigenous communities preaching the Word, I had wondered how many Aboriginals had actually embraced Christianity since this time. I am happy that in my short time in Nganmarriyanga and surrounding communities, I was given plenty of true witnesses to God amongst these people.

Such examples include sitting outside their church singing hymns with Aboriginal women, hearing a man talk about his conversion and embracing me saying “God Bless You”, being shown the graves of Aboriginal women who had become religious sisters, observing men come to have their feet washed at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, watching children line up at Mass for a blessing from Father Dan.

In seeing all this, I have no doubt now that God is truly in this land, is truly across these countries, is truly amongst the many languages, is truly with all people.

In leaving Nganmarriyanga and leaving the Territory, I now know that all of us have our hardships, all of us struggle in determining what it is that we want from our lives. The Aboriginal man is no different to the Australian man, who is no different to the Chinese man, who is no different to the African man.

As someone said to me during our visit to Wadeye, “Your skin is a different colour to mine but we both have the same coloured blood, so that makes us the same.”

On behalf of all of us who visited, I would like to thank everyone for the warm welcome we received during our time in the Territory. This is yet another strong sign of the presence of God in this country.

BRENDAN LINDSAY is a member of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria.

Applications for the 2011 Immersion Program are now open.

If Brendan’s experience has touched you and you would be interested in learning more about life in a remote Aboriginal community, consider applying for the 2011 Immersion Program.

The National Immersion Program will run from 26 March to 10 April 2011 and applications are now open. Applications are welcome from all St Vincent de Paul Society members anywhere in Australia, aged 18-79 years.

The program involves living in a remote Indigenous community in north-west Northern Territory and running simple programs for school-aged children. We invite all those interested in learning and experiencing Aboriginal culture in the spirit of Vincentian spirituality to read the application brochure and consider applying.

You can find the application brochure and form by visiting www.vinnies.org.au/immersion-program-national or contacting the NT Youth Coordinator on (08) 8948 8170 or at youth@svdpnt.org.au.

Applications close on 25 November 2010.
REFOUNDING IN TASMANIA

Hope and vitality spring from the Tasmanian refounding process, as TONY BRENNAN explains.

IN APRIL LAST YEAR, THE FORMER Hobart and Glenorchy Regional Councils amalgamated to form the Southern Regional Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society Tasmania.

Soon thereafter, the Council commenced a detailed membership survey. In October it held a Refounding Forum, and in April this year, a Youth Justice Festival.

Southern Regional Council ranges from Dover in Tasmania’s deep south, to Swansea on the east coast and Oatlands in the midlands. It has more than 1000 members and volunteers. All told, it is a very positive story of the hope and vitality of the Society.

We had the idea for a Refounding Forum from a quote in The Record from Syd Tutton, our National President, who called for the Society to ‘refound’ itself in Australia today:

“The Refounding journey that has commenced in the Society in Australia is all about returning to the well-springs of this vision (of Ozanam) at the same time as we honestly and intelligently analyse the signs of the times we now live in.” (The Record, Autumn 2009).

Southern Regional Council is a vitally alive experience of the Society but nonetheless, it wants to more fully respond to the vision of Ozanam and the signs of the times, and thus a Refounding Forum was decided upon.

THE REFOUNDING FORUM

Our purpose for the Refounding Forum was to achieve consensus on the general direction for the Council over the next three years.

On 23 October 2009, a representative group of between 30 and 50 Vincentians was brought together to arrive at 12 principal goals or ideas for action to be integrated into an updated Regional Council Strategic Plan.

We believed that the forum needed to be active and participative, with the chance for each representative to be engaged in deciding upon the highest priority “ideas for action” for the new Region. The process was also consultative in that each Vincentian, young or old, staff or volunteer, had an opportunity to contribute to the “ideas for action” in the lead up to the forum by filling in an ideas form.

Starting with an hour of formation that included prayer, spiritual reflection and brief presentations from leaders and facilitators, the evening forum continued with two hours of group discussion, in which the 12 goals were arrived at through open and democratic processes.

More than 70 ideas were articulated on the day or on survey forms returned from Vincentians.

The goals were paraphrased the 12 goals to ensure that they could lead to actions that were inspirational and SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time bound).

The 12 goals, covering four domains, are:

**Spirituality and Leadership**

- Schedule Festival Meetings, Masses and future Refounding Forums to invite Vincentians to renew their vision and vocation and to encourage young people and leaders to consider succession to works and roles;
- Encourage youthful passion for social justice by supporting them in future events such as their Justice Action Day and also open such events to the once-young!

**Service and Justice**

- Create new Vincentian works for emerging needs such as for farmers, refugees and the elderly disabled or adapt existing projects (e.g. create a “women’s shed”);
- Reinstate gaol ministry through advocacy to the State Government with the support of State Council;
- Review home visitation, seeking ways to better serve those who seek emergency relief and to support volunteers with training, communications and research (e.g. regarding financial and food security needs);
- Enable Conferences to “ask the social questions” and encourage them to feedback these issues to higher Councils for social advocacy for change;
- Research what other help we can offer those who suffer social exclusion (e.g. those who suffer mental illness, loneliness and isolation) and who often do not ask for our help.

**Community and Communications**

- Design more services in which people can volunteer to help with the support and coordination of employed staff (e.g. Homework Clubs for refugee children);
- Recruit new and especially younger people to become Vincentians and set up a taskforce to set targets and establish processes for recruitment, training and formation.

**Organisation and Resources**

- Establish a Mobile Stand and promotional displays to detail our works and vision and utilise this at church and civic events state-wide;
- Employ a Budget Counsellor to give financial advice to those referred by Conferences and Special Works to help those whom we serve to break out of the cycle of poverty and debt;
- Propose to the State Council and other Tasmanian Regions that a Northern Youth Coordinator be employed jointly by the Northern regions.

Since October 2009, progress has been made on each of the goals.

Tony Brennan

Tony Brennan is the Acting Regional President, Southern Regional Council.

A detailed plan on how to run a Refounding forum and the full 11-page executive summary of the membership census report, can be obtained from Southern Regional Council via the Regional Manager, Pat Flanagan, email: Pat.Flanagan@stvinnies.org.au.
POST RELEASE OPTIONS PROJECT

Creating a bridge back to society after prison.

NEARLY THREE YEARS SINCE ITS inception, prisoners nearing release voluntarily add their names to a waiting list to be part of the St Vincent de Paul Society Tasmania’s Post Release Options Project, (PROP).

The program began after research by Bethlehem House, in conjunction with the University of Tasmania’s Criminology Research Unit, headed by Professor Rob White. That study concluded that scarce resources existed to help male inmates reintegrate into their community after leaving prison.

From that, a funding proposal was developed and submitted to the Federal Attorney-General’s National Community Crime Prevention Programme (NCCPP) funding scheme. In 2007, NCCPP approved funding for PROP for a period of three years; the program began in January 2008.

The aim of the project was to engage with prisoners who were assessed as being “high-risk” – in other words, inmates who were seen to have a high likelihood of returning to prison within a short period of time after release – and to support them in addressing their offending behaviour.

The program is voluntary and has been influenced by offenders’ willingness to change their offending behaviour and general lifestyle to include more pro-social behaviour and activities.

As PROP is focused on the successful transition of an offender back into the community, our team starts work with the clients around three months before they are due to be released, and up to 12 months after they are released.

“...strong positive relationships have been developed between PROP and the Tasmania Prison Service...”

An essential part of the PROP program has been working with offenders before they are released to prepare them for what lies ahead on the “outside”, so strong positive relationships (including a Memorandum of Understanding) have been developed between PROP and the Tasmania Prison Service to facilitate in-prison visits by PROP case workers.

PROP has also developed a Memorandum of Understanding with Community Corrections in the Tasmanian Department of Justice, which demonstrates the acknowledgment of PROP as a useful and positive service in Tasmania by the State Government.

PROP has had enormous success among its clients and the word has spread to both potential clients and to government and non-government sources. This has led to an overflowing case load, with offenders now on waiting lists to be assessed and potentially accepted into the program. In this particular case, the old adage of “the proof is in the pudding” rings true – the proof lies within the clients themselves.

“I feel different in the head all the time, you know and I know they’re [PROP] trying to help me and I’m trying to help myself… and before that I’ve never had a chance to help myself,” explained one PROP client in an interview for an impact evaluation conducted by the University of Tasmania.

“I’d done so much jail… and I wanted to rehabilitate my life… but if PROP wasn’t there, I would be getting nowhere and I’d re-offend. The reason is… you’ve got someone to talk to and help you achieve this goal now and it’s completely different.”

The PROP team has been successful in creating a bridge back into the community for former offenders, enabling them to make choices about how they run their lives. Other non-government organisations have been enlisted in partnership, and most of all, the PROP team has been able to see less offending and more pro-social activity and family connection in the lives of the men. These high-risk offenders, “the 10 per cent who do 80 per cent of the damage”, are finding new ways to live life without crime, while getting to the heart of why they offended in the first place.

This article was compiled by PROP staff, Project Officer, IMOGEN JONES, Project Coordinator, GENE WHEELER, and Project Manager, GARY BENNETT.
Ease of travel makes the world smaller – but issues do not change over space or time, writes MICHAEL MORAN.

THE SOCIETY IN AUSTRALIA recently enjoyed the visit of Michael Thio, our new international President-General.

Michael is the sixth President-General to visit Australia. Many of us remember his immediate predecessor, Jose Ramon Diaz-Torremocha, who visited Australia more than once, most recently for World Youth Day in 2008.

Previous Presidents-General to visit Australia were Pierre Chouard (1962, pictured), Henri Jacob (1970), Amin de Tarraszi (1989) and Cesar Nunes-Viana (1996).

The ease of travel in the modern world has changed the way leadership works in the Church and the Society. Like the Popes, Presidents-General did not travel widely until recently. Pope Paul VI, who visited Australia in 1970, was the first Pope to travel outside Italy since 1809. A President-General did not visit Australia until the Society had been established for nearly 130 years.

The “Vinnies’ Pope” or President-General was based in Paris rather than Rome. Just as loyal Catholics in distant countries would turn to Rome, loyal Vincentians would also turn to “our venerated heads in Paris” (Superior Council annual report, 1914). Where a Cardinal or bishop would visit Rome for guidance, a St Vincent de Paul president would visit Paris. The first Australian national president to do so was Louis Heydon in 1904.

In the early years of the Society, such a visit to “headquarters” would take several months by sea and land. Face-to-face communications between Society presidents were therefore infrequent.

Air travel, which we take for granted but which was not readily affordable and available until the 1950s, changed all that. The first President-General to visit Australia, Pierre Chouard, in 1962, flew in via a United Nations conference in Tashkent, and there has been regular traffic both ways since.

The first two Presidents-General to visit Australia actually came primarily on personal rather than Society business: Pierre Chouard as a scientist, Henri Jacob as the commercial director of a French perfume company. They undertook Society activities only as an extra duty and only in Sydney. Today, a President-General will make a dedicated visit as the Society’s international leader, and visit members in all States.

Pierre Chouard’s visit provides a snapshot of the Society a half-century ago. A distinguished scientist, Professor of Plant Physiology at the Sorbonne (where Frederic Ozanam had once been a professor of literature), he came here as the official French representative to a scientific conference.

The Society organised a range of activities for him in Sydney, including meetings with national and State leaders. The biggest function was a general meeting – really a party – at the Town Hall, to meet Conference members and spouses. Hundreds sang God Save the Queen, the Marseillaise and Advance Australia Fair, accompanied by the St Vincent’s Boys Band from Westmead. Heber Boland was our National President, and at the end of the evening the assembly sang Faith of our Fathers.

Any visit by a President-General is an occasion for raising the great issues of the day, especially those facing the Society. It is interesting to see what the issues were half-a-century ago.

Perhaps most interesting is what was missing from the agenda. Pierre Chouard’s visit took place a few weeks before the opening of the Second Vatican Council, in October 1962. Today we look back on Vatican II as the biggest event in the history of the Church for centuries, yet it doesn’t seem to feature as a topic of discussion during his visit, let alone excited anticipation. Catholics did not realise what was about to hit them.

Two issues which did feature were twinning and mental health. Twinning, which is now a regular, mainstream Society work, had only just begun when Pierre Chouard visited. He was impressed with our work, praising the Society in Australia for having “the true international outlook.”

Most striking, for 1962, and in the language of the day, the President-General talked about mental illness, something which has become a great concern of the Society. He told the national council:

“Any case of poverty is to be assisted. You have the sick, you have those in gaol, you have the new form of poverty – mental poverty. This was growing in the more technical nations. Mental sickness was a symptom of our age; neurosis, mental disturbance. It might be a good thing for us to consider this type of work, work for the mentally ill. Mental sickness is a danger.”

The issues raised during the first visit by a President-General to Australia are still with us, as is the call to serve across national boundaries and the boundaries of prejudice and indifference.

MICHAEL MORAN is the National Council Archivist.
ST LUKE HAS A WONDERFUL TOUCH as a storyteller.

Today, he recounts how Mary, already pregnant, travels for four days on foot to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, who is about to give birth to a son. And when Mary and Elizabeth come together, filled with joy, they sing the praises of God. They are like two sopranos standing at the centre of the stage in an opera by Verdi, singing a duet about the marvellous things that God has done in their lives.

Elizabeth cries out in a loud voice, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed are you who have believed that the word of God is fulfilled in you.” And Mary immediately intones her own song: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, because he who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.” (Rule 1.2)

Your Rule speaks again and again about the person-to-person quality of your visits. It urges you to bring to the poor reverence (1.8) and empathy (1.9), to promote their self-sufficiency (1.10), to have a concern for their deeper needs and spirituality (1.11), and to express gratitude to those you visit (1.12). These visits are a privileged moment in your lives.

Do you hear the voices of Mary and Elizabeth as they sing in praise today? Their joy explodes in prayer. Luke’s gospel wants all of us who are visitors of the poor to be filled with joy. The Lord calls us to offer the poor our solidarity, our friendship, and our service. He calls us to share with them our belief that God loves them and us. And because we know that God’s love is so abundant, we can join with the poor in praising and thanking God joyfully for his goodness.

Today, we celebrate the beautiful feast of the Visitation. Let me say three things to you this morning, as leaders in the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

1. This feast is especially relevant for you. Visiting is an essential part of your life. You have a wonderful vocation which your new Rule describes in this way: “The vocation of the Society’s members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to his compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope.” (Rule 1.2)

3. Thirdly, your Rule states eloquently: “Vincentians never forget the many blessings they receive from those they visit. They recognise that the fruit of their labours spring not from themselves, but especially from God and from the poor they serve.” (Rule 1.12).

In reality, it is often the poor themselves who teach us fundamental lessons of today’s Gospel. Both Mary and Elizabeth
were poor women. They sprang from the poor of Israel and had a keen sense of God as the giver of all good gifts. As Jewish women, they recognised God's love in creation, in the daily rising of the sun and its setting.

And as women who hungered and thirsted for God's Kingdom, they recognised God's presence as he erupted into history and took flesh in the Virgin Mary's womb. Like so many poor people, Mary and Elizabeth were attuned to the rhythms of nature and could see both the unexpected and the expected as grace. They were grateful for life, and they teach us today how to celebrate life and to thank God for it with exuberant joy.

I want to encourage you, when you return to your countries, to bring enthusiasm, hope and joy to your companions in the Society. With them, develop a deep spirituality of service. With them, be alert, as Mary and Elizabeth were, to the Lord's constant in-breaking into your own life and the lives of the poor. With them, let your daily prayer be filled with wonder and hope. Believe, as Mary did, that God's power overcomes evil, that God is a liberating force in history. He casts down the mighty from their thrones; he lifts up the lowly.

Today, I urge you to breathe in the faith of Mary and Elizabeth. When you leave this Assembly and return to your countries, sing a new song with Mary and Elizabeth. Sing with them in thanks to the Lord for your wonderful vocation as Vincentians. Sing in thanks for the support and witness of your brothers in the Society. Sing the praises of God for the poor who draw us out of ourselves and help us to see the world as God sees it. Like Mary, let your heart and your voice cry out with this faith-filled, grateful song that combines humility and gratitude: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.”

**Letters**

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

**The real Real Presence**
The front cover caption, “We recognize the Real Presence of Christ in our marginalised sisters and brothers who are not only disadvantaged but also demonised and despised” (The Record, Winter 2010) suggests a misunderstanding of Catholic Church doctrine and history.

Both Oxford dictionary and Encyclopaedia Britannica define “Real Presence” solely as applying to the Catholic Eucharist. St. Ignatius of Antioch, who knew St John the Evangelist (c110) and other early Church fathers, referred to the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist as though it were common knowledge throughout the Church.

The teachings of the Council of Trent ratified the dogma of the Real Presence.

**Duty to abate suffering**

I refer to the debate which has been continuing in your pages for some time about the role of The Society in working for social change.

Many who read the words of scripture, “Blessed are the poor,” or “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” console themselves with the thought that the word “poor” refers to the honest, that is to say, working poor, and not to the dregs of society. “Poor in spirit” is often taken to include even the wealthy, if they are humble in spirit.

The Greek word used by both Matthew and Luke for “poor” means literally, “covering ones,” or, at its mildest, “beggars.” We know that in the society in which Christ lived, beggars, usually people with disabilities, were looked upon as accursed. They were definitely the dregs of society, the drug and poker machine addicts of the age.

These are the people who were referred to by Christ as “Blessed,” doubtless because they were not enjoying their reward in this life. If they are beloved of Christ, they surely must be dear to us as well, and we must have a Christian duty to do all we can to abate their suffering.

Peter Daly, Brunswick West, Vic.

**Inspiration for all Vincentians**

Just read John Falzon’s address to the world body in Spain from 28 May to 6 June this year (The Excluded and the Unknown, The Record, Winter 2010), and I was very proud of him on behalf of Oz to put forward what I would regard as a brilliant synopsis of what Vinnies stands for. It should be sent to each and every person in the Vinnies team.

Interestingly, our recent strategic planning weekend came away with the key strategies as enacting charisma and nurturing charisma, much along the lines of his address.

Bernard Lynch, Hobart, Tas.

**A new Conference in PNG**

Greetings from our newly established Sacred Heart Conference, Tinputz, in Bougainville!

Our group originated in 2004, when I was Chairman of the Tinputz Parish Pastoral Council. During that period, I was called to attend a course on leadership and management offered by the Diocese of Bougainville at one of its mission institutions. That was where and when I first got the information about the charity organisation, the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

I was inspired by the mentions of helping the needy, as my wife and I were just looking after our two disabled mothers. It really hurts when I think of the suffering that the disabled, old, sick, and the poor encounter each day of their lives. These thoughts crept upon me, especially when I reflected on the Bishop’s open invitation to institute such organisations in our parishes. Well, I did it! I came back from the course and carried out an awareness meeting on what little I heard about the works of St Vincent de Paul. That was how our conference began.

The Sacred Heart Conference, Tinputz, began with a membership of eight married couples and a single youth. This group of 17 started out their activities with visits to the needy, firstly within the community and then later extended to the outside communities and of course with very limited items to share. It is just like a model of the poor helping the poor.

The link between the group, our Parish Priest and Bishop Henk was finally extended to Queensland, Australia. We had Jerry McAuliffe and another Vincentian from the Conference at Atherton, Queensland, who came over in 2007 and visited us, here on the mainland of Bougainville. Their visit was timely as it not only inspired current members, but also incited an influx of new members into the group.

Today we have approximately 50 members. We are so glad and proud that we are part of the Vincentian Family throughout the world.

Gideon Todo, President, Sacred Heart Conference, Tinputz, Bougainville, PNG

**Poverty is circumstantial**

I would like to comment on John Falzon’s piece on homelessness and the marginalisation of Christ’s poor in the world (The Record, Winter 2010).

I would like to agree with what was said about homelessness/poverty being due to life conditions or circumstances surrounding the person, and not actually due to a personal fault of the person themselves.

It’s not their fault that they experience such struggle, and sometimes this never-ending journey of suffering and neglect. I know this, because I have experienced homelessness and poverty myself.

I put myself through university to gain a Bachelor in Social Work, which I graduated from just prior to my journey into homelessness in 2006-07. It didn’t make a difference, actually. I was, with the benefit of hindsight, a victim of homelessness, not through my own fault, but because of the inability or unwillingness of others to assist me when I needed it most. I don’t blame them; I just realise that sometimes it’s difficult to help.

My relationship with others – family, friends and in the workplace – was strained for some time after, prior to, and while, I was experiencing homelessness. Unfortunately, this tends
Social problems are complex and there are no simple solutions. Knowledge is not quite the same as understanding and I don’t think you can help what you don’t understand. Usually, you have to experience something in order to understand it. Yes, people should be encouraged to help themselves, but some cannot. They must be tenderly carried, never controlled, and, as soon as possible, be part of any decisions regarding “solutions”.

I enjoy the spiritual readings in our conference, but what moves me most is when I see members of our group, one in his eighties, spending so much time visiting, listening, consoling, engaging; another, joining the long queue at Centrelink with a widow unsure of the complicated forms, or taking and staying at high school information nights because she doesn’t have a car or any family here to look after the four younger children at home. It is when I hear my president’s van in the early hours of the morning, dropping off details of visits to be made, on his way to work and turning up for the weekly meeting before he goes home for tea. Their loving service impels me.

Ann Hobbs, Casula, NSW

Absent coverage

It is important for The Record to tell members and others of the works and the operations of the Society, as we all benefit from the good example of others, and public scrutiny improves private or internal conduct. Had The Record publicised the conduct of NSW office bearers, the later events warranting their loss of office may not have occurred, or at least scrutiny by members may have altered behaviour.

Of the 26 pages of the Autumn 2010 issue of The Record, 11¾ pages record the works of the Society, including in seven other countries. The other pages comprise, in the main, prayer, 1/3 of a page; poetry, 1/3; a call for government policy on Aborigines and refugees to be changed, seven pages; a call for human and social measures as to the performance of the economy, one page; the CEO of the Society criticising “New Paternalism” and the present leader of the Opposition, in particular, 2/3, a sermon for Lent, three pages; and more money for tertiary students, 2/3 of a page.

Almost as much text is devoted to telling others what they should do, as to recording and promoting the Society. A particular author’s personal angst is not Vincentian news. However, ageing membership and serving the mentally ill – real issues for the Society – is Vincentian news, but it does not get much coverage. Illumination of the sources of the funds of the Society, the strings attached to them, and an explanation as to what is done with the funds (but not in an annual report sense) is conspicuously absent.

The Record needs to be changed in the above ways.

Adam Bisits, Richmond Conference, Victoria

Social Justice and Refugees

From The Record, Winter 2010, I was impressed by the article The excluded and unknown by Dr John Falzon and the article, Refugee Backflip – Missing What Matters by Andrew Hamilton. These articulated, better than I could, my own feelings on the question of social justice, particularly with regard to refugees.

On reading the letter by Les Fern, Duty to Respond, I too found myself asking "How do we debunk the myths about hapless boat people?"

If the refugees could tell their own stories, it would not be so easy to depersonalise their experiences or allow them to be pigeon-holed into an abstract identity called “boat people”. It is remarkable that while we might be content to pigeonhole refugees, it would not be as easy to depersonalise them as a group. By labelling people in a particular way it is possible to justify the treatment they receive as being their own fault. These boat people include women and children who obviously have a compelling reason to escape the environment in which they found themselves.

We all remember The Diary of Anne Frank, and similar diaries in this current situation may help to debunk the myth.

Alan Lehrle, Via Email

The Record welcomes letters but we reserve the right to edit them for legal reasons, space or clarity. Articles will be published only if full name and address and telephone numbers are provided, although the address will be withheld from publication if so requested.

Post to: The Record, PO Box 243, Deakin West ACT 2600 or email to admin@svdpnatcl.org.au.

Everyone whose letter is published will receive a free book courtesy of David Lovell Publishing.
DEEPLY saddened by the crisis engulfing Christianity in the Middle East, Pope Benedict XVI has asked the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) to provide urgent help.

In many parts of the land Our Lord Jesus Christ knew so well, the faithful now live in fear as increasing poverty and growing extremism threaten the survival of these ancient communities.

A mass exodus of Christians from the Middle East is now taking place. For some it is a question of escaping bloody persecution. In the Holy Land for example, the proportion of Christians has plummeted from 20% to as little as 1.4% in the last 40 years.

ACN is helping to keep faith and hope alive throughout the region by providing urgent aid to priests, religious and lay people, offering subsistence help to refugees and building and repairing Churches and convents. Please help us strengthen and rebuild the Church in the land of Christ’s birth.

A beautiful, olive wood crucifix, handcrafted in Bethlehem, will be sent to all those who give a donation of $15.00 or more to help this campaign.

Please tick the box below if you like to receive the little olive wood crucifix*.

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**Donation Form: Help keep Christianity Alive in Holy Land and Middle East**

**Send To:** Aid to the Church in Need, PO Box 6245 Blacktown DC NSW 2148

**Phone/Fax No:** (02) 9679-1929 **E-mail:** info@aidtochurch.org **Web:** www.aidtochurch.org

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I enclose $.......................... to help keep Christianity alive in the Middle East.

☐ Yes please send me the little olive wood crucifix*

Made of olive wood from the Holy Land, this small crucifix is powerfully evocative of Christ’s passion and death. The crucifixes are lovingly handcrafted by poverty stricken families in Bethlehem and your donation helps them survive. Comes in a display box with accompanying religious image. (Size 12cm x 7cm)

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Exp. Date ______/______ Signature __________________________

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**Aid to the Church in Need .... a Catholic charity dependent on the Holy See, providing pastoral relief to needy and oppressed Churches**