

*Go and do likewise:
Revisioning the
St Vincent de Paul Society
for the 21st Century*

Lecturer

Fr Richard Benson CM

Vincentian Father and member
of the Congregation of the
Mission in California USA

Respondent

Catherine Collins

Board Member
VincentCare Victoria

*Ozanam Lecture
2010*

Held at
St Francis' Church
Lonsdale Street, Melbourne
Thursday 3 June 2010

The lecture is held annually in honour
of the St Vincent de Paul Society's founder,

Blessed Frederic Ozanam
1813-1853



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works



Mission Statement

The St Vincent de Paul Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires 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.

A message from the State President

It is with pleasure that I present this printed version of the 13th annual Ozanam Lecture. The lecture celebrates our founder Frederic Ozanam's spirit and the charisma of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

This year's Ozanam Lecture *'Revisioning the St Vincent de Paul Society for the 21st century'* is appropriate as we continue the refounding journey at the Society in Victoria.

Fr Benson's lecture concentrated on recapturing the enthusiasm, youth and thirst for good which were hallmarks of the Society's foundation.

Catherine Collins' response to the lecture showed her experience, and gave examples of how we are responding to the hallmarks of the Society's foundation.

God bless you all.

Tony Tome
State President – Victoria
St Vincent de Paul Society

Our Vision

The St Vincent de Paul Society aspires to be recognised as a caring Catholic charity offering 'a hand up' to people in need.

We do this by respecting their dignity, sharing our hope, and encouraging them to take control of their own destiny.



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

Fr Richard Benson CM

A short biography

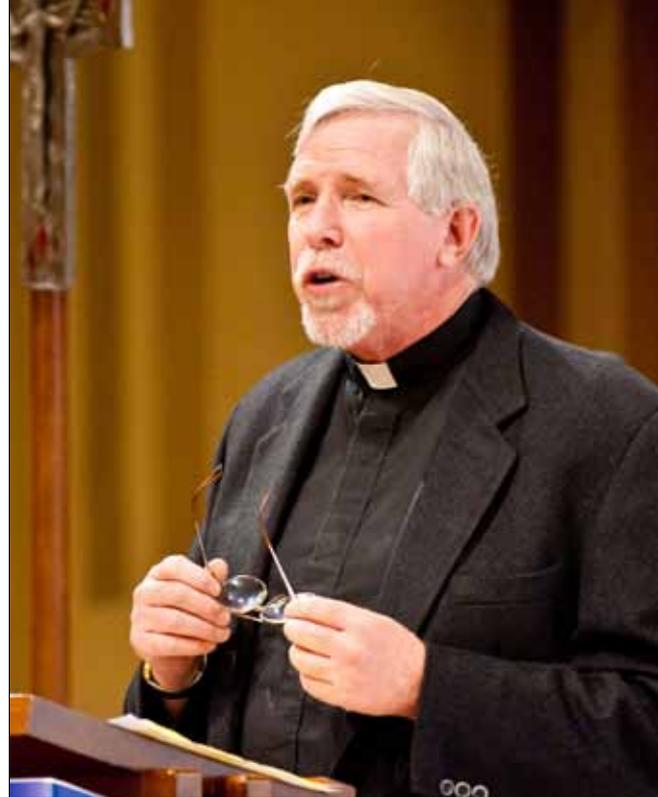
Richard Benson CM is a Vincentian Father, a member of the Congregation of the Mission, Province of the West, California USA.

Fr Benson has served at St John's Seminary since 1993 and is currently the Academic Dean and Chair of the Moral Theology Department.

He teaches fundamental moral theology, Catholic social teaching (social justice) and Catholic bioethics. Fr Benson obtained a BA in philosophy from St Mary's Seminary in Perryville, MO in 1974, and a Master of Divinity Degree and a Master of Arts (theology) from De Andreis Institute of Theology, in Lemont, IL in 1978.

Fr Benson was ordained a Catholic priest in 1978 and obtained a third Master of Arts degree (biological sciences) in 1980 from California State University Dominguez Hills.

Finally, Fr Benson obtained a STL (License in Sacred Theology) in 1990 from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Catholic University of Louvain) in Belgium and a PhD and STD (Doctorate in Sacred Theology) from the same university in 1993.



Go and do likewise:

Revisioning the St Vincent de Paul Society for the 21st century with the enthusiasm for the mission, faith and thirst for good which were the hallmarks of the Society's foundation.

Fr Richard Benson CM – Vincentian Father and member of the Congregation of the Mission in California USA

Early in the 17th century Vincent de Paul founded the Congregation of the Mission, a community of priests and brothers with a single purpose: *to bring the good news to the poor*. Vincent found his inspiration in the fourth chapter of the gospel of Luke where Jesus, preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth reads from the prophet Isaiah, *"I have been sent to bring the good news to the poor."* Vincent understood that here, at the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus was proclaiming his mission, his *raison d'être*, if you will. Jesus was making it clear that he was not sent by the Father to found a Church, but rather to proclaim the reign of God. Thus it has been articulated by theologians that Christians should understand that "the Church does not have a mission, but rather, the Mission of Christ has a Church." Thus, the Church, in its finite and earthly existence, serves the Mission of Christ, not the other way round. This understanding of Jesus and his mission has clear implications for all Christians: 1. Every disciple of Christ is a missionary and 2. Faith is a verb, not a noun. The baptismal vocation requires all disciples to proclaim the good news in word and act. Faith is a call to a way of life, a path of action and cannot be limited simply to what we do on Sunday in our churches.

Vincent's vision for his congregation and for all his sons and daughters was clear and simple: what

greater mission for any community than to take up the same mission as Christ. Hence, the motto of the Congregation of the Mission, *Evangelizare Pauperibus Misit Me* (I have come to bring the good news to the poor). Thus every Vincentian takes up the mission proclaimed by Jesus in the gospel of Luke. Every Vincentian is mission-driven. Every Vincentian is a missionary, a missionary to the poor and a missionary who brings good news, who brings the reign of God in a tangible form into the lives of the poor.

In the words of Vincent himself we hear the challenge. *"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 those who are poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Aren't they our brothers and sisters?... So then, if there are any among us who think they're... to evangelize 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... to do what 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."* (CCD, XII, 77-78)



'Faith is a call to a way of life, a path of action and cannot be limited simply to what we do on Sunday in our churches.'

Fr Richard Benson CM



Fr Richard Benson presenting the 2010 Ozanam Lecture.



‘Frederic himself caught the fire with this vision of Christian discipleship and invited others to find meaning and happiness in the service of the poor and most abandoned.’

Fr Richard Benson CM

For Vincent the call of Christian baptism was a vocation to respond to Jesus’ challenge after he had washed the feet of the disciples, “go and do likewise.” It was not enough for Vincent to ‘know’ his faith. Faith, he discovered, was only authentic when it was ‘lived’. Vincent understood that to be authentic, faith was to be found in our heads, our hearts and our hands. This, I would submit, is exactly Frederic’s insight when he determined that his “Conference of History”, which attempted to evangelize only with words and ideas of debate, needed to evolve into an evangelization that involved not just the life of the mind but direct action to the poor. And it was the example of lived faith in action, directed to the poor with a focus on organization and addressing social ills that he found in Vincent de Paul. Once Frederic understood the profundity of Vincent’s understanding of Jesus’ mission as related to him by Sr Rosalie Rendu, he changed the name from the Conference of Charity to the Society of St Vincent de Paul. To this day, every Vincentian is indebted to and inspired by the vision of Vincent. Vincent helped reform the Church simply by reminding her of her mission.

This evening, with your permission, I would like to use our short time together to explore the aspects of the vision of Vincent that so captivated Frederic with the aim of moving all of us to understand the vision that undergirds the mission of the Vincentian family and our challenge to bring the vitality of this vision into the 21st century.

Vincent burned with the desire to move Christian faith from a mere cultural experience or a notional sense of orthodoxy or family practice to a commitment. He expressed this commitment of living faith as “effective love” or love put into practice. Vincent knew that the greatest commandment, “to love God and neighbour” was

not a ‘command’ but a way of life that in itself was life giving. Frederic himself caught the fire with this vision of Christian discipleship and invited others to find meaning and happiness in the service of the poor and most abandoned. The call to refound the Society of St Vincent de Paul will only be heeded if we understand a refoundation to be more than a review and revitalization of projects, no matter how wonderful the projects. In the end, all Vincentian projects are only means, never ends in themselves. It is the Vincentian vision that must continually evolve and renew itself for it is the vision that drives the mission. The Vincentian projects of 17th and 19th century France, and even some of those of 19th and 20th century Australia may not be the projects necessary to meet the needs of the poor in the 21st century but the Vincentian vision, if it is authentic, remains as the fire that lights the path for an authentic animation of the spirit of Vincent and Frederic in our times.

Poverty in Vincent’s Lifetime – from Report of the Estates of Normandy (1651)

Saint-Quentin. Of the 450 sick persons whom the inhabitants were unable to relieve, 200 were turned out, and these we saw die one by one as they lay on the roadside. A large number still remain, and to each of them it is only possible to dole out the least scrap of bread. We only give bread to those who would otherwise die. The staple dish here consists of mice, which the inhabitants hunt, so desperate are they from hunger. They devour roots which the animals cannot eat; one can, in fact, not put into words the things one sees... This narrative, far from exaggerating, rather understates the horror of the case, for it does not record the hundredth part of the misery in this district. Those who have not witnessed it with their own eyes cannot imagine how great it is. Not a day passes but at least

200 people die of famine in the two provinces. We certify to having ourselves seen herds, not of cattle, but of men and women, wandering about the fields between Rheims and Rhétel, turning up the earth like pigs to find a few roots; and as they can only find rotten ones, and not half enough of them, they become so weak that they have not strength left to seek food. The parish priest at Boulton, whose letter we enclose, tells us he has buried three of his parishioners who died of hunger. The rest subsisted on chopped straw mixed with earth, of which they composed a food which cannot be called bread. Other persons in the same place lived on the bodies of animals which had died of disease, and which the curé, otherwise unable to help his people, allowed them to roast at the presbytery fire.

Vincent's counsel:

It is our duty to prefer the service of the poor to everything else and to offer such service as quickly as possible. If a needy person requires medicine or other help during prayer time, do whatever has to be done with peace of mind. Offer the deed to God as your prayer. Do not become upset or feel guilty because you interrupted your prayer to serve the poor. God is not neglected if you leave him for such service. One of God's works is merely interrupted so that another can be carried out. So when you leave prayer to serve some poor person, remember that this very service is performed for God. Charity is certainly greater than any rule. Moreover, all rules must lead to charity. Since she is a noble mistress, we must do whatever she commands. With renewed devotion, then, we must serve the poor, especially outcasts and beggars. They have been given to us as our masters and patrons.

Poverty in Frederic's lifetime

The worst thing about poverty in the 19th century was the callous attitude of many Victorians. They were great believers in 'self-help'. That is they thought everyone should be self-reliant and not look to other people for help. They also believed that anyone could become successful through sheer hard work and thrift. Logically that meant that if you were poor it was *your* fault. Many Victorians (not all) felt that the poor were to blame for their poverty.

At the end of the 19th century more than 25% of the population was living at or below subsistence level. Surveys indicated that around 10% were very poor and could not afford even basic necessities such as enough nourishing food. Between 15% and 20% had just enough money to live on (provided they did not lose their job or have to take time off work through illness).

If you had no income at all you had to enter the workhouse. The workhouses were feared and hated by the poor. They were meant to be as unpleasant as possible to deter poor people from asking the state for help. In workhouses you could not wear your own clothes. You had to wear a uniform. Husbands and wives were separated and children were separated from their parents. Inmates had to do hard, unpleasant work such as breaking stones or pulling apart old rope.

Poverty in the 21st century

Global hunger:

- 1.02 billion people do not have enough to eat - more than the populations of USA, Canada and the European Union; (Source: *FAO news release*, 19 June 2009)
- The number of undernourished people in the world increased by 75 million in 2007 and 40 million in 2008, largely due to higher food prices; (Source: *FAO news release*, 9 Dec 2008)
- 907 million people in developing countries alone are hungry; (Source: *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, FAO, 2008)
- Asia and the Pacific region are home to over half the world's population and nearly two thirds of the world's hungry people; (Source: *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, FAO, 2008)
- More than 60 percent of chronically hungry people are women; (Source: *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, FAO, 2006)
- 65 percent of the world's hungry live in only seven countries: India, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Ethiopia. (Source: *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, FAO, 2008)

Fr Richard Benson.



'...the Vincentian vision, if it is authentic, remains as the fire that lights the path for an authentic animation of the spirit of Vincent and Frederic in our times.'

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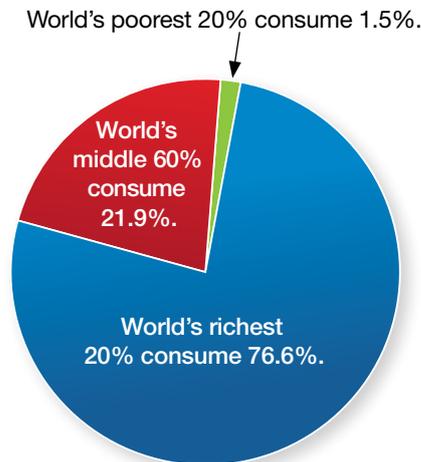
Facts on poverty in Africa

- 315 million people – one in two people in sub-Saharan Africa survive on less than one dollar per day.
- 184 million people – 33% of the African population – suffer from malnutrition.
- Less than 50% of Africa's population has access to hospitals or doctors.
- The average life expectancy in Africa is 41 years.
- One in six children dies before the age of 5. This number is 25 times higher in sub-Saharan Africa than in the OECD countries.

Facts on poverty in the world

1. More than 1.2 billion people - one in every five on earth - survive on less than \$1 a day.
2. The top 1% of the world's richest people earns as much as the poorest 57%.
3. More than 2.4 billion people do not have proper sanitation facilities, and more than 2.2 million people die each year from diseases caused by polluted water and filthy sanitation conditions.
4. Two-thirds of the world's 876 million illiterate persons are women.
5. The annual dairy subsidy in the EU amounts to \$913 per cow per year; EU's aid to Africa is \$8 per African per year.

Share of world's private consumption, 2005



Source: World Bank Development Indicators 2008.

For 156 years the St Vincent de Paul Society has been serving the poor of this community. The establishment of the Society in 1854 here in Melbourne is remarkable in that it was only 20 years after the society was first established by Frederic Ozanam and a few students in Paris and one year after his death in 1853.

We need to ask ourselves two foundational questions: 1. Who were these remarkable people, Vincent and Frederic? And 2. What can they mean for us today?

The world has changed significantly since the time of Frederic and the foundation of the Society in Melbourne. Is the vision of Frederic, founded on Vincentian spirituality, of any value and relevance to us as we begin the 21st century? If the answer is in the affirmative then we need to challenge ourselves to reanimate that vision for ourselves and our society.

At their first meeting, the seven members of the Society simply resolved to bring some assistance to homes of a few poor persons.

Faced with so many anguishing situations, with so much undeserved distress, of so many families stricken by hunger, cold and sickness, these young people made a resolution to answer the call of Christ by dedicating themselves to the poor.

They asked Sister Rosalie, a Daughter of Charity, for the addresses of some families in distress to whom they would bring some bread and friendship. Their resources were solely their own. Such was the origin of the first Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul. The History Conference became the Conference of Charity, which eventually and quickly became the Society of St Vincent de Paul. The hermeneutic key and the focus for us this evening is to ask "why Vincent?". What of Vincent resonated so deeply and authentically within Frederic?

It will be seen that the students of 1833 thought neither of founding a big organization nor of participating in a widespread campaign against misery. They wished to help one another to remain faithful to their baptismal promises and to carry out, supported by their mutual friendship, one of the essential duties of the Christian life.

Nevertheless, less than five years later in 1838, three years after the Conferences of Charity officially became the Society of St Vincent de Paul, Frederic is challenging the members to reanimate themselves. They were already settling into ruts that were jeopardizing the mission of the Society.

"It is your duty, by age and office in the Society of St Vincent de Paul, to reanimate it from time to time by new inspirations which, without harm to its primitive spirit, foresee the dangers of too monotonous a uniformity. Let us be careful not to straiten ourselves with customs too hidebound, within bounds impassable in number or density. Why cannot the conferences of Saint-Etienne and Saint-Sulpice go beyond 50 zealous members? Why cannot the Society here (Lyon) get larger than scarcely forty members? Think about it."

I would like to suggest today that the task or project of revisioning the St Vincent de Paul Society for the 21st century begins with exegeting the foundational vision of Frederic. At least a part of Frederic's vision, and I would argue a significant part of that vision, lies within the person of St Vincent de Paul, especially the retelling of the story of Vincent by Sr Rosalie Rendue to Frederic. The power of the story of Vincent animated Frederic to such an extent that his dream became a powerful reality, the anecdotal and ad hoc service to the poor became a systematic organization that resonated with thousands of people, immediately and almost explosively.



Fr Richard Benson amongst audience members.

That initial explosion was heard and heeded in Melbourne. Let's take a moment and ask ourselves: what indeed constituted the heart of the story of Vincent that rocked Ozanam's soul?

Let me suggest that we can find in Vincent's story three elements that are authentically human and authentically Catholic, elements that resonate with the human soul and elements that are totally in rhythm with the Catholic vision of human flourishing.

Vincent, educated but far from being a systematic theologian, came to understand the profundity of three foundational aspects of the Catholic faith:

1. That every human person is created in the 'image of God'.
2. That only by securing the 'common good' can we truly guarantee every member of society's 'personal' good.
3. That the consistent ethic of life is essential to any moral vision and to the creation of a truly just society.

It's not necessary to trot out a long line of quotes from Vincent to see the authenticity of these aspects in Vincent's vision, it is but necessary to look at his life. I would propose that in the telling of Vincent's story, Rosalie captured Vincent's soul and heart in a way that no academic treatise ever could. She translated Vincent for Frederic in a way that left him entranced and seduced with a vision of effective love. This narrative captured the imagination, the very soul of Ozanam.

The facts of Vincent's later life are profoundly telling in themselves. First, his concern for all persons, rich and poor is interwoven throughout his ministry. Every

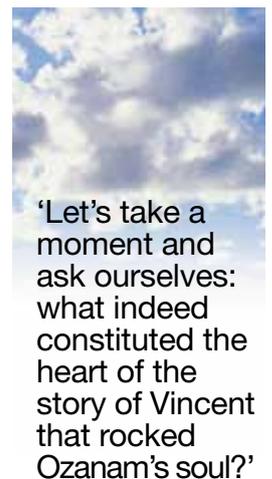
person was inherently valuable because they were created in the image of God. The galley slave, the homeless, the discarded mentally ill, the abandoned and probably illegitimate child, the aristocrat at court, the wealthy and powerful, all were God's children and all were deserving of the same loving care and attention but in different ways and for different reasons.

Ozanam was quick to find his own vision of the human person in the Vincent that was revealed to him by Sr Rosalie.

Himself only a teenager, years before the decree of the Provisional Government abolishing slavery in French colonies and possessions promulgated on 27 April 1848 at the proposal of the Martinique deputy Victor Schoelcher, Ozanam vigorously denounced the inhumanity in the treatment of black people.

"There is no denying the sad and deplorable condition of these unfortunate victims of European barbarism; it will unquestionably continue to be a cause for indignation and tears for the true philosopher and the true Christian, this horrible cruelty of these men who call themselves civilized and who in the name of a holy religion appear on foreign soil like thieving brigands who snatch sons from their mothers and fathers from their children.

Let us weep for the shame of our persecuting brothers! Let us weep for the evils suffered by our oppressed brothers! But you who are lamenting with me turn your eyes away for a moment from those calamities to find out their cause. Listen and listen well to what is in a father's curse, the vengeance of almighty God from whom all fatherhood proceeds and who punishes the audacity of a guilty son to the very last generation.



Fr Richard Benson CM



‘Vincent’s desire to provide not only a “hand out” but a “hand up” was a prescient vision to what we now call social justice.’

Fr Richard Benson

There are sacred pages which reveal to us the primitive source of all these horrors. The spirit of light dictated them to the sacred historian for the instruction of future races.”

Second, Vincent’s desire to provide not only a “hand out” but a “hand up” was a prescient vision to what we now call social justice. Vincent, the apostle of charity, saw the profound connection between charity and justice. He fully understood the adage, “Give a person a fish and they eat for a day, teach a person to fish and they eat every day.” To feed the poor is truly important, but to ask “why are there poor?” is perhaps even more valuable. As Bishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil, a man dedicated to the poor once remarked, “When I fed the poor they called me a saint, but when I asked “why are there poor?” they called me a communist.”

Of course the concern for the poor was not introduced by Vincent. We find it throughout the scriptures, but especially in the teachings of Jesus. The early Church fathers and mothers continued to challenge Christians to adopt a preferential option for the poor. St John Chrysostom, the golden tongued preacher of the 4th and 5th century spoke vigorously of this responsibility. *“Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs. 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.”* This same theme was echoed in the twentieth century words of Pope John XXIII who reminded us that “all property has a social mortgage”.

Again, Ozanam finds in Vincent a clear example of the vision of discipleship that was so important in his life; that serving one’s neighbour is not optional, it is essential to authentic effective Christian love.

Twelve years before the communist manifesto of Karl Marx in 1848, Frederic was deploring the increasing gap at the heart of society between the strong and the weak. His articles suggesting social interventions on behalf of the poor were eventually to be incorporated into the first of the Church’s social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891. This gave him a prophetic premonition of the terrible and unavoidable confrontations between rich and poor.

“The question which divides men in our time is no longer a question of political systems. It is a social question that is of knowing which will prevail: the spirit of selfishness or the spirit of sacrifice? Whether society is to be simply a great opportunity of exploitation for the benefit of the strongest or a dedication of everyone for the benefit of all and especially for the protection of the weak...”

Third and finally, the understanding that human life is sacred from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death is not of twentieth century theological coinage. Rather it is found throughout the history of the Church and Vincent adopted it as a rule of life for Vincentians.

If indeed there is at least a piece of the truth in that the original vision of effective love, a vision that so animated Ozanam to action, was based on the narrative of Vincent that challenged every Catholic to live by three precepts: 1. That every person is created in the image of God, 2. That ensuring the common good is essential to the Christian vision of society, 3. That life is sacred from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death; then we are ready to address the second goal of tonight’s lecture: is this vision of any relevance to the contemporary world, is this vision one that can reanimate the St Vincent de Paul Society so that it brings a message and meal to a world hungry for authentic meaning and authentic happiness? Does it mean anything to us that the Society in its infancy resonated almost exclusively with the young, that those older and more traditional generations whose Catholic identity was tied exclusively to notional assent and sacramental participation were hardly touched by the vision of Vincent that so thoroughly rocked the life of Frederic? Is Ozanam’s vision, the Vincentian vision of effective love, anachronistic? I would answer that the Society’s vision, its authentic vision is only as anachronistic as ‘love’. If love is old fashioned, out of date and mythic then maybe the Vincentian vision is also. Vatican II reminded the church that the two marks of authentic faith are joy and hope. These same two marks are found in the Vincentian vocation as articulated and lived by Vincent and Ozanam. The Society needs to be inventive unto infinity in the service of the poor and every member needs to adopt the authentic Vincentian spirituality that allows them to be grounded in prayer and flexible in service. I truly believe that the future for Vincentians depends on our reappropriation of the Vincentian vision in every member and every conference.

I would suggest that Australia is ripe for the Vincentian vision:

The Society can lead the way in preaching through its actions that every person is the image of God and has inestimable worth regardless of their social class, their skin colour or their country of origin. The Society needs to capture the energy of the Catholic Social Gospel, the good news that justice is a right and that systemic sin won’t be tolerated. And finally the Society needs to make it clear that it serves every human life from the moment of conception until the moment of natural death. ◆



Catherine Collins

A short biography

Catherine Collins joined the VincentCare Victoria Board in April 2007 following her retirement as Principal of Siena College, Camberwell, a position she held for 12 years.

As Principal of Siena, Catherine played a major role in sponsoring and supporting the Society's Compeer volunteer program which provides companionship to people living with a mental illness. She was also involved with the Christmas social program for volunteers and their companions. In addition to her role as a Board Member, Catherine is also a member of the Society's Fundraising, Public Relations & Marketing Committee.

Catherine notes that retirement is the unwritten chapter of her life but one for which she has definite goals including serving in some way which recognises the immense privilege she has had, both in having been raised in a Catholic environment and in working for 42 years in Catholic education. This has formed and sustained her and now she volunteers the gifts she has for the benefit of others.

Response to Ozanam Lecture

Catherine Collins – Board Member, VincentCare Victoria

Together we stand on sacred ground. This ground is holy - our Wurrundjeri brothers and sisters are its traditional custodians. I wish to acknowledge that and pay my respects to their elders; past and present.

Holy ground - this was the site of the first Catholic cathedral in Melbourne and Victoria's first seminary. Blessed Mary MacKillop was baptised and made her first communion here and her parents were married in this church, as were the parents of Ned Kelly!

Holy ground - it is the place where the first Australian conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society met in 1854 under the patronage of Fr Gerald Ward.

Holy ground - it is where we Vincentians have gathered to listen to an inspiring Ozanam Lecture for 2010 given by Fr Benson.

Holy ground - it is every place where we as Vincentians seek to love, serve and bring support and hope.

Thank you Fr Benson for standing here in this sacred place and urging us forward; challenging us to continue the revision the St Vincent de Paul Society by our rekindling of the fire that lit the vision of Frederic Ozanam.

Your references to the world of St Vincent de Paul, and even that of Frederic, are almost beyond our comprehension. They do, however, serve to remind us that, even amidst such horror and travail, God's spirit is alive and is brought to fruition in the minds and hearts of those made in his image. With God's spirit burning in hearts such as those of Vincent de Paul and Frederic and in us, there is a recognition that there is Christ loving the poor whatever kind of impoverishment these, their brothers and sisters, have been subjected to.

We are called to love the poor – people who are poor, those on the margins of our lives, those who are lonely, poor in spirit, who are hungry, those without a safe and clean home and other necessities of life, those who

are frail, have special physical and mental health needs and have little sense of dignity and self worth.

As we seek to return to them 'a debt of justice' (St John Chrysostom) we also remind ourselves that we are part of a 2,000 year-old story of hope and salvation and remember that verse from Matthew: *'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.'* (Matt.25:40)

The intellectual calibre of Vincent and Frederic, together with their deep spirituality, enabled them to reflect on their society in general. That essential of aiming to ensure the 'common good' provided for debate and discussion as to what human beings should expect to be necessary for a life of dignity no matter who they were.

But at the heart of the matter was always the service to that person in need, no matter the circumstances, no matter how far the climb up to the stairs to a room where resentment might be shown - this was holy ground; the sacred ground on which they stood and on which we stand too as we serve our 'masters'. (Frederic Ozanam)

This place of service is a sacred place because of the presence of the hand of suffering that receives of the cup, the hand of love that offers the cup and the hand of Christ that blesses the cup. How fortunate we are in Australia to have such a profound symbol; the circle of authentic love which encapsulates the vision and mission of the St Vincent de Paul Society!

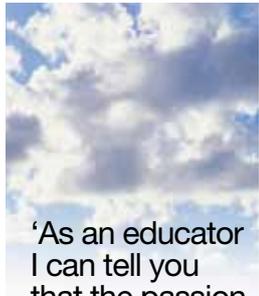
It may be presumptuous of me, Fr Benson, but I believe I can answer the question central to your lecture: *'Is the vision of Frederic, founded on Vincentian spirituality, of any value and relevance to us as we begin the 21st Century?'* I believe I can give a resounding 'yes'! This foundational vision is central to the very health of human existence, whether for the 16th, 17th, 19th or 21st Century. I believe too that there is the same resounding 'yes' from my fellow Vincentians present this evening.

With an affirmation from us all regarding the relevance of the original Vincentian vision to our work today, the question to follow is the 'lived faith in action' question *'So what do we need to continue to do to ensure that the St Vincent de Paul Society is authentic to the original mission?'* The corollary of that is *'if what we do flows out of who we are' or 'lived faith in action'*, then how do we then re-imagine our commitment as Vincentians, personally and as an organization?



As we seek to return ... 'a debt of justice' we also remind ourselves that we are part of a 2,000 year-old story of hope and salvation'

Catherine Collins



'As an educator I can tell you that the passion for justice is alive and very well in the young.'

Catherine Collins

I have been a Vincentian for just over three years. As a 'new' Vincentian I know I do not have the wisdom and experience of so many of you here, but I have the enthusiasm of a learner - what has been 'taught' has been 'caught', and I have the dreams one has when you are given the chance to experience more intimately such a precious gift; the St Vincent de Paul Society, devoted to faith in action. I try to imagine the possibilities without worrying about the limitations!

My experience as a Vincentian has been as a member of the VincentCare Victoria Board. This company is a controlled entity of the Society in Victoria; one which I believe all Vincentians can be truly proud of, and is a fine example of the refounding that has been part of the Society's vision here over the past years.

VincentCare Victoria was set up by the State Council in its wisdom in 2003. It was then named *Aged Care and Community Services* as it provided services to the aged and to the homeless, extensive individual personal support and programs, transitional and emergency accommodation, and meaningful employment opportunities for those with a disability. It has broadened its range of services over the years.

During the past several months the VincentCare Board has asked the questions: *'So what? If what we do flows out of who we are, then who are we and what are we doing and what do we need to do? What is our authentic mission as part of the St Vincent de Paul Society?'*

I think that even after so few years we were searching for a way forward; perhaps you could say we were in a kind of 'rut', as to our mission. This does not negate the motivation or professionalism of the directors or management involved or the success of programs. From my perspective, it is a natural consequence of collaborative human endeavour. Perhaps that is what concerned Frederic Ozanam as he lamented the restricted size of conferences so early in the formation of the Society and urged regular revision, as quoted tonight.

The questions often come easy; the answers are somewhat more difficult and require considered reflection, discussion and debate. One reason I felt able to give that resounding 'yes' earlier is because that is what we as Vincentians were challenged to do - give a 'yes' to the need to re-imagine our role as custodians within the Vincentian vision. We gave that 'yes' to the vision of Frederic and thus Vincent, 'yes' to continuing to share the story and we set about discovering what our mission was to be for the foreseeable future.

The big questions were: *How do we reflect the vision, and re-imagine the mission for VincentCare within the St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria? Who are we called to serve? Where is the Vincentian philosophy evident in our works? How do we articulate our Vincentian culture? What improved structures might we need to better achieve our aims? What is our role in governance and advocacy for 'the common good?'*

I believe Frederic Ozanam would approve of our progress. Some of our deliberations will no doubt be accompanied by some degree of discomfort. But a description of a comfortable St Vincent de Paul and a comfortable Blessed Frederic Ozanam was not what we heard about this evening and do not ring true to me either. I think they would both be urging us forward, telling us to maintain the momentum. The same tension that Frederic and others felt in the early days of the Society's foundation needs to remain throughout our deliberations. Much of that momentum comes from an increasing sense of solidarity with our State Council.

The challenge is how we can best serve disadvantaged people and examining the best options for them, for policy development and for our advocacy responsibilities. No doubt of particular interest to many of you is the commitment by VincentCare to finding a way to better monitor community needs by working with and learning from the other works of the Society, especially through effective communication with the Society's conferences.

So you will no doubt be hearing from us to ensure your experience informs our way forward and hopefully all of the services the Society offers, whether as a

conference or a board, will be enriched by this closer association.

This sharing of experience and understanding across all of the works of the Society is critical to an informed response to the many needs of our disadvantaged brothers and sisters.

Whilst revisioning, refounding, or whatever the term, must eschew complacency, there is much to celebrate here in Victoria and in Australia as the commitment to sharing the story has actually borne fruit over several years.

Frederic was so young. There have been more than nine hundred new members to the Society over the past year and, whilst they are not all 'young', there are excellent programs, conferences and educational initiatives in place for the young, ranging from primary and secondary years through to those in their twenties. Their presence here this evening, together with those so committed over the years, provides us all with a sense of hope for the future and also a reassurance that there will be others to walk in our footsteps!

As an educator I can tell you that the passion for justice is alive and very well in the young. There are so many 'young Frederics' (and 'young Fredericas!') in our society. We need to continually re-imagine how we might creatively capture that same fire of Frederic that is in many more young hearts. We work within the Church. Let us keep embracing the young, giving them the sustenance so many seem to be finding elsewhere, and hope they will recognise that the work of the Society is indeed 'lived faith in action'!

We, 'the well travelled', have much collective wisdom and experience. We have tried to live by the directive of Frederic Ozanam: *"Yours must be a work of love, of kindness, you must give your time, your talents, yourselves."* Our commitment is a precious gift to our Church and our Australian brothers and sisters. We are well versed in meeting challenges and finding solutions. I truly believe that Vincentians in Australia, whatever our roles and responsibilities, understand that we *'bring good news; bring the reign of God in a tangible form to the lives of the poor.'*

Fr Benson, throughout your lecture, you reminded us of both the energy and the advocacy of Frederic Ozanam. His love for his God and fellow human beings was authentic and so he was listened to as he advocated for the poor, for social justice. There was no diminution of values in his pronouncements whether for the ears of government or elsewhere and in his direction to all involved in seeking 'the common good'. He was an advocate for the impoverished. He was fearless, as he knew he had truth on his side.

Several years ago the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia decided that, like Frederic, advocacy isn't a matter of politics, it is a matter of absolute truth, born out of love.

So we need to be prepared to advocate in all of our ministries. Do we rattle the chains enough? Advocacy requires energy, scholarship, research, policy development and, definitely, a spirited

enthusiasm and courage without a shred of feeling comfortable. It is essential to our mission, ensuring, as quoted this evening, that we give 'a hand up' as well as 'a hand out'. This is social justice, otherwise our hand outs will become the ends in themselves. To quote Pope John Paul II: 'Love for others, and especially for the poor, is made concrete by promoting justice'. (The Hundredth Year (Donders), #58) and Frederic: 'Can we remain passive in the midst of a world which is suffering and groaning?'

I want to thank you, Fr Benson, for inspiring us to keep up that momentum as the story is told and retold in our journey of refounding. I believe you have gone a long way to helping us to answer critical questions centred around how can we ensure we add value to our services so that the Vincentian ethos is articulated and not diminished in any way.

You have taken us back to visit the three foundational aspects of faith upon which Vincent based his service and which Frederic embraced. I suggest that if we, in our deliberations and reflections, can give a resounding 'yes' to each of these questions based on this foundation then we will indeed be true to our God, our Vincentian heritage and to those who follow:

Do we recognize that every human being is created in the 'Image of God'?

Are we striving to secure the 'common good' and thus guarantee the 'personal' welfare of every person?

Do we acknowledge the sanctity of life of every human being?

I loved your reference to the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia as being 'ripe' for a 'reappropriation of the vision in every member and every conference'. The word suggests a readiness, a growth to maturity, a promise of a future - it certainly creates images of greater possibility, building on the work that had already been done. It also suggests time is of the essence as the fruit is ripe!

We are already committed to a re-incarnation of the Society in Australia. Frederic was vital, passionate, awake to the needs of his time, keen to restore the dignity of their personhood to those in need, to restore the 'common good' and he revered the sacredness of every human life.

Perhaps we can each start where I am finishing and ask these questions of ourselves. Standing together on those broad shoulders of Saint Vincent de Paul and Blessed Frederic Ozanam, with our guest lecturer, Fr Richard Benson, and all Vincentians, past and present, we give thanks for the chance to enthusiastically reawaken within each of us who we are and then seek to be truly awake to what can collectively flow from us so that we can 'go and do likewise!' (Luke 10:37)

Yes the ground on which we stand is holy, the opportunity we have to share our love as Vincentians is sacred - with the last word to St Vincent de Paul: '... a sacred trust to which we have been invited'. ♦



L-R: Damian Coleridge, Catherine Collins, Fr Richard Benson, Tony Tome.

Ozanam Lecturers and Respondents

- 1997 Sir James Gobbo** Governor of Victoria
Respondent: Betti Knott, General Secretary, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc.
- 1999 Archbishop (now Cardinal) George Pell** Archbishop of Melbourne
Respondent: John Moore, National President, St Vincent de Paul Society
- 2000 Sir Gerard Brennan** Chief Justice, High Court of Australia
Respondent: Susan Campbell, General Secretary, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc.
- 2001 Betti Knott** Director Operations, Archdiocese of Atlanta, United States of America
Respondent: Tony McCosker, Director, Ozanam Community
- 2002 Professor John Molony**
Professor of History and Author, Australian National University
Respondent: Morag Fraser, Editor, Eureka Street
- 2003 Helen Johnston** Director, Combat Poverty Agency, Ireland
Respondent: Fr Mark Raper, Provincial, Australian & New Zealand Province of the Jesuits
- 2004 Fr Frank Brennan SJ** Associate Director, UNIYA and Author
Respondent: Sr Libby Rogerson, Co-ordinator of Social Justice & Director of Caritas, Diocese of Parramatta
- 2005 Moira Kelly AO** Executive Director, Children First Foundation
Respondent: Fr Peter Norden, Policy Director, Jesuit Social Services
- 2006 Fr Gerald A Arbuckle SM** Co-director of the Refounding & Pastoral Development Unit, NSW
Respondent: Julie Morgan, Promoter of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation for the Franciscan Friars
- 2007 Dr John Honner** Director, Edmund Rice Community Services
Respondent: Dr John Falzon, Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council
- 2008 Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez SDB** President, Caritas Internationalis
Respondent: Christine Boyle, Barrister and member of the St Vincent de Paul Society
- 2009 Dr Rosanna Scutella**
Ronald Henderson Senior Research Fellow, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research and The Brotherhood of St Laurence
Respondent: Dr John Falzon, Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council
- 2010 Fr Richard Benson CM** Vincentian Father, USA
Respondent: Catherine Collins, VincentCare Victoria Board



Young Vincentians with Fr Richard Benson, Catherine Collins and Tony Tome.

Ozanam Lecture

The annual Ozanam Lecture celebrates the spirit of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and the good works of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Frederic Ozanam wrote:

"Yours must be a work of love, of kindness, you must give your time, your talents, yourselves. The poor person is a unique person of God's fashioning with an inalienable right to respect.

"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 a long term improvement."

The lecture is open to the public and welcomes all interested individuals. Each year a guest lecturer is invited to address an audience and raise their community consciousness on a contemporary social justice issue.

The selected lecturer is a person actively involved in practical work with the disadvantaged and marginalised (those God loves most). But is also an advocate for social justice through their words or examples. This is to reflect the charism of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and his companions and our patron, St Vincent de Paul.

The Society has been privileged to have a distinguished list of lecturers and respondents over the years. We are grateful to all for sharing their experiences while also raising the social consciousness of us all to our obligations in continuing to journey along Frederic Ozanam's vision.



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

The St Vincent de Paul Society began in 1833 with a 20 year old French university student named Frederic Ozanam. At that time the people of France were experiencing tremendous political and social upheaval including the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and unjust employment practices.

Ozanam gathered a group of colleagues and began responding in practical ways to the poverty and hardships he saw around him by visiting people in their homes, offering friendship and practical support such as a load of wood. Today this practice of 'home visitation' still remains a core activity of the St Vincent de Paul Society's members and volunteers.

The Society in Australia was founded by Fr Gerald Ward at St Francis' Church, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne on 5 March 1854. There are now over 44,000 members and volunteers assisting over 1.8 million people in need. The Society is one of the largest and most cost-effective welfare organisations in Australia.

In Victoria the St Vincent de Paul Society consists of over 8,000 members and volunteers who assist more than 660,000 people in need each year. The specialist arm of the Society, St Vincent de Paul Aged Care & Community Services, provides professional assistance to people with more complex needs in aged care, accommodation and support services as well as supported employment for people with a disability.

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