

Dedicated believers make a difference in our community

Written by Ricardo Torres Thursday, 10 November 2011 09:02



A great blessing in my life has been serving as the archdiocesan chaplain for the St. Vincent de Paul Society. The experience has deepened my spiritual life, introduced me to a very holy community of Christian servants and stretched my understanding of the Gospel. I can never say enough about the goodness, generosity and joy of the Vincentians.

Founded in 1833 by Frederic Ozanam with a group of college students at the University of the Sorbonne in Paris, the St. Vincent de Paul Society began as a humble grass-roots effort to live out the corporal works of mercy. During a public debate with Professor Ozanam, an agnostic intellectual asked what Catholics were doing for the poor people living in the teeming slums of Paris.

The question triggered a surprising response from the profoundly Catholic Ozanam, as he gathered a group of students together and went to the needy and suffering. This little organization, named for the great French saint of the poor, took off like wild fire and today is the largest lay organization in the Catholic Church, with Vincentian conferences flourishing and working in hundreds of countries.

The goals of the St. Vincent de Paul Society include the personal growth in holiness of its members, service to the poor in a personal and humble way and the cultivation of spiritual friendship within the conferences. Here in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, approximately half of our 205 parishes have a Vincentian Conference, whose members meet regularly to pray, reflect on the Gospel in light of their service experiences, and report on their activities.

When a needy person calls a parish, looking for food, clothing, furniture, shelter or other assistance, two Vincentians receive the request, go to the person's home, talk with them, make an assessment of the need and respond with help. This deeply personal and spiritual way of befriending and engaging the poor on the local level transcends the simple handing out of material aid.

In addition, the St. Vincent de Paul Society runs many thrift stores, a family resource center, food pantries and two meal programs on the north and south sides of Milwaukee. Through the committee of the Voices of the Poor, members advocate for justice on political and economic fronts. A recent effort directed

attention to the exploitation of the poor by some loan agencies in the inner city which often gouge their customers with exorbitant interest rates.

With the recent downturn of the economy and rising unemployment, requests for help to the society have dramatically increased. Vincentians respond the best they can, as they are totally dependent upon charitable donations to continue their important work.

We can all help the St. Vincent de Paul Society with donations of food, money and clothing. Priests can support the Vincentians in their parishes by getting to know them and encouraging their efforts. Many people are joining the society because they see it as an authentic and personal way to live out the teachings of Jesus Christ. Maybe God is calling you to do the same!

Recently, I attended an informational meeting at SET ministries which works with all sorts of folks to help them achieve their goals of housing, education, employment, access to services or freedom from addiction. I came away very inspired by the success stories I heard. SET is another great organization, founded in 1985, helping those who live below the poverty line right here in our local community. Living now at the cathedral, I am blessed to see on a daily basis the good work of the Open Door Café which feeds hundreds of people who have nowhere else to go.

These three movements of the Holy Spirit – the St. Vincent de Paul Society, SET Ministries and the Open Door Café – are three powerful examples of the many groups of dedicated believers making a profound difference here in our own archdiocese. As the agnostic French intellectual asked of Ozanam, what are YOU, as a Catholic, doing for the poor and suffering? Blessed Frederic took this disturbing question to heart and answered it with the witness of what became his life's work.

What ideas, inspirations, goals arise in your heart as you ponder the same challenging query?

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Speaking of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, please join me this Saturday, Nov. 12, from 10 a.m. to noon, St. Vincent Pallotti Church, 201 N. 76th St., Milwaukee, at the "The Biggest Warmer" weigh-in for Caps4Kids. We'll find out how many new caps, gloves and mittens schools collected for children in need. Caps4Kids is another excellent example of the work done by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, in this case in cooperation with your Catholic Herald, the Pallottines and Big Buck Country 106.9.