

Praying with the Vincentian Communities

*Tap into a spiritual tradition that can enrich
your prayer life* ■ BY REGINA BECHTLE, SC

At a recent retreat for my community, the question was posed: “When have you felt most like a Sister of Charity?” One after another, stories poured out. Each one reverently described an encounter — with a lonely child, a destitute family, a suffering patient, a confused student, a jobless immigrant. Each one said, in so many words, “I truly live my vocation and most surely touch God when I am in the presence of persons in need.” That experience brought to mind the words of Blessed Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity who served

the poor of Paris for more than 50 years: “Never have I prayed so well as in the streets.”

So how might we define Vincentian spirituality as lived today by Sisters and Daughters of Charity, Vincentian priests and brothers, laypersons in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Ladies of Charity, and young members of Vincentian Marian Youth and volunteer groups?

The answer starts with two people in 17th-century France. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) was fired by passion to meet the material and spiritual needs of persons



who were poor. With a talent for organizing others who shared his passion, he began a group of priests and Brothers, started parish-based lay confraternities, and developed a vast network of charitable services.

Louise de Marillac (1591-1660), a widowed mother and noblewoman, became Vincent's colleague. Together they gathered ordinary women eager to serve the poor in Jesus' name, and taught them to find their cloister in city streets and sickrooms. In these "Daughters of Charity" they successfully created a new way for women to live their vocation in the Church, not set apart from the world but finding God in its midst.

This way of Charity was rooted in Jesus' own mission to "bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18), to set captives free, and to heal the sick in body and spirit.

The story continued in 19th-century America when Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton — a mother, widow, and convert — adapted Vincent's innovative model for her new community, the Sisters of Charity. As the first group of apostolic (service-oriented) Religious women founded in this country, they began schools, cared for orphans, and tended the sick. Their "affective and effective" charity laid firm foundations for the largely immigrant Church.

The Vincentian spirit caught fire in the young nation as others like Catherine Spalding and Xavier Ross began Religious communities to serve frontier settlers. Priests and Brothers of the Congregation of the Mission preached the Gospel and formed the clergy. Laywomen and men spread the Vincentian spirit through the Ladies of Charity and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Believing that "the charity of Christ impels us," (2 Corinthians 5:14) these founders shaped a

Discover the Vincentian family at a glance

There are **more than 1 million** Religious, priests, and members of the Vincentian family, (including those of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul)

Website: For more information, visit **famvin.org**

rich spiritual heritage that integrates prayer and action. In their life experiences, especially as they encountered persons in need, they found a privileged meeting place with God.

These pioneers had a knack for bending existing structures so that the poor might hear the Good News of Christ's love. They found a way around, under, or through situations that seemed impossible, and kept turning obstacles into opportunities. To this day, a hallmark of the Charity spirit is being "*inventive to infinity*," in Vincent's memorable phrase. In today's complex world, this means offering "a hand up rather than just a hand out" — that is, seeking long-range, systemic solutions to poverty as well as meeting immediate needs.

Another core principle of the Vincentian way, now embedded as a keystone of Catholic

THE **SPiRiT** OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL



Words that capture the spirit of Vincent, though he never said them (they were written by writer Jean Anouilh for the film "Monsieur Vincent") are: "You will find that charity is a heavy burden, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket of bread. It is not enough to give soup and bread: The rich can do that. The poor ... will often say harsh things to you, but you must keep your gentleness and your smile. It is only because of your love that the poor will forgive you the bread that you give them."

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social teaching, is *respect for the dignity of every person, especially those who are poor*. Vincent perceived the world through a lens that led him to see the other person as a unique revelation of God. Christ shines through the features of every person, especially those who live in poverty. Looking through this lens invites us to see the face of Christ behind the surface appearance of a homeless person who hasn't bathed in some time, a co-worker whose irritating ways drive us

FAVORITE VINCENTIAN PRAYERS

Some of the Vincentians' favorite prayers are quotes from Scripture

“Let us bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ” GALATIANS 6:2

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” LUKE 4:18-19

“The Charity of Christ impels us.”

2 CORINTHIANS 5:14

“God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God in them.” 1 JOHN 4:16

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crazy, or a starving child halfway around the world. Vincent taught a profound theological truth: To love the person in need is to love God. Let the poor teach you, he would counsel, and count yourselves privileged to be in their company.

Yet another hallmark is *rela-*

tionship. Because we belong to each other, even to those “others” who may at first seem different or unfamiliar, we try to cultivate a hospitality of the heart that values relationships and community above efficiency and productivity. Becoming friends with people on the margins, getting to know their names and stories, may lead us far beyond our comfort zone, but it is the path that Christ’s own charity urges us to walk. We believe that this kind of love truly does change everything.

Here’s an example: A wealthy downtown lawyer decided to volunteer at a nursing home. So did several women from the poorer neighborhood nearby. After the volunteers pushed residents’ wheelchairs, they would eat lunch together, swapping stories and family pictures. As the women from the edge of poverty became friends with the man from the lap of wealth, they opened his eyes to a world he had never known. The experience changed who and what and how he saw. And when one’s way of seeing and acting changes, so does one’s way of praying.

The Vincentian way cultivates the habit of *reflective living*. Simple



Love is inventive to infinity.

■ ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

questions like “Where is God in this experience? How is God being revealed in the people and situations that fill my day?” can start us on the path of contemplative awareness. Prayer rooted in reflection on real life deepens our sense of connectedness with others. It attunes us to discern God’s leading in each moment, so we might see and “do what is before us to do,” in Vincent’s words. Reflective living invites us to pay attention to the present moment, and so to the grace that unfailingly awaits us there. “Keep well to what you believe to be the grace of the moment,” advised Elizabeth Seton. “Only do your best and leave the rest to our dear God.”

The way of Charity calls for *collaboration*. In service of Christ’s mission, we gather collaborators and encourage inclusive communities. Our spirituality invites us to build bridges rather than walls, to be people of “both-and” rather

than “either-or.” In the family of God, everyone belongs; at the table of Charity, there is room for everyone.

Trust in Providence led the great figures of our tradition to take huge risks with little certitude. They sought to do God’s will and trusted mightily that God would give them the necessary wisdom and resources. Providence sustains their followers today, who continue to accomplish extraordinary things with characteristic *humility* (honesty), *simplicity* (single-mindedness), and *zeal* (passion and hard work).

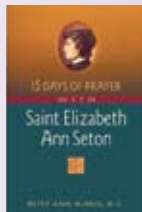
Vincent de Paul did not set out to develop a formal teaching on prayer or the spiritual life. Rather, he offers us a spiritual way that is *ordinary*, down-to-earth, rooted in real life — ours and that of the people we serve. It invites us to enter into the mystery of God-in-our-midst, to look for manifestations of God within the events,

persons, and circumstances of our ordinary lives.

To sum it up, Vincentian spirituality offers us a practical, ordinary way of seeing, loving, and serving the Christ who meets us in the person in need. It is a way that learns from experience, builds relationships, trusts Providence, acts creatively, and finds God in everyday moments, reflective prayer, and simple people. **GD**

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WHERE TO LEARN MORE



You can further explore the spirituality of **Saints Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, and Elizabeth Seton** in the *Praying with...* series from Word Among Us Press, *15 Days of Prayer With...* series from Liguori Press, and *A Retreat With...* series from St. Anthony Messenger Press.

■ SISTER REGINA BECHTLE

▶ NEXT MONTH PRAYING WITH THE FRANCISCANS

DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT

Anyone who uses the phrase “easy as taking candy from a baby” has never tried taking candy from a baby.

100 YEARS OF WALKING

A wise old man celebrating his 100th birthday got a visit from a local television reporter. “Are you able to get out and walk much?” the reporter asked.

“Well,” said the man with a wry smile, “I certainly walk better today than I could a hundred years ago.”

