



St. Vincent de Paul

ASSISTANCE • SHELTER • HOPE

## The Journey of an Inner-City Servant



## **DEDICATION**

**I WOULD LIKE TO DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO ALL THE RELIGIOUS BROTHERS IN THE UNITED STATES AND AROUND THE WORLD IN RECOGNITION OF THEIR SERVICE TO GOD, COMMUNITY, AND THE NEEDS OF THE POOR AND NEEDY**

## INTRODUCTION

In 1955, I entered the Congregation of the Mission. I have spent sixty-four years of my life in ministry exercising various roles at St. Vincent De Paul Parish as a Religious Brother.

In April 2021, I celebrated my eighty-seventh birthday. I've had a wonderful life. I have had many reasons to celebrate God's amazing grace. Because I have had such a rich experience, I want young men to know the value of being a Vincentian Brother.

In the Eastern Province of the Congregation of the Mission, there are only four brothers. We are not the only congregation experiencing a decline in the number of entrants called to be a religious brother. The Congregation of the Mission, however, offers opportunities that cannot be found elsewhere. A Vincentian Brother is called to serve God and the poor in the way of St. Vincent De Paul. It is a rare and unique vocation, one that is filled with joy and purpose. The promise of this life is the vocation that makes a pivotal difference with regard to the pressing needs of our day!

St. Vincent De Paul would want us to adapt to the changing times and environment in which we find ourselves. The mission of the Vincentian Brother, therefore, finds expression in accordance with the needs of the day. I have initiated several nonprofits that meet the current need for racial equality, that defend the right of the disenfranchised to have employment, a quality education, food security, and affordable housing. All of these needs are supported by the fundamental right of each person to be treated with dignity and respect.

Finding Christ in the face of the poor is the greatest gift one can be given. This is why, before I die, I must speak to the young men around the world about the importance of considering a vocation to be a Missionary Brother.

I want them to come and give voice to the global demand for justice and peace with a community of men who make a real difference in the world. I long for them to let their voices be added to the countless members of the Vincentian Family who clamor for the same values. I hope that they are ready to transform the world with their courage and zeal, their truth and compassion, their energy and idealism.

I want to credit the Provincials and Superiors of the Congregation of the Mission for their vision and faith. They have challenged each of us to live a life worthy of the Gospel. They have insisted on integrity and service to the least of our brothers and sisters and have never side-stepped difficult issues in their transmission of values that are transformative and necessary to the building of a better world.

My Provincials have called me to find the poor in the daily providence of my everyday life and to work zealously to make a difference in their lives. They have made spaces for me to encounter the

God who motivates and uplifts me. They have supported me when I acted in prophetic ways and challenged several Presidents of the United States, legislators and members of the City Council to act in ways that were just and equitable.

What richer life is there for one who wants to make a difference in the world? Let my story encourage young men to consider the life of a Religious Brother, and to come, leave their mark in the Kingdom of God that is come—but not yet—not fully, at least. These young men are His friend; they are being called to do as He asks. They need not be afraid. God is with them!

This is the reason for which I came—to make Him known by lifting up the poor and lonely, the disabled and disenfranchised. Perhaps they, too, after reading about my life, will feel moved and want to come, too. Perhaps they will seek His face in the poor and lowly and will desire to bring the poor to the table where those brothers and sisters of ours will, perhaps for the first time, find inclusion and meaning. They can make a difference.



# LIFE AND WORK OF BR. ALFRED J. SMITH, CM

## Son of St. Vincent de Paul

### A Chronology

I was born to Alfred and Gertrude Smith in Albany, New York on April 2, 1934. I was the second child. My sister, Ann had preceded me. Within the next several years, however, John, Robert and Mary Louise would come along and make for a very close-knit group of children. As our family grew, so did our happiness. Sunday and summer trips with the family were a regular occurrence. Laughter, contentment and our share of “fun” were characteristic of the Smith household. We were one big happy family, pulling tricks on one another, helping one another in and outside of periods of “trouble,” and sharing all that we had. Loyalty was prized, and complaints were heard and resolved. Family unity was to be preserved and forgiveness was expected. Life was good, and family was everything.

At the age of four, however, I was separated from my mother with whom I had a strong relationship; in fact, that relationship persisted up until the time of her death and became stronger with every passing year. In 1938, my mother became critically ill and needed blood transfusions, so I was sent to Staten Island to stay with my aunt and uncle for the summer. I made the necessary accommodations and was happy until I received a letter from my mom telling me that my family had visited the circus and had traveled to my grandparent’s home during the summer following her illness. My reaction was typical of a forgotten child. I felt homesick and melancholic; I cried every day feeling abandoned by the person I loved most in this world—my mother. Within a short time, my Aunt Frances, a relative who lived near my parents, came to take me home. When I finally reached Albany I felt relief, a sense of being put together again. My life went back to being “normal” and I returned to my happy, secure, and peaceful *modus operandi*; I was loved immensely.

It was around this time that my vision began to deteriorate. I was cross-eyed (a condition caused by an accident at birth) and I needed thick glasses. I wore a patch over my left eye and did exercises each and every day until my eyes were properly aligned. This disability affected the way I played ball and my work in school. Despite my vision problem, I was happy (except in the classroom) and especially grateful that my very loving grandfather was living with us. My grandfather spent hours with his grandchildren, sitting us on his lap, telling stories and playing games with us. His love helped to ease the pain of impaired vision and certainly helped move me

along to seeing as I ought. The experience was striking because I remember “seeing” what we so frequently take for granted, namely that love is ageless and intergenerational, kind and compassionate--priceless experiences in one’s development. In 1940, the precious gift of my grandfather was taken from us. His legacy of love, understanding and approachability continued to impact my life and way of thinking even up to the present.

In 1941, World War II started. I collected scrap metal, rags, and newspapers for the war effort. Our neighbors joined with us as a community to help collect items from houses, railroad yards, and dumps; we made an ample contribution. My father was an Air-Raid Warden. When the sirens began to scream, we had to pull down our black window shades, put out all the lights and listen to a special radio station until we heard the “all clear” siren. It was a trying time for everyone, but the burdens that accompanied that war will last for a lifetime. Since aggression was not part of the Smith ethos, the magnitude and horrors of a world war were a threat to the values we held so dearly as a family. Love and understanding are not compatible with actions that threaten the lives and livelihood of so many. As a seven year old, I was completely baffled by the horrors of war-time hostility. Our regular family discussions had instilled in me the importance of forgiveness, peace and harmony. How could things have escalated into so much terror and heartache? It was a challenging experience, but thanks be to God, the war ended without destroying my family and the values the family so staunchly held.

In 1944, at the beginning of the end of the war, my family moved away from the city and out of our cold-water flat that we had occupied for many years. Our new home was on the outskirts of a town surrounded by woods and places to play; camp opportunities abounded. This new home added to our family spirit and enabled us to enjoy the world that had been so torn apart by the Normandy invasion and other cruel acts of war. In 1945, the war ended. I was eleven years old. It was at this juncture that I began to adopt a work ethic of sorts. I worked for a vegetable peddler from 7 AM to 11 AM. I would then rush home, change my clothes, and go to school. Because of overcrowding, middle school didn’t take place until noon; it lasted until 4 P.M.

From 1946 until 1948, I worked at a Farm Store. I delivered feed and hay to local farmers. I also had a morning paper route. These jobs ended when I began high school in 1949. I continued to work at new occupations, however; I was employed at a grocery store where I worked after school and every summer. If that wasn’t enough, I became the manager of three sports: basketball, baseball, and football. I was the official scorekeeper at games, statistician, and record-keeper. This spirit of industry negatively impacted my grades and self-esteem. While beginning with second honors, I ended my sophomore year with low grades and a diminished image of myself—my self-confidence certainly suffered a blow. Of course, I had only myself to blame. I never took a book home, and I did my assignments poorly, and while in school.

By 1951, I had developed a strong liking for the missions and a love for the poor. I wanted to be a Missionary Brother, but my parish priest insisted that I become a priest. During a Parish Mission, the preacher, a Maryknoll priest, advised me to become a candidate for the priesthood at a Maryknoll Junior Seminary. I felt disinclined, but I followed the lead of the priest who was guiding me. I must acknowledge that my instincts were more reliable regarding this matter. I had no background in French or Latin, and had to attend a special class to gain a working knowledge of these subjects. This class, coupled with the academic program at Maryknoll, was overwhelming. I became sick and was bedridden. I was given a grim diagnosis: ulcers and colitis. Moreover, epilepsy was not ruled out. I had to go home. I returned to high school and couldn't wait to finish. I did not enjoy any of the special events (for example, proms) that make one's junior and senior years tolerable for the disaffected. I got a job at the A&P super market, replacing food on the shelves. I worked quickly and efficiently-- to my detriment. Several of the other employees felt that I was creating a standard that they could not equal and so I was asked to "slow down" so as not to make them "look bad." I refused. That refusal earned me a job in the Dairy Department as assistant manager.

My promotion was a positive reality for me, but my health again began to decline. I began to have seizures. I was soon diagnosed with a brain tumor. I made it known to the doctors that surgery was out of the question, and kept the diagnosis to myself. I took strong medicine, but did not tell my parents since I was carrying my own insurance.

Soon I left the A&P, and got a job at the State Bank of Albany. I was also a member of the New York State National Guard, but was given an honorable discharge on account of my medical problem. Shortly thereafter, I was drafted to serve in the Korean War, but was rejected for medical reasons. Simultaneously, I experienced a growing desire to become a religious, as a Brother, a branch of the service of a different "Order." I dated, but without interest, because a gnawing sense of vocation became a compelling preoccupation. Mass and Eucharist had so much more appeal; my mother joined me in attending daily Liturgy before I returned to work.

In December 1954, during a Miraculous Medal Solemn Novena, which closed on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, I asked Our Blessed Lady to give me a sign regarding my desire to be a missionary. Father James Twomey, CM had preached the novena. Before the close of the Novena, it became clear to me that God was calling me to be a Brother in the Congregation of the Mission. I shared my thoughts with Fr. Twomey who agreed to send a Vincentian to speak with me. At the same time, I decided to stop taking the strong medication for seizures. I felt fine; in fact, I felt as if I were cured. Could it be a miracle?

I spoke with the Vincentian sent by Fr. Twomey. I agreed to a thorough medical examination so that my recovery would be confirmed. It was. Until this very day, there has never been a recurrence of seizures. On May 8, 1955, I left Albany and arrived in Philadelphia to begin my

formation as a Vincentian Brother. Since I was the first Brother candidate in years, I was sent to Mary Immaculate Seminary in Northampton, PA for a six month postulancy. I entered the Novitiate at St. Vincent's Seminary in Philadelphia on November 7, 1955 and, on June 5, 1956, I went in our newly-opened Novitiate in Ridgefield, Connecticut. I took temporary vows on November 8, 1957 and was assigned to St. Vincent's Seminary. I was asked to run the vocation office as secretary for Fr. John Lawlor, CM and to attend Pierce Junior College. I was also asked to run the athletic program at St. Vincent De Paul by Fr. John Rutledge, CM and Father Francis Atmore, CM, Pastor.

In 1959, at our Provincial Assembly, Br. Steve Kennedy, CM and I appealed to the Assembly to be more sensitive to the needs of the Vincentian Brothers. I am happy to say we were heard. Between 1962 and 1969, I served as the sacristan of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and was put in charge of the altar servers. Thirteen of my altar boys entered the Seminary.

By 1969, I was restless with zeal for parish work. Both St. Vincent De Paul and Immaculate Conception Parishes wanted my services full-time. With the help of Fr. Ned Loughran, CM from St. Vincent De Paul Parish and Bob Doherty, CM, Fr. James Collins, CM, provincial, assigned me to St. Vincent De Paul Parish for a six-month trial period. I am still waiting for my six-month evaluation. What was started on December 5, 1969 continues. With thanksgiving and joy, I acknowledge the affirmation of God's will by the members of my community. In 1970, I was asked by Fr. Bob Doherty, CM to be the Director of Social Outreach. As Director, I ran a food center and ministered to shut-ins and senior citizens.

In 1971, we became affiliated with the Archdiocese. I was asked to be on the Board of Directors that started the Archdiocesan Senior Citizen Council.

Even though hard times followed with the separation of the parish and the departure of two of our priests from the Vincentians priesthood (Fr. Bob Doherty, CM and Fr. Donald Cooney, CM), coupled with the comings and goings of many pastors and parishioners, I remain humbled with the confidence given to me by God and the conviction that Holy Spirit dwells within me and overshadows me. I have been guided by God through faith and the support of my Vincentian community, and I will never be able to put into words the trust that God and the community have had in me to serve the Lord. I know that my service has always been with abundant joy and a fervent desire to do His will in the way and time that He directs.

The changing demographics in Germantown prepared me to found and manage a series of organizations intended to impact cyclic poverty and to help the most vulnerable among us to find meaning in the midst of devastation and struggle.



In 1971, I worked at St. Vincent De Paul Parish under the leadership of Fr. Thomas Browne, CM. At Fr. Browne's direction, I kept myself busy with sports, altar boy ministry, sacristy ministry, works for the poor, the food center, school activities, teaching religion, and visiting shut-ins. In 1972, I initiated the Golden Age Club for about one hundred and forty senior citizens. Community life was a challenge, but the work was excellent. In 1974, we actually started to have senior citizen meetings. Our first meetings were in the old Boy Scout and Girl Scout room in the Parish Hall. Then St. Vincent School moved to Holy Rosary's old school on Haines and Morton Streets because of the lack of outside fire escapes. The Immaculate Conception School burned down in 1972 and moved to the Immaculate Conception Parish Hall. At this point, the St. Vincent School building was vacant. Fr. Browne asked me if I could do something with the building. I suggested that we use it for a Senior Citizen Center for about one hundred forty seniors. Fr. Browne agreed, but told me to get the money. I applied for a Block Grant offered by the Office of Housing and Community. I first had to address City Council. I was successful. At that meeting, I asked for \$30,000 to fix the heating system update the electricity, and paint the interior. I was told to hire architects. Eventually, they were fired because the architects suggested that the third floor of the building be closed off. I was given a new list of architects, and plans were made, but we encountered a new problem: we had a long-term lease on the building; the Vincentians owned it. No grant could be given to a lessee. Our provincial Fr. Gerard Mahoney, CM sold the property to the Senior Center for \$1.00 and we hired contractors. It took six years to complete the job. We opened in 1984. The final cost was over \$240,000. I became the President of the St. Vincent Senior Community Center (the newly formed nonprofit). Sr. Vincent Louise, D.C. came and directed the seniors. After one year, Sr. Vincent Louise was replaced by Sr. Mary Joan, D.C. I already had the services of Sr. Monica, D.C. and Sr. Eugenia, D.C. who helped on a regular basis. It cost \$25,000 to run the center. I raised the money through a junk business I started, was subsidized by a grant written with the help of Sr. Mary Grace, D.C, and with the revenue from the annual Bazaar run by the Daughters of Charity. Over the years, the Senior Community Center has offered an array of services, but shifting demographics have caused several services to be dropped. At present, the food bank remains the most important service offered, since food insecurity is a growing problem. The Germantown population is poorer than ever, and the provision of the most basic form of sustenance is sorely needed.

In 1974, I also obtained my Special Education Catechist Certificate. I was very happy to be able to teach the "retarded" (as they were called then), brain-damaged, emotionally disturbed and handicapped children of St. Vincent De Paul Parish.

In 1975, recognizing my service to the youth, Monsignor Schmidt and Father Maginnis, under the leadership of John Cardinal Krol, appointed me to be the Regional Director of the CYO. I was the first non-clergyman, to assume this post. My regional duties were added to my parish duties. These duties kept my hand to the plow, and my eyes focused on doing something special for God.

In 1977, Fr. August (“Bud”) Englert became the pastor of St. Vincent de Paul. I teamed up with Sr. Ruth Mahar, DC and Frank Mahoney, a faithful Catholic layman. We did outreach to the sick, shut-ins, and dying in the parish. 1977 was the beginning of the best years of my Religious Life. We visited 550 shut-ins each month. We split up the work and each of us visited certain individuals. Additionally, the three of us would visit local nursing homes, boarding homes, and high-rise senior citizen apartments. To minister to people who are dying is a very special blessing. For them to let you in on their intimate conversations with God is an experience that cannot be put into words. Although they would thank us, we knew that we were being ministered to by them. There was one boarding home that was especially poor. We often brought food and supplies and had parties with the people. They were overjoyed when we came, remarking “here comes the three musketeers” or they gave us other endearing names. It was a great ministry. Eventually Frank Mahoney became sick and died. I was asked at this time to start new ministries and Sr. Ruth recruited and trained new volunteers to help her with her work.

On November 17, 1978, my father died. Dad was one of eleven children. His mother died when he was in the fifth grade. So that the family could stay together, Dad and his other sisters and brothers had to quit school and get a job. He was never able to return to school and complete his education, but he was not deterred from advancing himself. He enrolled in an evening program where he learned auto mechanics, and how to make electrical repairs and plumbing repairs and to weld. These skills made it easy for him to find employment. He worked for the shipyard during WWII and with the New York Central RR as a boiler maker and welder after the war. At the age of sixty-four, my dad suffered a severe heart attack and could not work, but he had saved enough time to be able to receive a full salary until he was sixty-five when he retired with full benefits. My dad was a quiet, humble man whose skills were innumerable. He could fix anything. Perhaps the most memorable of his skills, however, was his capacity to love. He invited his own father to live with us until his dad passed away and he loved my mother and his children with passion, great devotion and wisdom. Unfortunately, I was not with him when he died. His life and love, his work ethic, his quiet passion for goodness and faith will forever influence my life.

In 1980, I celebrated my 25<sup>th</sup> Jubilee. My greatest gift was to attend a forty-day retreat in Guelph, Canada—an experience that deepened my love for God and strengthened my vocation as a Vincentian Brother. It was a tremendous experience.

In 1981, I retired from youth activities after twenty-four years. At the direction of my Superior, I founded Inn Dwelling (a nonprofit organization) at the Colonial Inn and simultaneously began the renovation of twenty-four individual houses in Germantown for families in need. Our endeavor at the Colonial Inn ended after a year. The problems were enormous and way beyond our capacity to resolve. We were a new organization, only beginning to build our resources. In 1983, Fr. Bud Englert, CM was reassigned and replaced by Fr. Richard Rock, CM.

On September 27, 1983, on the Feast of St. Vincent De Paul, Fr. Joseph McClain, CM dedicated St. Vincent's Community Center.

In 1984, we opened St. Vincent's Senior Center (a \$240,000 project), started a Soup Kitchen with Janet Hill and Peg Maguire, and continued our renovation work in individual houses. I coordinated the effort. I provided the food for the Soup Kitchen, and did the pick-ups and helped cook along with Janice, Peg, and volunteers. When Janet and Peg left, Jim and Sharon Lafferty and Steve and Maria Odelia Oldham, along with other volunteers, took over. I directed the operation until 1989 when Sr. Eileen Smith, SSJ joined our staff and took over the kitchen as Director. Up until the time I left, Ed Moughan and Betsy Ellis did the cooking on the days on which we were in operation, namely Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. I will always be grateful to them, the coordinators and volunteers.

In 1988, my mom died. Her mother had died suddenly when she was a young child. She and her brother were placed in an orphanage run by the Daughters of Charity. In her teenage years, she returned home to her father who had remarried. Her brother never accepted his life apart from his father and when he was old enough to leave the orphanage, he broke all family ties and lived the life of a nomad. My mother was a religious person. Daily Liturgy and prayer meant everything to her. We prayed the rosary as a family each evening, especially during the war. Her love for God spilled out into service for others. We were always delivering meals to or shoveling snow or running errands for neighbors. We were not permitted to accept any compensation. As her children grew older, she was available to assist any of them in their need. One great example can be found in Mom's relationship with my oldest sister, Ann. Ann had nine children. When the youngest of Ann's children started school, Ann went to college at night. My mother was a great help to her. Without a doubt, Mom was a great influence on the lives of all her children. If I had to write a book about her, I might entitle it *LOVE*. God and family came first, and love filled our home and our lives. Her three bouts of cancer (uterine, breast and bone) never deterred her from giving all she had to each one of us. Her death was a great personal loss for me.

In 1989, Fr. Gregory Cozzubbo, CM. replaced Fr. Rock, CM as Pastor of St. Vincent De Paul Parish. Since then, Fr. Aidan Rooney, CM, Fr. John Kettlelberger, CM, Fr. Richard Rock, CM, and Fr. Sylvester Peterka, CM have served as Pastors of St. Vincent De Paul Parish and have been supportive of Inn Dwelling.

In 1990, I suffered setbacks physically. I contracted shingles that extended over a three month period. An aggressive virus continued to plague me over the summer, and in November, I contracted pneumonia. It was a year I would like to forget.

In 1991, realizing that I had undertaken many projects and overwhelmed by the enormity of many of them, I asked Sr. Mary Rose, D.C. to be Director of the Senior Citizens.

In 1994, I hired Sr. Rosemarie Jefferson, MSBT who served and continues to serve as Asst. Director of Inn Dwelling.

From 1981 until the present, I have remained committed to Inn Dwelling with the help of God and the permission of the Congregation of the Mission. It has been a rewarding and transformative experience for many families and teens.

## Formative Experiences

I believe that a strong family is the most basic formative experience one can have. My family life influenced the direction of my entire life. Typically, it is the place where basic values are developed. From infancy through advanced years, I can look to many experiences that shaped the person I am still becoming.

Faith in God was the primary value instilled in each of the Smith children by devoted parents. My parents were wonderful stewards of God's magnificent love. We had no doubt that the Sacraments were visible signs of God's presence with us. My parents made sure that each one of us received Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist and that we regularly sought God's forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the slights we made during the course of our everyday life. My mother was a member of the Third Order of Mount Carmel. She attended daily Mass and prayed special prayers throughout the day. In the evening, we all prayed the rosary together. We were taught from a young age that a generous service was the fruit of a lively faith, and so my brothers, sisters and I would spend time delivering meals to the elderly and running errands for them *without expecting remuneration for our service*. While mom was busy making the meals, my father would repair the furniture of our neighbors who could not afford to hire a laborer.

In addition to our faith, our parents taught us that love means service and that we were to love our neighbor as ourselves. This meant that we had to respect the dignity of each person and do everything as if we were serving the Lord Himself. We were also taught to work through our pain and never give up. God's plan was paramount; inconveniences would pass, but God's love, expressed through us, would never pass away and would ultimately enrich the lives of others. My parents taught us to trust the goodness of every person and to believe that genuine potential was there, even if we could not see it. This taught me to trust others and to hope for the best possible outcome in my relationships. Without belief that a person can grow and realize personal development, hope suffers, and no program, no matter how good it is, will ever help another to reach self-sufficiency. God is the Master Designer. We are called, like John the Baptist, to prepare His way for each individual. It is God who brings about transformation. We are his instruments. We can offer opportunity and access, but people must seize opportunity and take advantage of access.

As a young man, I was engaged in my parish. At age fifteen, I was an usher and counted the Sunday collection. I soon became a member of the Holy Name Society and the Nocturnal Adoration Society. At age eighteen, I became a member of the Knights of Columbus and by age twenty, I took my fourth degree. There is something to be said for involvement in Church-related things. It helped me to become accustomed to the inner workings of a parish, and helped me to

feel confident that Church ministry was within my grasp. These activities fostered a love for the Church and a desire to serve.

Even my leisure time was a formative experience. I was both Treasurer and Secretary of three Bowling Leagues. The responsibilities involved were overwhelming, but they certainly prepared me for ministry.

Another formative experience has been my work with the poor. Many of the poor people I served were grateful, but many were not. I experienced a sense of entitlement from some, verbal abuse from others, and still others just didn't care if I helped them or not. Some stole from me, destroyed the gift that they requested, and threatened me. St. Vincent would put it this way, "The poor will resent the food you give them." I spent hours in prayer learning from Our Divine Master that the Cross is the way to union with Him and relief of the poor. Once that lesson began unfolding in my life, I, like our Master, could reach out and take the hand of the resentful poor person knowing that the outcome may be distasteful. At the intersection between God and the struggling human, God brings people into the Kingdom of acceptance, love and peace. When I experienced the love that is involved in the mystery of Redemption, carrying the wounds of my own humanity, I could see that heaven was and is filled with those who could not grasp Divine Love until they put their hands in the wounds of Christ and saw for themselves how much He loved them and how his love was expressed through humans. This is the ultimate transformative love of the One who gave His life for a sinner like me and the resentful poor. This is the beginning of understanding.

So I must acknowledge that in the providence of my everyday life, working with the poor continues to transform me and fills me with that longing to be "touched" by Him who loved me from the beginning. There is no greater LOVE.

This does not mean that I should not challenge and be challenged to "see" what is difficult to see. It does not mean that I should not be asked to be open to those who cannot understand Divine Love as expressed by humans. I should love them anyway. What it does mean is that I bear patiently the pain of human resentment and all that it involves. "The poor will resent the food [I] give them." My love for them, however, may challenge them to be open to that ultimate receptivity of God's Redemptive Love. There is no superiority, no privilege, no angle involved when a Vincentian Brother extends his hand. It is simple love, love as one has been loved by Him. This experience has opened me to the possibility of sharing with Him most intimately, the love that alone can satisfy, the Love for which I long, the Wounded Love that has grasped me from the beginning.

Another formative experience was the women companions on my journey. Working with the "Mother Teresa of Germantown" also known as Sr. Ruth Maher, D.C, was an experience I will never forget. She was a professional Social Worker. That identification was not, however, what people

remembered. What they did remember was her kindness and charity. Sr. Ruth exhausted herself in serving nearly five hundred elderly, sick and shut-ins who were living in Boarding Homes, Nursing Homes, Senior Housing, and in their own home. She was especially attentive to the poor. A visit was never simply a visit. It was an experience of the heart. There was nothing that she would not do to bring comfort and healing to the broken-hearted, to the disabled, to the downtrodden, or to those who had no one to care for them. Her touch made me feel good. I can only imagine what it did for those to whom she ministered.

Evelyn Rogers was also a Professional Social Worker. She and her husband, Marion, volunteered for St. Vincent's until Marion passed away at a young age. Since Evelyn was employed by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, she could only volunteer part-time. When, however, Evelyn retired she volunteered full-time in the Food Cupboard and Thrift Shop. I worked with Evelyn with regard to these endeavors and eventually the Learning Lab for forty-five years under the umbrella of the St. Vincent Senior Community Center Nonprofit Organization. She taught me to be tireless in my efforts to help even the most abusive people, and to remain faithful to the poor, never counting the cost.

I hired Sr. Rosemarie Jefferson, MSBT in 1994. I could see in her the enthusiasm and experience Inn Dwelling needed to bring individuals and families to self-sufficiency. I was not disappointed. We complemented each other's gifts and together helped fifty-eight families become first-time homeowners. At the time of her arrival at Inn Dwelling, I had nearly completed the development of a strategic plan for Inn Dwelling. At that juncture, we could either expand our housing base or create new social service type programs. I chose the latter. Together, we learned from the people, that education of their children was the greatest need. We have created a program that helps poor, underrepresented children access opportunity and levels the playing field. 100 percent of our students have been accepted into college. Sister has been with us now for over twenty eight years. Inn Dwelling could not have realized its success without her inspiration, devotion and energy. Her gifts enabled us to make the program successful.

These three women have collaborated with me to impact the lives of the poor. I am grateful to Our Lord for the many years of service they have given to help those in need at St. Vincent's Parish, the Senior Community Center and Inn Dwelling. I am also indebted to the Vincentian Community for their constant support. The Congregation of the Mission has been an extraordinary blessing in my life.

My own mistakes have taught me much about becoming real and a real Religious. I have made some blatant errors, but God, in His abundant mercy, has helped me and turned my lemons into lemonade, if you will. My congregation was tremendously supportive during these times. I learned that any work begun at the request of the Congregation was successful; those works fashioned by my own design were not.

Finally, each mission experience taught me a new lesson. I learned that by consistently helping people and giving them things, I was enabling them to remain dependent. While it made me feel good to give as much as I was able to the poor, I was not helping them to become self-sufficient. This influenced my approach in the development of Inn Dwelling, a nonprofit organization founded to help the poor realize their own potential.



## The Call To Be A Vincentian Brother

The call to be a Vincentian Brother is deeply rooted in my Baptismal call to share in the kingly, priestly, and prophetic roles of Jesus and to participate in the missionary role of the Church. It is a call to love—love God with all my heart, soul, and strength and to love my neighbor, especially the poor, as Jesus loves them. I have found the Triune God within me and have come to believe that the Triune God is in every person whether he or she is healthy or unhealthy, friendly or unfriendly, grateful or resentful, good or bad. It is easy to love the desirable. As Scripture tells us, there is no reward in loving your friends. Loving those who are not lovable, however, requires a special grace. The desire to seek out the unappealing person, or the angry person, the unlikable person or the lonely person is the fire of Divine Love working within us. This attentiveness to the broken-hearted has been the grace of my vocation. I feel called to listen to these sons and daughters of God and to bind up their wounds (Psalm 147:3). There is no greater satisfaction. It is the most humbling of graces for it shows me my own weaknesses and my dependence on the mercy of God. It has also challenged me to want the grieving person to take hold of his or her life at the time of our interaction and to realize the great gift being offered by God. Every living creature has the potential to become his or her true self. Few take up the challenge to realize that self; nevertheless, as missionaries, we are called to invite others to take the journey of self-discovery. In order for that to happen, I cannot act paternalistically; rather, I act prophetically. I am reminded of the story of the woman at the well. Jesus asks for a drink from a Samaritan woman. The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (Jews do not associate with Samaritans). Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water” (John 4: 7-10). This is the call—to engage with the brokenhearted and have God use you to give a person the opportunity to begin the search for “the water that becomes a wellspring of eternal life” (John 4:14). This, then, is the call to be a Vincentian Brother, namely to give sight to the blind, to set the captive free, to heal the brokenhearted. There is no richer life, no greater gift than to be used to help one’s brothers and sisters to experience the freedom of the sons and daughters of God. This is the work that is necessary to help another appreciate the gift of the Sacraments administered by a priest. I am called to be the one who prepares someone to embrace the life of a person who is fully alive, and ready to participate in the family of God and the missionary work of the Church. This work will take great energy and the person will fight you all the way, but with perseverance, you will, in many cases, succeed, because it is your vocation. God will use you and the person you serve will come to be grateful that you supported him, trusted him, believed in him, and loved him enough to call him home to his real self.

I would be remiss, if I did not give credit to my father and mother for laying the seed of transformative love in my heart. If it were not for their unspoken witness of love for God, each other, their family, and neighbors, especially those living alone, the disabled, and the poor and needy, I would never have recognized the call to intensify what was begun in me at Baptism. My parents' love for God and the Church inspired me. The daily recitation of the rosary as a family was especially attractive; it kept our family united and focused on the things in life that were important. Of course, my grandfather is behind the magnificent development of "family life." His wife died when his children were young. He told his children that he was not going to put them in an orphanage. Rather, he was going to keep them all together, and he was going to raise them. In order to meet all the expenses, however, the children would have to leave school and go to work. This included my father. My father and his siblings were deeply loved by a man who was possessed by God and who loved deeply. There is no greater love than to give your life in the service of your children--to provide for them, inspire them, and instruct them so that they, too, could live good Christian lives of loving service. And there is no greater place to teach this incredible lesson than on your dad's lap being told how special, how wonderful and how great you are even though the sacrifices involved are tremendous and the burden, unspeakable. Love does such things. What a grace to be raised by such a man and to pass that gift on to your family. This is precisely what my father repeated, and when he left home, being the last to marry, he took my grandfather with him. My grandfather lived with us. He put us on his lap and told us, not of the sacrifices he made, but of the hardships of an immigrant Irish population and all the joys of loving.

I have to credit, too, the priests in my parish who allowed me to exercise ministry at a young age. I was an usher and counted the collection regularly. As I grew, I joined the men's Adoration Society and made a holy hour in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament each First Friday.

Finally, I must credit the work of priests who gave missions in our parish church and in neighboring parishes. Although I did not experience a Vincentian mission in our parish until I was older, I was immediately attracted by the way they spoke about a call to serve the poor and needy. It was their touch that made my heart sure that God was calling me to a Vincentian Brother.

The witness I experienced, not spoken in words but by example, has made my heart fertile and enabled me to hear and receive the call of God to give the same witness to those I am privileged to serve—to be their advocate and friend and to companion them until they return to the Lord.

It is not enough to love God if my neighbour does not love Him. I must love my neighbour as the image of God and the object of His love, and do everything so that in their turn men love their Creator who knows and considers them as His brothers, whom He has saved; I must obtain that they love each other with mutual love, out of love for God who loved them to the point of abandoning to death His very Son. So that is my duty. Now, if it is true that we are called to bear God's love near and far, if we must set nations alight, if our vocation is to go and spread

this divine fire in the whole world, if it is so, my brothers, if it is really so, *how must I myself burn of this divine fire!*

**Vincent De Paul**

## **Why I Became a Vincentian Brother**

I think Pope Francis can help me explain this. He shared a legend that is instructive:

At the birth of Jesus the shepherds hurried to the stable with different gifts. Each brought what they had; some brought the fruits of their labor, others, some precious item. But as they were all presenting their gifts, there was one shepherd who had nothing to give. He was extremely poor, he had no gift to present. As the others were competing to offer their gifts, he stood apart, embarrassed. At a certain point, Saint Joseph and Our Lady found it hard to receive all those gifts, especially Mary, who had to hold the baby. Seeing that shepherd with empty hands, she asked him to draw near. And she put the baby Jesus in his arms. That shepherd, in accepting Him, became aware of having received what he did not deserve, of holding him in his arms, the greatest gift of all time. He looked at those hands that seemed to him always empty; they had become the cradle of God. He felt himself loved and overcoming his embarrassment, began to show Jesus to the others, for he could not keep for himself the gift of gifts.

A Brother is the one who stands apart. He has no special ministry as a priest does. A priest is called by God to be an icon of Him. He is called to gaze into the eyes of God's people and share the sacraments of God's infinite love made manifest in Jesus. He communicates with Jesus' people on His behalf. He is called to proclaim God's word and to celebrate the liturgies that accompany birth and death, anniversaries and jubilees. It is a magnificent calling, one of supreme importance and necessary to the organic structure of the Church.

A religious brother, on the other hand, is called by God to proclaim the Gospel more by his ministry of service than by a sacramental ministry. He is called to participate in the mission of the Church by bringing the good news of God's unconditional love to those who are not seen, or who are broken-hearted, or who are bitter because of some difference or experience that alienated them from God. He does this by cradling the Lord and sharing Him with others through touch and listening, gazing and sharing—in short, by taking care of the immediate needs of the poor. He recognizes his own poverty, and believing that everything comes from God, he points to Him through the corporal works of mercy.

More particularly, a Vincentian Brother responds with zeal and gentleness to those who have no resources to find healing and strength for the life they are living. The poor suffer from anger,

resentment, disability, homelessness, hunger, abuse, addictions, mental illness, and more. These individuals are often judged to be blight on society. They are those who cannot find it in their heart to engage in the personal work of becoming whole. A Vincentian Brother listens to the hurts of those deemed unlovable and accepts the person for who they are, never judging but comforting those who mourn and healing the wounds of those who are immobilized by our human lack of charity. The Brother accompanies the person on their journey to self-sufficiency and spends his life focused on “preparing the way of the Lord.” This means that the person is never left where they were found, but is lifted up by prayer, relationships and tender love.

This is why I wanted to be a Brother. I was weak and disabled by a brain tumor. God put in my hands the “gift of gifts” and I cannot keep him nor the miracle of my healing for myself. I feel loved. I just had to share what I had been given, confident that he was leading me. Miraculously, I have been cured. The Lord was put right in my hands. I want to share him and show Him to those whose experiences prevent them from cradling Jesus in their arms. This is the vocation of a Vincentian Brother and it is my vocation. I begin each day in the stadium of my heart where I ask Our Lord to take care of all of those who need my prayer. Then, after asking Him for his assistance, I leave my virtual cloister to visit those who are on the periphery of society. I want to bring the good news to the poor and set captives free, I want to bring food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, provide clothing to the naked, relief for those whose bills could bring a shut-off of utilities or eviction notice, friendship to those who are lonely and depressed—this is only the first step. Then I listen to the reason for their desperate circumstances and begin to relate with them in a way that God can use to transform their lives. This is so that they can be themselves, can realize all the gifts they are missing and be healed, as I was. Then they will be “free,” captives no more. When that happens, there is no telling what they can and will do. God is the Way and the Light, He is certainly Incarnational Love, and for those who ask them and have faith, He will bind up their wounds so that, in turn, they can help others to become free.

My choice to follow the Lord as a Vincentian Brother was a demonstration that I was captive no more. I was cured, and I just had to run, cradling the Love of my Life, and sharing Him with those, who like me, are standing apart, empty handed, embarrassed-and waiting for Our Blessed Lady to lay Love in their arms. And she will!

We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of Providence, and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ.

**Vincent De Paul**

## **The Life of Prayer of a Vincentian Brother**

St. Vincent De Paul is known as the “Apostle of Charity.” Through his devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, he came to see others as Christ sees them. He loved the poor and he knew that humility was fundamental to the development of the other Vincentian virtues: simplicity, zeal, mortification, and gentleness.

My prayer life began in earnest when I asked Our Blessed Lady to grant me the blessing of knowing what God wanted of me. I have already explained that I was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Could God be calling me to become a Vincentian Brother with this malady? Through the intercession of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, I was cured of my brain tumor and my seizures. I was then admitted to the Congregation of the Mission. This was the beginning of my interior life that led to service. My devotion to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal has never been stronger. I pray the novena prayers and the rosary each day. She is the way to the heart of Jesus, and she has asked her Son to sustain me in my vocation. He certainly has

Believing in the counsel of Vincent, I tried to develop a greater spirit of prayer and humility. I began to pray in a deeper manner when I became affiliated with the Charismatic movement. I settled on a group that met at the Dominican Retreat House in Elkins Park, PA. With the assistance of many who attended, I was invited into a closer and more intimate relationship with God. I couldn't get enough of the lessons on the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit, on Scripture, and on engagement in the Healing Ministry. I was attracted to the notion of contemplative prayer and was directed, in 1980, to make a forty-day retreat at Guelph in Canada. It was my 25<sup>th</sup> Jubilee as a member of the Congregation of the Mission, and I wanted to do this as an act of gratitude for all the God had done in me and through me. The retreat was one of the greatest experiences of my life. I came away with a deeper love of God and a deeper appreciation of the gifts God had given me, an understanding of my strengths and weaknesses, acceptance of my dependence on Him, and a burning desire to serve God and the poor with all my strength, love, and will-- with the help of God and a deep personal experience of Him.

These religious experiences have enabled me to “know” God more intimately and to become aware of Christ in the poor. Following the retreat, I was asked to help plan weekend retreats at Elkins Park and in Maryland (on one occasion). My heart was full. I relied on the Holy Spirit to give me the words that were suitable for the occasion. Eventually, however, my interior life felt as if it was drying up. I attended many retreats searching for a proper way to pray. I tried the simple Jesus Prayer, centering prayer, journaling, imaging as in the case of the Spiritual Exercises (in fact, I started a group to do this, but after a couple of years it died out). I finally came to understand

that contemplative prayer is not based on a method. I now simply recognize the Presence of God and I enter the contemplative prayer that unites me with God. I cherish this form of prayer, for I know that in darkness, a wonderful Light moves me with His strength and love, enabling me to love as He loves. His strength overcomes my weakness. I know, too, that when I have a tangible feeling that I call *The Light*, I am tempted “to build a tent” and maintain my right to be at rest in the presence of God as I want. At times such as these, I am always called to step into the cloud, as at the time of the Transfiguration, to hear His all-powerful voice. He tells me to gaze on Him and to seek his Face in the poor. There is to be no concern for feelings of presence that I should want to savor. There is no ministry that can find a successful outcome if the Lord is not the focus of my life and prayer. Without faith and trust in God, we labor in vain. I know that I have seen His face in the poor. He has taught me that He resides within each person, and even though disguised at times because of human frailty, He lives and remains in the heart of the poor--hidden as the Eucharistic Bread in the Tabernacle, waiting to be recognized and compassionated. Anyone who embraces the life of a Vincentian Brother, must know the Eternal God who calls and transforms us. “To all who do receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a spouse’s will, but born of God.” (Jn. 1: 12-13). This is the work of the Holy Spirit who “overshadows” us and grafts us into Trinitarian Life. To know and understand that we are God’s and are acting in God’s name means that we must make room for Him and ponder His words in our heart. We do not see Christ in our brother without a profound humility and great love. God freely gives us these gifts, if we rely on His infinite goodness and mercy, and, guided by Him, seek His face in those who are undesirable and marginalized. This we learn in prayer. It is the reason why I make an annual retreat. I believe that St. Vincent De Paul was right when he said, “A man of prayer is capable of everything.” I know that this is true. I am a branch that clings to the Vine; I am a sheep and He is the Shepherd. How blessed I am to be called to be His servant!

Further, I am asked to pray for so many people who rely on God’s help for a variety of needs. I have placed them in the stadium of my Heart and ask God to give them their daily bread. Our prayer cannot be narrow and petty. It has to touch the lives of those who so depend upon Him and us. It has to reach those who are most in need of His love. It is the advocacy I exercise before God that is most effective, because it is He who “builds the house,” He who loves the poor more profoundly than I can.

We, as Vincentians, are called to be Contemplatives in Action. The energy to pray for others, listen to the poor, and possess a burning desire to love and serve God for Himself and in the poor, comes from “I AM.” How can we doubt that He is in us and with us? I pray that I can love Him more each day with a love that is rooted in humility and gentleness.

*Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding,  
and my entire will. Whatever I have or hold, You have given me;*

*I restore it all to You and surrender it wholly to be governed by Your will.  
Give me only Your love and Your grace, and I am rich enough and ask  
for nothing more.*

**St. Ignatius of Loyola**

## **The Call to Community as a Vincentian Brother**

I should imagine that my family was the first community to which I was exposed. This Smith domestic church was the strongest and most instructive experience of my life. It taught me about love, presence, belonging, meaningful relationships, support, understanding, compassion, forgiveness, encouragement and all the other virtues so characteristic of a community. I was challenged to make a commitment and to be unselfish in the use of my gifts. My experience was intergenerational. After my grandmother died, my grandfather lived with us until he died. I loved sitting on his lap and hearing his many stories: *family first*; that was our motto.

I am told that this is what a young man, seeking to commit himself to a religious congregation, is looking for. I believe that the Vincentians offer this opportunity. The superiors trust the candidate's capacity to accomplish the mission and are **supportive** of the efforts made by each individual. The congregation offers peer support during formation. The young men are assigned to intergenerational community settings during and after profession and/or ordination. Those already living in the house teach values that strengthen the dignity and gifts of each person. The men living in the rectory are inclusive and diverse. Those sent to live in a community setting are exposed to the Vincentian family and learn about the support offered by the Vincentian community, the Daughters of Charity, the Ladies of Charity and the St. Vincent De Paul Society.

Even though each Rectory may not be a community of young men, the Formation Team tries to make sure that there are at least two young men (if available) present in the rectory. Even if that is not possible, the priests and brothers that I know provide a positive experience for the men assigned to live out their vocation as a Vincentian. The men in the rectory offer prayer experiences, support, encouragement, exposure to the Vincentian way of life, understanding, and recreation. They do not judge the new priest or brother. If he makes a mistake, they listen, are quick to overlook and offer good role-modeling. They really want the young man to become more fully immersed in the Congregation of the Mission and so they foster a life lived together in harmony and great joy.

St. Vincent De Paul wanted us to live in communities. He said:

Be united with one another, and God will bless you. But let it be by the charity of Jesus Christ, for any union which is not sealed by the blood of Our Savior cannot endure. It is therefore in Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ that you ought to be united with one another. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is a spirit of union and of peace. How can you attract people to Christ if you are not united with one another and with him?

**St. Vincent de Paul**

(Abelly, book II, c. 1, 145)

It should come as no surprise that St. Vincent laid claim to the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation as foundational. Love of the poor requires that a Vincentian be supported in the development of relationships since one cannot love unless he is first loved into being: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Begotten Son so that anyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16). And again, “We love God because God loved us first” (1 Jn. 4:19). Many of our hopes and dreams for community and meaningful relationships are contained in the profound gifts of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

Community supports Incarnational love. It is the glue that holds us together when things are challenging and difficult, when we celebrate, when we are victorious, when there is a pandemic. It is regenerative and life-giving.

Our community life is also rooted in the Trinity. The Trinity of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit give us the model of the truly relational. When one comes to know the love of God, one comes to embrace the Truth that God Is Love. This belief strips us of our self-preoccupation and moves in us in an “other-centered” way. So, for example, it moves me to listen to the joys and pains of our brothers. It moves us to care about their ideas and participation. It opens us to share joys and successes, failures and misfortunes, and even insights in prayer. We become concerned that all of us are comfortable and that everyone’s needs are met. We work at becoming culturally aware of other’s ways of doing things, types of food they eat, important feasts and ways of dress, ways of speaking, manner of exchange, ways of praying and so on. Our community is inclusive because everyone belongs, and everyone has a say—the old and the young. It is a movement away from our comfort zones, and a movement toward integration and peace. This lifestyle requires flexibility and compromise, but it likewise brings great joy.

In community, the goal is that everyone decreases so that together we may increase in stature, in wisdom, in Christ and in brotherhood. This is not easy and we fail at it many times, but we realize the goal many times, as well. The key to success is prayer and humility. It is the recognition that the myths of individualism and supremacy have no place in a community. We are in this together—for better or for worse. Our guide is Jesus Christ, His Eternal Father, and the Holy Spirit. We are dependent upon our God to make us a company of men willing to bring God to the most vulnerable. If we receive the Trinity in our heart, we will become willing and able Servants and Sons of Vincent. It requires the letting go of my egotistical ways, and putting on Christ. It requires that I affirm the gifts in everyone and recognize that only in unity is there strength.

We Vincentians have the capacity for a great community life. It happens when we gather together and make a plan that includes praying, eating, and recreating together and sharing ministry. It is



taking time each week and sharing what is going on in our lives. It is sharing faith. It means becoming united in ministry, whether it is the same ministry or a variety of ministries. Community should make us family. By our example, we empower people to want to be part of our vision for ministry and part of our life. It is the family way. It is love. We are not always successful, but when a local community makes an effort, it brings great satisfaction to all of the members of the community. After all, we are in this together!

## **THE VINCENTIAN CALL TO SERVE**

### **CATHOLIC YOUTH ORGANIZATION**

When I finished my novitiate in Ridgefield, CT, I was assigned to work in the Vocation Office with Fr. John Lawlor, CM and to attend Pierce College for an accelerated secretarial program. At the same time, I was given permission by the Provincial to work at St. Vincent De Paul Elementary School to coach baseball and basketball for the middle school. This was a new venture for me; I had never coached any sport. It was my first experience of on-the-job training. I struggled in the beginning, but eventually was able to have my team play with the best. I was then asked to start a team with the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades. The pastor called them the "Mighty Microbes." With God's grace, we did win many games. This was important because it boosted the boys' self-esteem as well as their grades. In 1963, now coaching the freshman-sophomore CYO game, we won the Regional Playoffs and then the City Championship. It was the first time that St. Vincent de Paul CYO had won the City Championship. This led to Father Martin O'Halloran's asking me to serve as Athletic Director.

Soon, at the request of the students, I became a track coach. I got help from my friends who were coaches, a sponsorship from the Santa Maria Knights of Columbus Council, and a field from LaSalle College. I knew God had to be in this one!

In 1975, I got a call from Msgr. Schmidt, Archdiocesan Director of the CYO, asking me to be the Regional Director of the CYO. I was the first non-cleric to serve in this position. This was a great experience. I coached for twenty-four years, but in 1981, I had to resign to take up other duties.

### **SENIOR CITIZENS AND THE ST. VINCENT SENIOR COMMUNITY CENTER**

In 1969, I was asked to work with youth and senior citizens. In 1970, I began a Golden Age Club. We met in the old Boy Scout and Girl Scout Room in the rear of the Parish Hall. In 1971, this club became affiliated with the Archdiocesan Senior Citizen Council and I was asked to be on the Board of Directors that started that Council.

In 1974, St. Vincent De Paul School moved to Holy Rosary School on Haines and Morton Streets because St. Vincent De Paul School was unsafe for the children. There were no usable fire escapes between the second and third floors. This left a vacant building on St. Vincent De Paul's property. Fr. Browne asked me to identify a use for the empty building. I asked if the senior citizens, (there were about one hundred forty) could use it. He agreed, but told me to find money to repair the building. I was made aware of a Block Grant being offered by the Office of Housing and Community Development. I attended a meeting at the Philadelphia City Council and proposed a grant of \$30,000 to fix the heating system, make roof repairs, update the electric system and paint the interior. Sr. Victoria Nolen, D.C. and Sr. Mary Grace Higgins, D.C. helped me to prepare the proposal. My proposal was accepted. I was told to hire an architect and close off the third floor. We acquiesced to the City's demands, only to find out that the architect's plans were rejected. The City fired the old architects and gave us a list of others from which we could choose. The newly hired architect drew up plans in accordance with the City's instructions. His plans were approved, but there remained one problem: St. Vincent Senior Community Center was leasing the building and that was not permissible; we had to own the building. My Provincial, Fr. Gerard Mahoney, C.M. sold the building to us for \$1.00. We sent out bids and the contractor was hired. It took the contractor ten years to complete the job; thus we did not cut the ribbon for our Grand Opening until 1984. The final cost for renovations was upwards of \$240,000. By this time, we had lost one-half of our senior citizens through death and illness and the demographics had changed considerably.

The Daughters of Charity sent Sr. Vincent Louise, D.C. to direct our eighty member group. After one year, Sr. Vincent Louise was replaced by Sr. Mary Joan, D.C. Sr. Monica and Sr. Eugenia, D.C. helped on a regular basis.

I opened a thrift and furniture shop in Norristown to meet the costs of the senior citizen center. Additionally, we set up a Food Center for those seniors who could not attend our meetings.

## **SHUT-INS**

One of the most enjoyable and inspiring periods in my life were the years I spent ministering with Sr. Ruth Mahar, D.C. and Frank Mahoney. Together we visited the parish shut-ins. We visited about five hundred and fifty people each month. Each of us visited certain individuals, but, together, we visited the local nursing homes, boarding homes and high-rise senior citizen apartments. This ministry began in 1977.

My most precious and valued moments were spent with the dying. Ministering to those who are returning “home” to the Triune God is a special blessing. I valued being “let in” to the dying individual’s intimate conversations with God. The exhilaration I experienced during these opportunities cannot be put into words. Bringing them Eucharist and hearing their thanksgivings was a privilege, one that I treasure. Sister Ruth, Frank and I knew full well that these moments were moments in which we were being ministered to.

Our visits to the nursing homes were also rich experiences. We especially loved our visits to the nursing home that ministered to the poor. St. Vincent De Paul Parish always took care of the residents’ special needs; for this reason, the people loved to see “the three Musketeers” bring the good news of God’s unconditional and prodigal love to them. On holidays, we would throw parties and give them each a gift. The expressions of love and joy filled them and enabled them, in turn, to share God’s gifts from them.

Our work together continued until Frank got sick and was no longer able to visit with us. He died within a short time of his illness, and so did our missionary ventures. Sr. Ruth then trained volunteers who continued this invaluable ministry.

## **ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOUP KITCHEN**

In 1984, I was approached by the Pastor, Fr. Richard Rock, CM, who asked if I would run a weekend soup kitchen. Food insecurity was a growing need in the neighborhood. I rounded up a cadre of volunteers to work with me. We served every weekend and on holidays. I felt it was important to help the poor to experience a sense of “family” on those days, since there was such a sense of abandonment. I did this for five years (in addition to my other responsibilities). Fr. Rock finally suggested that someone be hired to take over this much-needed and growing ministry. Eileen Smith was hired and from then on “on the seventh day, I rested.”

## **VILLA VINCENT**

In 1994, I incorporated Villa Vincent, a nonprofit organization. Its buildings were located on Germantown Ave. next to the building which was then the YWCA. The purpose of the nonprofit was to develop commercial properties. It was funded in part by the William Penn Foundation. A

series of proposals were submitted for the use of the buildings. As a result, the St. Catherine Laboure Medical Clinic, serving the uninsured, was situated on these premises.

## **INN DWELLING**

As I noted in the chronology, I started Inn Dwelling at the direction of my Superior in 1981. I am going to speak in greater detail about Inn Dwelling since it is the mission in which I am most intimately involved and which is ongoing.

In January 1981, St. Vincent De Paul Parish administrators were approached by the administrators of a local boarding home regarding the possibility of accepting the boarding home as a new ministry. Since the priests and parishioners of St. Vincent De Paul Parish had been ministering at the boarding home for ten years, the pastor felt that it was worth our prayerful consideration. Several parishioners from a variety of disciplines were called upon to join the parish administrators in discerning the appropriateness of this call to administer the home. Religious congregations were called upon to pray, and facilitators were asked to lead the process. Katie Buckley and Jim and Barbara Allaire guided us in wrestling with this momentous decision. On May 25, 1981, with the assistance of Philip E. Hughes, we negotiated an agreement with the owner of Colonial Inn. Because the Inn was in such disrepair, we decided to lease it for one year with an option to buy. We ran the Inn, in accordance with our agreement for ten months beginning on July 1, 1981. The name of the Inn was changed to Inn Dwelling, knowing full well that only the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit could transform this disintegrating operation into a ministry of love and care. With the help of seminarians, volunteers, Sr. Eileen Maguire, SSJ and the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, we began the arduous task of cleaning, exterminating, renovating, and humanizing what was formerly called the Colonial Inn. We hired Marielena Zuniga to take over the "Don Cares" Program, Bruce Fina to handle the finances, Sr. Mary Anne, RSM to provide personal care and supervise the kitchen, and Jim Dempsey to be our night supervisor. I was asked to be the Director. After expending an exhausting year, St. Vincent De Paul administrators and all those involved decided that we could not pursue the purchase of the Inn. We left, but not without touching many lives and making the place a home with boarders who were "family."

At this juncture, we convened a group of parishioners, who with Fr. Bud Englert, CM and I began a discernment process regarding the suitability of continuing Inn Dwelling in some form. As we looked for signs of God's providence, I was given a house. The committee felt that the donation of a house was an indication that the entity "Inn Dwelling" ought to continue as an affordable housing program.

God had taught me through my previous mission experiences that if 'I gave people a fish, they could eat for a day; but if I taught them to fish, they could eat for a lifetime' (Chinese proverb). I was determined to have people realize the potential God had given them. Thus the mission statement of Inn Dwelling was that people should attain to self-sufficiency.

I set out to restore a decaying neighborhood as well as to help families gain a sense of control over their lives which could lead to independence. Every family signed a contract through which they agreed to keep their house in order and attend monthly meetings. During the meetings, the families were taught to budget and save for first time homeownership. The provisions of the contract were challenging for many families. Some families never remained faithful to the terms of an agreement before Inn Dwelling. Some never understood the value of maintaining a job. Still others did not understand the concept of paying bills and paying them on time. Still others failed to understand the cost of maintaining a home, of the need for budgeting, and saving for a down-payment of something they would eventually own. Some did not grasp the importance of monthly meetings. And finally, many never learned the art of negotiating for themselves; their actions were mainly passive aggressive and, in the extreme, delinquent.

In time, families began to see the importance of carrying out the responsibilities referred to in the previous paragraph. Eventually, fifty-eight families obtained a mortgage and became the owner of their own homes. This was an upgrade for a neighborhood written-off by most developers.

Since many of the adults lacked marketable skills, Harry Nutter began a computer program. He did a remarkable job preparing people for the job market. If and when the student reached the level of proficiency, the computer on which the student learned was given to the student along with a certificate. When Harry died, so did the program.

Since our strategic plan had opened Inn Dwelling to the possibility of providing an array of services, Inn Dwelling explored the area of education with the neighborhood parents. It was agreed that education was a much-needed service. Since approximately ninety-five per cent of the families were headed by single parents, after-school issues loomed large. Inn Dwelling met with Jim Wuenschel, an ally of Inn Dwelling and two Franciscan Sisters, Sr. Mary Jean and Sr. Dolores. We planned an after-school program that was rather ambitious. Not much recruiting was necessary because as soon as the word spread that Inn Dwelling was going to provide after-school services, a plethora of families signed on the dotted line. Since the program was intended to be comprehensive, a local foundation expended a rather large amount of money to provide for student evaluation and payment of teacher salaries. After one year, we learned that service of a large number of children with teachers who were unaccustomed to provide the kind of services mandated by our contract, was untenable. Jim Wuenschel suggested that we recruit students with

academic and social potential (in line with our mission statement) and train them to be successful. This would give others role models and would provide the standard necessary for eligibility for our program. It was a remarkable idea. Our first students were highly successful individuals: one is a principal, one a teacher, one a lawyer, one an account manager, and one a program-developer at the Greene Street Friends School. Since 1997, Inn Dwelling has invited bright sixth through twelfth-graders and developed a program of highly successful students who have attended colleges that include Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, University of Chicago, Notre Dame, Cornell, Amherst, Wellesley, Haverford, Villanova, etc. Many of these students have obtained their Master Degrees and work in places that include Ernst & Young, New York Advocates for Youth, Mayo Clinic, Inn Dwelling, Nike, Independence Mission Schools, Indian Valley Library, Einstein Medical Center, Independence Blue Cross, Greene Street Friends School, etc.

To me, of all the good works in which God called me to participate, there was none like Inn Dwelling. Leveling the playing field for financially-challenged, underrepresented students has been the most impactful experience of my life. I thank God for the opportunity that some of the poor will “fish for the rest of their lives.” It is a program of justice and transformation.

## **A SHARE IN THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF JESUS**

Through Baptism, each person is called to share in the priestly, kingly and prophetic role of Jesus. I believe that everyone, even those deemed least among us, is entitled to know God’s unconditional love through people. I have tried to stress the dignity of the human person and their rights to have safe, clean, affordable housing, food, clothing, employment, quality education and support. When these rights are in jeopardy, I have not hesitated to confront the policies that thwart God’s plan for them.

Phone calls and letters have been sent to several Presidents of the United States, including: Presidents Reagan, Carter and Clinton. I have addressed the Philadelphia City Council and have worked with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, The Northwest Interfaith Movement, Stapley Hall, Germantown Interfaith Housing Corporation, and the Urban Resource Development Center in an effort to guarantee the rights of the poor.

There is no credit that can be given to me for participating in the prophetic role of Jesus. I was called by Him and sent by the Congregation of the Mission “to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to captives, and to set the downtrodden free, and to proclaim a year of favor for the Lord” (Lk 4

# Some Missionary Stories from the Perspective of a Vincentian Brother

## A Vincentian Brother Discovers the *Joy of the Gospel*

Michael was the son of Sal, a faithful volunteer for my outreach services program. Sal had two sons; both were born with intellectual disabilities. The oldest child resided in an Archdiocesan Home for children living with disabilities. The youngest child, Michael, was living with Sal. Sal was raising him on his own because Michael's mother had died when he was very young. Sal approached me one day and asked if Michael could receive the Sacraments of Eucharist and Confirmation. Michael had been excluded from classes in his parish because of his intellectual disability. Sadly, Michael felt the rejection keenly and continually asked his dad why he didn't qualify to receive Jesus in the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit in Confirmation. Sal asked if I could do anything. I reassured Sal that I would pursue the matter. I contacted the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. I asked for the qualifications of a candidate for Eucharist and Confirmation. Instead of answering my question, I was invited to attend sessions to become a Special Education Catechist. I attended a course at St. Katherine Day School and undertook *The Special Teacher Training for Catholic Education for Children with Learning Disabilities, Brain Damage and other Disabilities* and received a certificate on February 14, 1974. Subsequently, I gave private lessons to Michael. He received his First Communion in the spring of 1974 and his Confirmation shortly thereafter. Michael was proud, and finally felt equal to the other students. His father was so elated and overcome with emotion that he promised to be a volunteer for as long as he lived. I was happy that I was able to teach Michael. I, too, felt elated. I decided to take an advanced level catechist course at Our Lady of Confidence School and was awarded another certificate of *Special Teacher Training* on February 10, 1977.

Michael loved me with the love of an innocent child until he died at the young age of twenty-five. The Gospel has a way of profoundly touching the minister and teaching him (me in this case) that there is no greater joy than to give one's time and energy for the Kingdom and its little one. Michael's joy was complete and so was mine.

The poor have much to teach you. You have much to learn from them.

**Vincent De Paul**



## **A Vincentian Brother Serves the Abandoned**

Frances was a disabled bed-ridden person who had no living relatives. Her dearly beloved nurse's aide and companion had died of cancer; she had been taking care of Frances' finances. I had been visiting Frances and bringing her Holy Communion for years; she was a parishioner of St. Vincent De Paul Parish. One day she asked if I would be her Power of Attorney and the bank approved. Frances' grandmother had left her a large trust fund. Frances was running into financial difficulties. The trust was twenty years old, and Frances could only use the interest from the trust. The bank forced the sale of her home to cut monthly expenses. Frances then took up residence in a small apartment.

After the death of her nurse's aide, she was given a replacement. The replacement was also Frances' live-in companion. Shortly thereafter, Frances' cousin died. He left everything to Frances. The nurse's aide/companion felt that she deserved part of Frances' inheritance, since she was working hard to care for Frances. The nurse's aide/companion hired a financial adviser and they together hired a lawyer and had that lawyer change Frances' will. The new will would leave everything to the nurse's aide/companion and her financial adviser. When I found out, I protested. I called Frances' lawyer and together we went to visit Frances. The nurse's aide/companion would not permit us to speak with Frances.

A problem arose regarding the new will, however. It was not witnessed. A second nurse's aide who visited Frances was asked to witness the will, but she refused telling the nurse's aide/companion that it would be wrong for her to do this. When I learned of this, I asked the visiting nurse's aide to sign a sworn affidavit. I gave it to Frances' lawyer to keep on file.

Frances' nurse aide/companion began to accuse me of stealing Frances' money. I took all of my records to the Bank. The bank was more-than-satisfied that I had done everything in accordance with the law and Frances' best interest; then, I withdrew from my responsibilities as Power of Attorney. A new Power of Attorney was appointed; he lasted one month, and the bank asked me to resume responsibilities as Power of Attorney. I declined.

The lawyer for the nurse's aide/companion was advised that I had kept a second set of records and that if the nurse's aide/companion accused me of anything, I would report her for tax fraud since she never paid taxes on her salary. I never heard from her lawyer again.

It was not long after these events that Frances became a Ward of the State. Of course, her assets were taken over by the State. Fortunately, neither the nurse's aide/companion nor her financial adviser got any of Frances' money.

The lessons I learned from this experience are: never allow the person who appoints you as Power of Attorney, Payee, or Administrator to include you in his/her will. It is a conflict of interest. Keep good records. Make sure the person who has assets and is appointing you as her power of attorney has an estate lawyer to craft an acceptable will and is protecting the interests of that person's estate.

Rarely is any good done without difficulty; the devil is too subtle and the world too corrupt not to attempt to nip such a good work in the bud.

**Vincent De Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother's Understanding Can Make a Difference for Those Who Stand Alone**

When we ran the Colonial Inn, a boarding home for one year, Fred was one of our residents. Fred was previously an alcoholic and was estranged from his family. He had no one come to visit him and no one seemed to care about him. I don't believe they knew how sick he really was. He had stopped drinking and had been sober for many years. Still his family would have nothing to do with him. Fred had to be placed in a nursing home. He was in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. I was the person who acted as next of kin. I was the only person who visited him. I would bring him things he needed (a variety of personal items). At first, Fred knew me. Within two years, Fred could not recognize me. Fred died within a short time. I was his executor. When I received the call that Fred had died, I began the process of making funeral arrangements. Fred had no religious affiliation and told everyone that I was his clergyman. I made several attempts to reach his family so that they could participate in the creation of funeral arrangements with me, but they were annoyed, even angry. I learned that the family thought that I was looking for money with which to pay funeral expenses. They expended their energy on useless worry, since Fred had taken care of everything before he died. I did call them to apprise them of the date and location of services, but they were not interested in attending. They were unforgiving about the pain Fred caused them in his past life.

On the day of the funeral, Sr. Ruth, Frank Mahoney, and I showed up. The services were conducted in the funeral home. After all his expenses were paid, there was a \$5,000 excess. I consulted a lawyer about what to do with the excess. I asked if I could buy a headstone. Once I got approval, I purchased a rather large headstone so that someday, if the family would have regrets, they would be able to locate his resting place.

We should strive to keep our hearts open to the sufferings and wretchedness of other people, and pray continually that God may grant us that spirit of compassion which is truly the spirit of God.

**-Vincent De Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother Becomes Eucharist to Someone in Need**

Charlie was a lifelong parishioner of St. Vincent's. He was an usher and counted the collection at St. Vincent De Paul's. He was very dependable, knowledgeable, and honest. He was also accurate—everything had to be reconciled to the penny. He was a treasurer with the St. Vincent De Paul Society for years.

Charlie was an accountant; he worked at an accounting firm in center city. He was always dressed impeccably in a suit and tie. When his wife died, however, his disorganization, disorientation and isolation became exacerbated. It seems that Charlie's wife did everything for him: She prepared his meals, placed the clothing he would wear to work the following day on his chair, made all the plans for their social life, scheduled his responsibilities, etc. When she died, so did his chances of surviving. Charlie's only son lived in another state and had little interest in taking over his mother's self-imposed duties. Charlie's only ally was the neighbor across the street. After his retirement, Mrs. C, the neighbor who took an interest in him, would keep me informed of his activities. One day Mrs. C called me to tell me that Charlie was sleeping all day, would get up at night, and catch a bus to the job he thought he still had. He would always get lost, forget his key, etc.

Charlie bowled with the Knights of Columbus. He bowled in a suit and tie. The men from the Knights would always pick Charlie up. They became concerned about Charlie when Charlie stopped caring for himself. The Knights told me that Charlie was dirty and had a foul body odor. Mrs. C confirmed this and asked if I could help Charlie take a bath and cut his hair which had become shoulder-length. I was prepared for our meeting. I brought clothing and underwear with me. After he soaked for a while, I scrubbed his skin and it became white again. I gave him the new clothing and he felt refreshed and renewed. I took him downstairs and cut his hair. He felt like a new man.

I checked his bureau drawers, but they were empty. I looked over and saw a pile of dirty clothes in the corner. Then Mrs. C noticed that the ceiling had fallen down because of a leak in the bathroom. We knew that Charlie needed care. We got him admitted to a local nursing home. While he ate dinner, we completed the paper work. In about an hour, Charlie was at Mrs. C's door. He said, "it was a lovely restaurant. I had a delicious dinner." We soon got him admitted to a nursing home outside the city. I visited Charlie many times until he was no longer able to recognize me. He passed away shortly after my last visit.

What a joy it is to minister to those who depend on the love and compassion that is part of our legacy as a Vincentian Brother. Often times, the cost of such love is difficult, but this is what it

means to be broken open –to be Eucharist for someone in the spirit of one who gave His Life.  
What a blessed and rich life I have lived!

We must love our neighbor as being made in the image of God and as an  
object of His love.

**-Vincent de Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother Welcomes the Stranger**

I received a call from a local pastor asking if I could help an immigrant family that recently arrived from Haiti. The family was living in deplorable conditions in a basement of an unscrupulous landlord. The basement was damp and musty. When I arrived, I was welcomed into the basement. It was not a finished basement, nor was it renovated to fit the description of an apartment. It was just an ordinary basement; the landlord lived upstairs. I noticed right away that there was little light and it had no windows. There was no bedroom. It was a single room with a small bathroom that had only a toilet and sink. It had no bathtub or shower.

I greeted the mother and her three small girls. The mother told me that she was concerned about the welfare of her children since they were bitten on their toes by rats while sleeping. She pleaded with me to help them. At the time, I was running a transitional housing program at Inn Dwelling. I had just finished renovating one of our houses. Of course, I offered to move her and her children into the house immediately. I supplied furniture, since she came from Haiti with only her clothing. Since I was also operating a furniture bank, I was able to supply them with beds, table and chairs, dressers, kitchen utensils, bed linens, towels, and anything else they needed.

Her story deserves even more attention. This woman was a nurse in Haiti, but had to be a nurse's aide here because her credentials were not satisfactory for the practice of nursing in the U.S. Because she could not earn a competitive salary, Inn Dwelling charged her a reduced rent so that she could establish herself and her children. The family stayed in our housing until the girls went to high school. At that point, the family needed more room. She saved her money and moved into a larger house.

I hear from them regularly with updates on how they are all doing. The three girls have been accepted into college. In fact, I attended one of the girl's college graduations. They never cease thanking me for all that Inn Dwelling did for them. I am profoundly grateful that I was able to do something for them to reinforce their dignity and goodness. What a blessing they are to me and to our world!

Go to the poor: you will find God.

**Vincent De Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother Brings Love to the Unlovable**

Tony was mentally disabled. He was on S.S.I. and needed a payee to receive his checks. He could find no one to agree to become payee. Tony was a poor person and he needed help. How could I refuse? However, I didn't know what I was getting into. Tony had very good days and could hold lucid and intelligent conversations. Then there were those days when Tony was off the deep end. I found out that he had a serious mental disorder. I discovered this after I placed him in one of our Inn Dwelling houses. Tony refused to take his medicine, saying that it was poison and that he didn't need it.

On one occasion, I received a call from a neighbor. She told me that Tony was sitting on top of her car and would not get off. He threatened to chop her into little pieces, and pledged that he had done it before. By the time I arrived, the police were speaking with the neighbor because Tony was standing on the roof of her car with a large walking stick he had made from the branch of a tree. It was decorated with many different color crack vials among other things. Tony threatened to hit the police if he was arrested. Of course, Tony was arrested. Fast-forward to the court appearance. I attended the hearing and requested that Tony be placed in a psychiatric hospital for evaluation instead of jail. The judge agreed and after a month or so, he was discharged. Of course, I could not readmit him to our Inn Dwelling house, so I helped him get a room not too far away. He was doing well for a while, a long while. He even got a part-time job in a bakery.

He came by one day, and it was obvious that he was failing. A few months later, he passed away.

Love sees what is in the heart; it pierces its physical and mental barriers. It is the joy of my life to have such a vision of people. God comes to my assistance—always and in all ways.

You will find out that Charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the kettle of soup and the full basket. But you will keep your gentleness and your smile. It is not enough to give soup and bread. This the rich can do. You are the servant of the poor, always smiling and good-humored. They are your masters, terribly sensitive and exacting master you will see. And the uglier and the dirtier they will be, the more unjust and insulting, the more love you must give them. It is only for your love alone that the poor will forgive you the bread you give to them.

**Vincent De Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother Learns from his Clients**

One day, our parish social worker asked if I could be Ed's Payee. I could not refuse. Ed was fine for a while. With the money Ed received, I would pay his rent and his utility bills. I would then give to him the cash needed to purchase food and personal items which included cigarettes. Before long, Ed would start borrowing against the next month's check. This put him behind on more than one occasion.

Ed was a likable fellow; people enjoyed him unless he wasn't taking his medicine. When that occurred, Ed would yell at people or talk to himself in a loud voice as he traveled the streets.

At times, he was incorrigible. One example can be found in the time when he would not let the City Inspectors in to inspect his apartment. Of course, he was put out. Another more pertinent example was when he announced that he wanted to be his own payee. I took him to the Social Security Office to see if they would approve his request. We were escorted to the next available representative who happened to be Caucasian. Ed, who was a person of color, explained his desire to receive his own check. The woman politely explained that he would have to get a doctor to certify his competency to handle his own affairs. With that, Ed stood on a chair and yelled, "Racist, Racist, Racist." The representative became frightened and signed the paper work on the spot.

It was a great day. Ed received his own check and I was free from the badgering about borrowing against his next check. I continued to see Ed, however, and remained his friend until he died.

If Jesus welcomed the mentally ill and fanatics, why shouldn't we? (XII: 78)  
God, grant us the grace to see things with the same eyes as you do.

**Vincent De Paul**



## **A Vincentian Brother Perseveres In Difficult Times**

Dolores Smatana was in her 80s. She lived in a Senior Citizen Apartment House. She was a nurse. She lived alone and suffered an apartment break-in. The thieves, seeing that she was elderly and alone, ransacked all her rooms. When they found nothing, they threatened to rape and kill her. She told them she had only a few dollars from her already-spent Social Security check. They didn't believe her. They proceeded to cut-up all her clothing with a knife. They broke up her furniture and glassware. After a while, finding nothing, they left. Sr. Ruth, DC was able to get her moved into a local Senior Citizen Apartment Building. Dolores never stepped outside of her apartment again. Having no clothing, she wore a nightgown, house coat and slippers. She paid someone to do her shopping and paid \$1.00 to have a co-tenant carry her trash to the chute. Sr. Ruth and I did a lot for her also. We did her banking, got her medicine, etc. When she had to be placed in a nursing home, I continued to serve as her Payee on her Social Security check. Dolores was very demanding. She had been the head nurse until she reached her mid-seventies, but according to Dolores, not one of them could ever do the right thing. On one occasion, I went to visit her. She was angry because I was late. As a result, she told me that I was "Fired and Dismissed." That lasted about ten minutes, since she began to understand that I was the only person who visited her weekly. Sadly, her son and his family had given up on her. She lived to be ninety-eight years old, and when she died only Sr. Ruth and I were in attendance at the funeral.

God allows us to give rise to the practice of two beautiful virtues: perseverance, which leads us to attain the goal, and constancy, which helps us to overcome difficulties.

**Vincent De Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother Shelters the Poor**

Sr. Ruth Mahar, D.C., our parish outreach worker, asked me to join her and a few Vincentian Seminarians at the apartment of a disabled woman who had to move. It seemed like a reasonable request, and I viewed it as a great opportunity to be with the seminarians. Sr. Ruth had neglected to tell me that the apartment was overrun with roaches. Roaches were everywhere—even in the freezer.

Since this woman was a double amputee, I could not abandon her or the moving project in which Sr. Ruth was fully engaged. Despite the fact that very few things were salvageable, we moved the woman to a new apartment in the same building and gave her back a sense of dignity. St. Vincent De Paul has much to say about serving the poor, but there is one of his insights that gives me courage and zeal in circumstances such as these:

Extend your mercy towards others, so that there can be no one in need whom you meet without helping. For what hope is there for us if God should withdraw His mercy from us?

**Vincent De Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother Is All Things to All Men**

I knew Travis for over twenty-five years. He was addicted to alcohol and drugs most of those years. He brought me to visit his mother and father who were elderly, sickly, and home-bound. I never knew until he died that he had been married and had two children. He always told me that his relatives never wanted him to be around them. He worked off and on for many years, never staying long at any job. He usually came to me for help when he was drunk; the call for help was delayed, however, until he was sober. I did not see him for a few weeks. One day, he came to tell me that he had been in the hospital, diagnosed with seizures. He had collapsed on the street, and the EMT's took him to the hospital. I told him I could help him with his medicine, if he would not drink alcohol with the medicine. That request was not put into effect for a very long time. One day, he was at a party with some people he knew, and someone put something in his drink that caused major damage to his internal organs. He had to get an emergency operation to remove and repair his damaged organs. He lost his colon in the process and was given an ostomy bag. He had to wear a ostomy bag for the rest of his life. So, for the rest of his life, I helped him with the things he needed to function. I would purchase new bags when he needed them. When he collapsed on the street, having had a seizure, and was taken to the emergency room, he would give his nurses and attendants my name as his contact. Many times, I received a call from the hospital telling me that his bag had burst and soiled his clothing. I would go to the local Thrift Store, and purchase new clothing. This happened so many times, that I began buying two bags at a time so that he always had a back-up.

One day, I picked him up at the hospital. I needed an address so that I could drop him off. He told me to take him to one of his relative's home. When I arrived, his relative told me that he did not want him living there. He went in anyway. Eventually, Travis was placed in a home.

The problems with his overflowing bags ceased. He stopped drinking and took only his prescription medicine. Providing food, clothing and medicine was now a lot easier.

One day, I received a call from the hospital, letting me know that Travis was dying and he wanted me to come and see him. I asked the pastor of St. Vincent De Paul Parish to come with me. When we arrived, Travis asked if we could pray with him. The pastor prayed the prayers of the dying and the three of us prayed the Our Father together. Travis explained that he had no Church affiliation. I asked him about his relatives and who we should notify. He told me that he did not know how to notify them, because he was not in touch with them for years. A few days later, I received a call from the hospital, letting me know that Travis had died. I tried to find relatives; I even put a notice on the bulletin board of the Soup Kitchen where he regularly ate, thinking that someone could help me find relatives, but no one could. Just a few days later, I received a call from the hospital telling me that if no one claimed the body, they would have to send the body to the

city morgue. I did not want this result. No one would know where he was buried. I was able to raise enough money to have the body cremated and the pastor at St. Vincent De Paul Parish celebrated a Mass for the repose of his soul.

After about a week, a tidal wave of calls from angry relatives flooded my phone. "Who are you," they said, "to have Travis' body cremated?" I could not satisfy them with my explanations about how I really tried to contact them. I let them know that I would give them his ashes, but that did not satisfy them, either. Within a short time, two young ladies came and told me that they were Travis' daughters. They were quite polite; they thanked me for all I had done for their father. They told me that they were planning a funeral service in a local park that Travis visited many times during his life.

Travis never knew that he wasn't really alone. I, his caretaker, never knew he was married and had daughters until after his death. I was very happy, however, that Travis was finally reunited with his family and would rest in peace!

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.

**Vincent De Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother Does What No One Else Chooses To Do**

I received a call from a Social Worker asking for beds for a brother and sister who lived in Kensington and were sleeping on the floor. They lived in a Trinity House, meaning there were three rooms, one on top of the other. The house was very small. When I arrived with the beds, a gentle African-American woman allowed me to enter. Immediately, I could see that the house was cluttered with years of papers, magazines, etc. On the first floor was a very small living room. Attached to the living room was the kitchen, or what was left of it. The refrigerator and stove were half in the room and half in the basement. It went without saying that the kitchen was not functional. The woman explained that she had a two burner hot plate in the living room where she cooked. At the time of my arrival, she was heating a can of soup in a pot that I don't think was ever washed. There was no running water. I could also see the drippings from previously heated soup, stuck to the outside of the pot. The walls were slimy from cold dust fumes that the old coal furnace had expelled. The coal dust had seeped up from the basement through the holes in the kitchen floor.

There was a narrow staircase that led upstairs. This made it impossible for me to take the beds upstairs. The box springs would not make the turn. I decided to go home and find something that I could get up to the second floor. When I returned to St. Vincent's, I found metal bunk beds that could be separated. I returned with the beds. A young helper assisted me and we did manage to get the bunk beds up the stairs. On the second floor, there were two small rooms, one on each side of the staircase. When I opened the door on the right, eighteen cats scattered, nearly sending me down the flight of stairs. The cat droppings made it difficult to walk, since they were all over the floor. There was a small bathroom in the rear of the room, but since there was no running water, it had not been used for a long time. The cardboard box, thought to be the litter box for the cats, was filled with human waste. We swept, and made a space for one bed.

I cautiously opened the door to the left. This room was filed with piles and piles of newspapers and other junk. We made a space and placed the other bed in position. We were told not to go to the third floor. Our experience dismissed any desire to make a visit there, and so we returned to the first floor. We were just about to leave when an elderly white gentleman came into the house. The African-American woman introduced him as her brother. He told us that he had just returned from the Senior Citizen Center, a place that he frequented to obtain a hot lunch. His sister, although eligible for a hot lunch, would not leave the house.

I was about to depart with my helper. I went to shake the hand of the African-American woman. She thanked us over and over and took her hand from inside her pocket to shake our hands—and

much to my surprise, I saw white skin. I then realized that she was not African-American. She was a Caucasian covered with black coal dust that was simply caked on her face and hands.

I called the Social Worker and told her that I thought that the house was unfit for habitation. She told me that the woman and her brother had lived there all their lives and would not leave. She refused to go out because she did not want the City to board up the house and declare it unfit. The SPCA did come and remove twenty cats, and the City did come and remove the debris from the house. I can't remember how many days the City worked on the house, but it amounted to a lot of hours. Further, the Social Worker noted that she was trying to get the water turned on.

Since Christ willed to be born poor, he chose for himself disciples who were poor. He made himself the servant of the poor and shared their poverty. He went so far as to say that he would consider every deed which either helps or harms the poor as done for or against himself.

### **Vincent De Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother Finds the Face of Christ in the Despised**

I've known Vincent for over twenty years now and during that time have found out his life's story. Vincent has spent over half his life in prison. When he was sixteen years old, he, as a gang member, killed a member of another gang. He told me that the murder was in self-defense. Vincent was tried as an adult, found guilty and spent over twenty years in prison. When I first met Vincent, he was 6'4" and 230 lbs. with a deep voice. He was an intimidating figure, one you did not want to cross. Vincent told me that he learned a lot in prison, and that he was trying to do the right thing. He was an intelligent man, and received his high school diploma while in prison. He befriended an elderly white woman who was known as the "dog lady" in the neighborhood. She lived in a house without heat and water, but would take in any stray dog that was roaming the streets. Every day, the dog woman would beg for scraps. She received very little Social Security; this caused her bills to pile up and eventually, her gas and water were shut-off. She had not paid her real estate taxes for years, which complicated her problems immensely. One evening, as she was walking her dogs across the street, she was struck by a hit and run driver. After a long hospitalization and much rehabilitation, she was placed in a home near her relatives who lived about sixty miles from her residence. Vincent would take a bus to visit her. He continued his practice of doing kind things for her. She wanted to give Vincent her home which had a small store on the first floor; (Her husband ran a grocery store up until he died). She knew Vincent would never own the home because of the many liens and back taxes owed on the place. She decided to write a letter saying that Vincent could use the property as long as he wanted it. Vincent gladly accepted the place even though it had no water or heat, and he opened a second-hand store in what was once the old grocery store on the first floor.

Now, Vincent's reputation preceded him. When he refused to buy drugs, those with long memories, began to taunt him. Every once in a while, Vincent would lose his temper and waffle some of his old acquaintances with his fists. One day, he came to see me. He was bruised and his right eye was half shut. He was smiling and I asked him the cause for the smile. He said proudly, "You should see the other guys."

Vincent, feeling comfortable, told me a story I hesitated to believe. Years ago, it seems, his doorbell was ringing incessantly. He finally answered the door and it was his girlfriend who had been missing for months. She explained to Vincent, that she had escaped from Gary Heidnik, a notorious serial killer. She wanted Vincent to help her. He armed himself with a hammer, and his girlfriend led Vincent to Heidnik's home. When Vincent was within a block of Heidnik's home, he called the police and gave them Heidnik's address. He told the police that they had better arrive at

Heidnik's home before him, because he had devised a plan to take care of Heidnik. The police found three women in chains at Heidnik's home and arrested him. News of this was reported in the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Vincent doesn't look like the same impressive man I met when he was young. In the last three years, he has been involved in two car accidents. Getting compensation for his injuries (head injuries resulting in memory lost and headaches) has been a challenge. More recently, Vincent was attacked by an old acquaintance who tried to spray him with mace. He beat the guy and was charged with assault and battery. He was imprisoned, but the police who knew Vincent told him not to worry—he would be exonerated. My role in this fiasco was to help his mother get his bail together. He was exonerated.

Vincent considered me to be his Spiritual Advisor. What a joy it was for me to know that Vincent, who was religiously unaffiliated, could touch God's face in the service rendered by a religious brother. I praise God that I was able to bring him the compassion and love of our God.

Though the poor are often rough and unrefined, we must not judge them from external appearances nor from the mental gifts they seem to have received. On the contrary, if you consider the poor in the light of faith, then you will observe that they are taking the place of the Son of God who chose to be poor.

**Vincent De Paul**



## **A Vincentian Brother Is Attentive to the Most Vulnerable**

Dorothy and her sister were members of our Senior Citizen Club at St. Vincent's. Dorothy had never married, but her sister, Madeline did and with her husband (who passed away), had one son. After the passing of Madeline's husband, Dorothy took up residence in her sister's home and lived there for many years. The sisters were very close and did everything together. Madeline told Dorothy that if she should die first, the house and everything in it, would pass to Dorothy. Unfortunately, Madeline procrastinated in signing her will. The son, therefore, became the legal beneficiary of Madeline's estate. He told Dorothy to leave and forbade her to take anything, (not even the things she purchased) with her. Dorothy was devastated. Dorothy found an efficiency apartment in a senior citizen complex within the boundaries of St. Vincent's. Dorothy's few pieces of furniture fit nicely into the small space of the apartment. Sr. Ruth and I visited her and all the senior citizens in that apartment complex on a monthly basis. One day, Sr. Ruth and I received a phone call telling us that Dorothy was being admitted to Germantown Hospital and that we were listed as her emergency contacts. When we arrived at the Emergency Room, we found Dorothy in a very agitated state. She told us that she was in the ER because her nephew (she called him the "Gorilla") had come to her apartment and claimed that some of the furniture she had belonged to his mother. He wanted Dorothy to return these pieces. Dorothy and he engaged in a heated argument. She began to experience chest pain. Her nephew left the apartment and went home. One of Dorothy's neighbors called 911 and Dorothy was taken to Germantown Hospital's Emergency Room. Sr. Ruth and I tried to calm Dorothy down, assuring her that we would not let her nephew near her. Dorothy died a few hours later.

Dorothy had previously asked me to be the Executor of her will. Her nephew was her only living relative. Dorothy made me promise that her nephew would get nothing. Unfortunately, the attorney who helped her make out her will was on vacation. The secretary located the will, but it was not signed. Her estate was distributed according to the prior will. That last will and testament gave her nephew the role of executor; ironically, he was the only beneficiary of the will. I was able to plan the funeral. A few days after the funeral, I was at the Senior Citizen complex, visiting with Sr. Ruth. We found Dorothy's nephew in Dorothy's apartment, taking her belongings and selling what he could not take. He sold Dorothy's favorite rocking chair to Dorothy's ninety year old neighbor. The neighbor told Sr. Ruth and me that she loved the rocking chair. We told her that Dorothy had wanted her to have it. Sr. Ruth and I then told the ninety-year-old that Dorothy gave us \$300 to give to the poor. It was in the cushion of the rocking chair, and since it was there, and she bought the chair, the \$300 was hers. We told her that Dorothy would be very happy that she got the chair.

...Love must be your calling... **Vincent de Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother Buries the Dead**

Camille and Rose were members of St. Vincent De Paul Parish. One day, Rose was hit by a car in front of her home by a hit and run driver. Her husband Camille had died in 1985; Rose lived alone and cared for thirteen dogs.

As a result of the accident and the ensuing disability Rose experienced, Rose's daughter placed her in a nursing home in upstate Pennsylvania. A neighbor visited Rose and Rose asked if I could bury the ashes contained in an urn on her mantle in her now-vacant home.

When the neighbor went to retrieve the urn, he learned that someone had broken into the house, dumped the ashes on the floor and stole the urn. The neighbor swept up the ashes, placed them in a box and then in a cloth bag and gave them to me.

A further elucidation of this story is necessary so that the impact of the events that occurred can be better understood. Camille was born in Cairo, Egypt. He possessed a Doctorate in Economics and was a member of Nasser's cabinet. He was also a friend of Fr. William Slattery, a former superior general of the Congregation of the Mission. I am told that Camille was helpful in preventing the government of Gamal Abdel Nasser from confiscating our community property. It seems that when Nasser was overthrown, Camille had to flee from Egypt, leaving behind his own wealth and property. When he arrived in the United States, Camille was penniless.

Later, Camille met and married Rose. They settled in St. Vincent De Paul Parish. They opened a small grocery store as a means of support. As they aged and became sick, both Rose and Camille had to go on welfare as they had neither Social Security nor health benefits.

I presented this story to our Vincentian Administrators. They were quick to give Camille a fitting place to be laid to rest. Camille's funeral Liturgy celebrated by Fr. John Gouldrick, CM was followed by his burial. Fr. Gouldrick and I accompanied his remains to our Community cemetery in Baltimore.

Oh! how happy the man of means who uses his wealth and his life for the greater glory of God, from whom he has received them!

**Vincent De Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother is a Friend to the Lonely**

Frank was in his eighty's. He had become a recluse after the death of his wife. He had one distant relative who lived out of town, but neither he nor she made any effort to make contact.

When Frank's physical condition began to deteriorate, he was concerned that he had no one to help him meet his needs. He had a serious heart problem and diabetes. I met with Frank and assured him that I would do whatever I could to assist him. I asked him to write down his next of kin, since he had no will. Frank took me to a back bedroom and showed me where he had hidden some cash.

One day, I received a call from a neighbor who told me that the mailman indicated that Frank had not moved his mail for two weeks. I went to his home. When Frank did not answer the doorbell, I went to the side alley and looked in the window. I could see that the overhead light in the living room was lit. I knew Frank would never leave his lights on during the day; he was most frugal. I called the police, who came and found a small unlocked window in a back bathroom. The policeman climbed in the window, but emerged quickly followed by a swarm of flies. A largely decomposed Frank was lying on the dining room floor near the telephone. I assumed he had tried to call me.

The policeman and I collected his belongings: the cash from the air conditioner in the back bedroom and a box in his top dresser drawer. In the box, I found his personal papers and the phone number of the distant relative.

As he requested, he was buried next to his wife in a cemetery in upstate Pennsylvania. I was happy for Frank that he was resting in peace and happy that I was able to be a friend to someone who was all alone.

If God is the center of your life, no words are necessary.  
Your mere presence will touch hearts.

**Vincent De Paul**

## **A Vincentian Brother Welcomes the Homeless**

At the beginning of the Inn Dwelling project, I attempted to help those most in need. I rented a fully furnished house for \$300 to that family. They were homeless at the time. The gentleman and his family, like all tenants, were supposed to save their money and attend mortgage counseling sessions. A mortgage and loan advisor came monthly to help our tenants learn to budget, repair their credit and prepare for the purchase of a home. The tenant had between three to five years to accomplish this goal. The family, however, wanted no part of the sacrifice. When warned that they would have to leave if they did not comply, they simply remained silent, hoping to wear me down so that he could live free from the burden of responsible planning for change. One day, while I was visiting another family, the children from the previously homeless family marched up and down, shouting, "Kill the owner." Regardless of the threat, I remained steadfast in my resolve to apply the consequences for failing to comply with the agreement they and I had made when they began living in the house. The family failed, and I evicted them. On the day they were scheduled to leave, the father called me and told me that robbers broke in and stole many of their things. I asked if he had called the police. "No" was the simple response. So I called the police and met the police at the house. The family was sitting outside in their car. They reiterated to the police what they told me, namely, that robbers had broken into the back door and stole some of their things. The police noted that no one had broken into the house; rather, someone broke out of the house. The glass was resting on the porch outside the back door. A neighbor told us that the family had rented a truck and filled it with furniture, the day before.

I did not ask the police to charge them with the burglary. That would have further complicated their lives. As it was, they left angry.

These developments taught me an invaluable lesson. The projects that I thought would be great and help the poor and needy people failed at times. I was not discouraged, however. I know that on this occasion, God accomplished His will. He is the reason for which we serve. I do not regret that we do not always succeed. We are merely imperfect servants trying to do the best we can to serve our God and His poor. Despite the challenges, Vincent De Paul would have called for compassion in this instance. This was a source of consolation.

Meekness makes us not only excuse the affronts and injustices we receive, but even inclines us to treat with gentleness those from whom we receive them, by means of kind words,... it makes us endure all for God.

**Vincent De Paul**

## **GOD'S AMAZING GRACE**

God's amazing grace is God's love for us. It is grace that we receive by praying and helping and caring for others with love. It also comes with the reception of the Sacraments of Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation. It comes from attending the Sacred Liturgy.

My first experience of God's amazing grace was when I was a young teenager. Since my family (mother, father, two sisters, two brothers and I) could not afford to take vacations, we would take day trips. We usually traveled to Coney Island in New York on that day. Regarding this particular trip, my sister, age five, insisted on going on the Roller Coaster. My parents agreed, but only if I would go with her (I was fourteen). I was not thrilled with the idea, but my sister insisted. When we ascended to the highest point and were about to descend, the security bar loosened. Of course, my sister was pushed forward so much so that she was almost out of the car. I was able to pull her back, and just as we started downward the security bar snapped back into its position and locked—God's Amazing Grace!

Years later, when I had my own health insurance, I went to see a doctor. I had begun having mini-episodes that appeared to be seizures. After the doctor received the X-ray results, I was informed that I had a brain tumor. The doctor wanted me to see a surgeon and I refused, so he gave me a strong prescription to stop the seizures. At this time, I was a member of the New York State National Guard. When they learned of my brain tumor, they gave me a medical discharge. Later, I was recruited for service in the Korean War. After my physical, the officials issued me a medical rejection. Just about this time, I was considering a vocation to be a religious brother. I was not attracted by any of the literature I had read at the time. Then I heard that Our Lady of Mercy was having a nine day solemn novena in honor of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal in December 1954. Father James Twomey, CM was going to preach the novena. Father preached about St. Vincent De Paul. I was attracted by what I heard. It was the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. I felt strongly that God was calling me to be a Vincentian. I felt confident that if this desire was from God, then nothing would stand in my way. I stopped taking my prescription medicine. The seizures stopped. In May 1955, I entered the Congregation of the Mission and started my postulancy as a Vincentian Brother—God's Amazing Grace!

It was autumn 2002. I was inspecting a building, the floor gave way and I fell from the second floor into the basement. I tore open both of my sides and was bleeding. The only way out was to shimmy up a sewer pipe. I was able to get out. I went to the medical office next door that was being rented from Villa Vincent, and was patched up. I went to the emergency room for X-rays and learned that I had torn both rotator cuffs. I was told that I would have to have two separate surgeries, each requiring three months for recovery. I was advised not to lift anything over my

head. Of course, I said no to the surgery and did what was necessary to complete my work. That meant I was lifting things over my head. It has been twenty years ago. I never had pain—God's Amazing Grace!

In 2018, I was rushed to the hospital. It seemed that I an untreated urinary tract infection that developed into sepsis. I also needed some surgery. I was told at the time that I had a tumor on my liver and kidney. The doctors wanted to do a biopsy. I refused. The doctors agreed to monitor the tumors. Within six months, the tumors were shrinking. After the next six months, they had disappeared—God's Amazing Grace!

How blessed I am to have such a Good Friend. He has always blessed me and filled me with His Amazing Grace!

## CONCLUSION

### AN INVITATION

There can be no richer life than to spend it in the company of Our Lord, serving Him and making Him known and loved upon the earth. We are here such a short while. Our capacity to love is always limited by the original sin we bear. Yet despite our weaknesses, Jesus stoops from heaven to lift us up, and makes us His very own. The “cost of discipleship” is negligible. We are merely instruments of his great and inexhaustible love, a love that is prodigal and unlimited. This participation in the life of the Trinity is possible because we share in the roles of Jesus to be priest, prophet, and king. This is the commitment we made at Baptism. A life as a Vincentian Brother intensifies that commitment.

During my short life, Jesus taught me innumerable lessons about love and service. He put a clean heart within me and gave me an incredible gift—the gift of a religious vocation. It is humbling when I think of the rough material from which Jesus designed a missionary brother and, more wonderfully, a Vincentian Brother. I am always learning.

The call to be a Vincentian is noble. It goes right to the core of the spiritual life and teaches us so much about the connections we have with Jesus and with all people, especially our community and the poorest and most abandoned.

It is my fondest hope that you young men around the world will be attracted to this call to love and serve—humbly, generously and devotedly. The love we bear is so deep and searing, the hope we carry is so invincible and the faith we have is so intrinsically woven into our hearts that we experience the Trinitarian Life in ways that are hidden and mysterious to most. We are broken open and are loved. The more you give to Him who loves you, the more He loves you back and that love is ultimately poured out in works of charity and zeal.

I pray that you will embrace the Lord as a vowed religious brother and pay Him the kind of service that can transform the world. There will never be any regrets for the YES you give to such an extraordinary call.

As Vincent De Paul explains:

So, our vocation is to go, not just to one parish, not just to one diocese, but all over the world; and do what? To set people's hearts

on fire, to do what the Son of God did. He came to set the world on fire in order to inflame it with His love.

I invite you to take up this challenge. The world needs fire—the fire of His love. He needs you to go throughout the world and love and heal it. Create the fire that will unite us in Him. Be credible witnesses of the saving power of God! Yours are the only hands, feet, and eyes through which He can bring compassion to this world (Teresa of Avila). The future of the universe depends upon this fire.