

To Be Face to Face with the Poor

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We, as members of the Society and of the worldwide Vincentian Family, have a great social responsibility. We have first-hand experience of the problems that afflict thousands of poor families. The dust, the mud, the rain, the wind, the heat ... all of these we feel as we walk side by side, face to face, with those who are poor. We feel that way during our home visit and when we accompany them during a time of crisis that demands our support. When we act in that manner, we become very close to these men and women who are poor and in return, we receive greater support from the community. We discover that doors are opened and that we become an example for many other people.

To be face to face with the poor does not mean that we simply share material goods during our home visit. Rather it means that we become the voice of those who are poor and thus denounce the present-day injustices. We engage with them in the struggle for dignified work, for quality education and for access to healthcare. At the same time, we encourage them in the practice of their faith so that they become committed in their beliefs. We are more than distributors of food baskets ... we are lawyers for the poor.

To be face to face with the poor also means that we cannot “outsource” our Vincentian activity. I am saddened when I hear that a Conference, instead of discreetly bring their food baskets to the homes of those families in need, pays the bus fare so that a member of those families can travel to the Conference headquarters in the parish and there receive a food basket.

If the members do not act selflessly and with a missionary spirit, if they do not reach out to the poor in a dedicated manner, they will never be true Vincentians and will never come face to face with those persons who have been excluded from participation in our society ... they will be “artificial, cold human beings”.

Only when we are face to face with the homeless can we experience the depth of the suffering of those men and women who struggle with so many difficulties in order to survive: family crisis, health issues, financial problems, unemployment ... so many different situations that we are privileged to share.

Those individuals who provide assistance during the holiday season or other specific times of the year ... these individuals have little understanding of what actually happens on the peripheries and in the poor neighborhoods and communities. They do not have the DNA [1] of charity in the blood nor the seal of humility on their forehead.

I recall here a biblical passage in which God leads those who have been chosen to reach out in service on behalf of those who are poor. In the Book of Sirach we read: The God of justice hears the cry of the oppressed ... the prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal (Sirach 35:12-17). This passage assures us that the prayer of the poor reaches the ears of God and that those who serve God will be received in heaven and their supplications will also be heard. Are there are better promises than that?

Therefore, dear members of the Society and members of the worldwide Vincentian Family, we are on the right path. The closer we become to the poor, the closer we become to Jesus Christ. I leave you with one question to discuss in your group: what does it mean for you to be face to face with the poor?

Notes:

[1] DNA is deoxyribonucleic acid, a self-replicating material which is present in nearly all living organisms as the main constituent of chromosomes. It is the carrier of genetic information. Therefore, to say that certain individuals do not have the DNA of charity in their blood, the author is speaking in an allegorical manner because without such DNA, their action is mere philanthropy.

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