

# The Commandment of Love

Published on: 19 March 2020



The international motto that was adopted by the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in 2013 (Love, Charity and Justice) was done so with the intention of celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of the co-founder of the Society, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, and the 180th anniversary of the foundation of the Society. In this reflection we will develop the theme: the Commandment of Love, which, in reality, is the beginning of everything.

Because of the manner in which this theme is dealt with in the various means of communication, many people view love as simply personal relationships among people and thus, confuse the noble concept with kindness, esteem and sex. However, in this text, we speak about another form of love, God's love toward humankind, an unconditional love, a perfect love, an immense, unwavering love.

The commandment of love that was proclaimed by Jesus has two dimensions: a vertical dimension (our love of God) and a horizontal dimension (our love for our neighbor, for our brothers and sisters). Jesus taught us: This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:12-13).

Jesus Christ, our Savior, made love the center of life. Jesus knew that people could only be fulfilled and happy with love. Therefore, Jesus made love the first and greatest commandment: You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind;

the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 22:37-39). Those two commandments are the foundation of the Christian and Vincentian life.

In the gospel of John, we discover the meaning of the word love: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16-17).

In the first letter of John we find the origin of this love: for this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another (1 John 3:11). Later, John states: Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love (1 John 4:7-8).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides us with further insight. In articles 2443-2449 we hear about God's promise to bless those persons who assist the poor and God's rebuke of those who turn away from them: Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on the one who wants to borrow (Matthew 5:42) ... Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give (Matthew 10:8). It is by what people have done for the poor that Jesus Christ will recognize his chosen ones. The Catechism states: When the poor have the Good News preached to them, it is a sign of Christ's presence (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2443).

In order to concretize Jesus' demand to serve the poor, the Catechism goes on to state that the works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. the corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2447).

The gospels and the catechism are not the only places that speak about this divine love. We find this love expressed in the life and ministry of Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Frédéric Ozanam and all the other Servants of God, Blessed, Venerable and Saints of the Vincentian Family.

As members of the Vincentian Family we need to savor the inexhaustible virtue and the examples of holiness of our predecessors ... and we can do this by studying and reflecting on the lives of those enlightened men and women and by seeking to understand and give life to their most significant characteristics as we serve those persons most in need.

Frédéric Ozanam and Vincent de Paul, for example, concretized the fulfillment of the commandment of love through effective action to alleviate the suffering of the poor. They did this on a daily basis and we, living in the 21st century, can and should do the same. The greatest challenge for the members of the worldwide Vincentian Family is to live the charism of charity in the midst of those men and women who suffer and, at the same time, to give life and vitality to our Vincentian spirituality in the “worldly” environment in which we find ourselves.

This affective and effective response to God’s call, this mysticism of the poor is the primary mission of all the members of the Vincentian Family. We must be aligned with that guideline; if not, we will lose our identity. Sometimes we discover that some members of our Family are more concerned about other charisms (meritorious, no doubt). Such paths, however, lead to a distorted vision of the motivation that made the Vincentian Family see the light, namely, a love for the poor, home visits and a strong spirituality focused on Vincent de Paul and his exemplary legacy.

It is not easy to be a Christian today. Our acquaintances and co-workers, in the community or at school, observe us and frequently ask us about the effectiveness of our activities. Vincent and Frédéric were also questioned by their contemporaries and they knew how to respond with love and concrete actions, without giving up or weakening. We must be wise and holy in order to respond to God’s love and to reach out and graciously serve those men and women who are poor, abandoned and marginalized.

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