

Saint Paul, the Vincentians and the Thorns

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There is a biblical passage that remains “undeciphered” to this day. It has to do with the “thorn in the flesh” that St. Paul refers to in the 2nd letter to the Corinthians: “Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me...” [1]

Bible scholars claim that this “thorn in the flesh” could be both a physical illness and something related to the spiritual life. Either way, that thorn was an inconvenience in Paul’s life; however, despite having asked God three times

to free him from his suffering, he accepted his situation, offering it to the Lord as proof of love, obedience and faithfulness.

Some think that the thorn might be a recurring eye infection; others, that it was circumcision (because Paul was Jewish, but he had converted to Christ and had to live with that Jewish symbol). The Bible does not explain what that thorn really was.

What does this passage of the Holy Scriptures have to do with Vincentian work? In our path, we find many thorns that, at times, can hinder our projects and desires. Let's start by talking about the "thorn of poverty," which leaves those we help in a situation of fragility and vulnerability. How can we remove the "thorn of poverty" from within the unequal society in which we live? Oh, it's a terrible thorn to fight! How we could eliminate that thorn! But we have to live with it, at least mitigating its disastrous effects on those who suffer most.

Another "thorn in the flesh" that we have in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is the mistaken attitude of certain of our leaders, who are emboldened by the positions they hold, such as president of Special Work or a Council. Unfortunately, there are those who think this way, even if we are really mere instruments of the Lord so that He, can perform wonders through our hands and talents. We are "useless servants" and we cannot be presumptuous about anything we do, for Jesus himself guided us: "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" [2].

Finally, another "thorn in the flesh" that accompanies the Vincentians is the question of indifference and dispassion that many have in relation to those in need. We cannot allow ourselves to fall into a routine during home visits, or restrict our actions to donating material goods and food. Nor can we keep looking for excuses for our absences from meetings and Vincentian events, because that weakens us spiritually. Penance – one of the Vincentian virtues – has everything to do with retaining that sense of unease. Therefore, we ask God to keep that thorn in our flesh, so that we never forget that we are His tools.

Our hope lies in God's promise to the poor and those who help the poor: "For he will deliver the poor who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the poor and save the poor from death."^[3]

Some questions to reflect on in the Conference: What is the thorn that most bothers us in the day-to-day work of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the external thorn (associated with those we are helping, such as misery and inequality) or the internal (associated with the relationships within Conferences and Councils)? Or perhaps the thorns are spiritual and physical?

[1] 2 Cor 12:7-9.

[2] Lc 17:7-10.

[3] Psalm 72.

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