

The Works of Mercy – The Example of St Vincent de Paul

This past Wednesday was the memorial of St Vincent de Paul. He was born in southern France in 1576 and was friends with another French clergyman – St Francis de Sales. One of St. Vincent's biographers said that one difference between them was that St Francis de Sales was born into a well-to-do aristocratic family while St Vincent was born into a poor peasant family and thus that St Vincent had greater odds to overcome. But in fact this biographer had it backwards and upside down – it was St Francis de Sales who was disadvantaged, who had to reject temptations to an easy life in order to become a great saint. To think that being born into a modest family is somehow an obstacle to true greatness, i.e., real holiness, is a worldly way of thinking.

St Vincent's parents recognized his sharp intelligence early on and sent him to be educated at a renowned school in southern France. After only 4 years at school (i.e., still at a young age) he was hired as a private tutor for a local lawyer's kids, which allowed him to continue his education without any financial burden to his family. Notice the example of real family life here. The family sacrifices for the good of the son, the son sacrifices himself, and desires to do so, for the sake of the family – a good example of what Pope St John Paul II said the family is meant to be: a school of charity, one sacrificing for the good of the other. Let us bear firmly in mind the plea of Pope John Paul II: Families, become what you are meant to be. Our world depends on it.

Vincent eventually went on to seminary and to ordination, also attaining a doctorate in Sacred Theology. Shortly after his ordination he set sail to go receive an inheritance that some lady had willed to him, but this trip was not to be without incident. He was travelling by ship and it was attacked by pirates, who took him and other passengers prisoner and sold them into slavery in north Africa. Fr de Paul was bought and sold several times, at one point being owned by a Muslim man who, though congenial towards him, tried to convert him to Islam, promising to make him his heir if he did so. So what did Vincent do? Did he say: well I am a priest or I am well educated, I cannot be overcome. He did not. He pleaded with our Lord to preserve him from temptation. In the face of what could have turned into a strong temptation, his humility preserved him. Vincent eventually ended up being owned by an apostate Catholic who had become Muslim so as to have multiple wives. Now one of the man's wives was in fact Muslim and she would go into the field at times, where Fr de Paul was working, and ask him to sing songs to "his God." The good priest would sing the Psalms, with tears running down his face because they reminded him of his incapacity to live out his ordained priesthood. The woman became very sympathetic towards Vincent and she began to chastise her husband repeatedly. She told him he should go back to his Catholic faith, and he eventually did it. He took Vincent back to Europe, renounced Islam, repented, went to Confession, and began to live the Catholic faith.

Fr de Paul took on several different positions – chaplaincies and so on – after his return but before long he entered into what would become his life-long work, that for which he is most well-known: his care of the materially poor. St Vincent eventually founded a religious order whose formal name is Congregation of the Mission, more commonly known as Vincentians. Now when you hear that the work of St Vincent and his religious order was care for the materially poor, what is it that comes to mind? It might be something like homeless shelters, a food pantry, clothing drives, a soup kitchen and so on. And indeed, they did help with people's material needs. But their primary or first concern was care of their souls through teaching – parish missions, catechetical instruction, preaching, and so on – and offering the sacraments. To disregard the soul, *eternal* life, while tending the body (passing life) would be like a doctor clipping someone's long fingernails while the person is having a heart attack – first things first!

At the same time, our Lord *did* give us the corporal works of mercy – feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, and so on. These were not just nice little things He mentions, they are commands. For Church-going Catholics in South Dakota, this might be something to work on, something that maybe needs a little more attention, something to be a little more conscientious about.

How to go about it? The first and most important part is to have the right interior disposition, which means that it must be done with the utmost humility. Given that the corporal works of mercy are for the true good of man, it should come as no surprise that there are numerous ways to corrupt such work, and one of the greatest

corruptions is to make sure everybody knows about it. One of the great problems in carrying out the corporal works of mercy today is that people often get tennis elbow – not from heavy lifting but from constantly bending their arm to pat themselves on the back, thus ruining what could have been a good and meritorious work.

But we have to be careful here. Keeping it secret is not the essence of doing some work with humility. A person might keep it secret just to be able to shine their own halo even more in their own mind. The corporal works of mercy of some of the saints are well known. The right mindset is not a matter of just not advertising. What then is the right interior disposition? Our Lord gave the instruction: When you give alms do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. It means do not glorify yourself in your own mind when doing some work of mercy. Do it and think nothing of it; think no more of it than you would of taking a shower in the morning. Would you take a shower in the morning and say: look how wonderful I am? It's absurd, but it's just as absurd to glorify one's self for "giving alms." I am not seeking to conceal it or advertise it, any more than I am seeking to conceal or advertise the fact that I showered this morning, simply because I think nothing of it. Blowing my horn about some corporal work of mercy not only ruins the merit of the work, it makes me worse off than I would have been if I'd done nothing at all. Grumbling while doing some work of mercy would actually be better than blowing a horn over it, provided it's done with at least some sense of duty to the Lord. Sometimes you will hear individuals or organizations give a whole litany of all the "good works" they have done. Our Lord's reply is: you have already been repaid; there is no merit in your works.

Given that our Lord has commanded us to do the works of mercy and that this right mindset is the only way that command can be carried, how is it developed? Virtue and vice have one characteristic in common – they are both habits. In order to have a good habit – habitually have the right interior disposition – I have to root out any vice contrary to it. And what might that (habitual) vice be? How quickly and easily man "worships the work of his hands," as Scripture puts it. This can become so habitual that a person will even become unaware that they are doing it: oh I am such a great parent and spouse, my business is successful, I do so many good things, I have an important position, I do important work, and on and on (and on) it goes. I have heard Church-going people go on and on in such a way, completely oblivious to their own pride and self-righteousness. If priding myself on what I do, or have done, or what I am is a habit, I will not be able to carry out the works of mercy. To break a sinful habit (vice) and to build a good habit (virtue) I have to choose to do so. I begin to recognize where and when I self-glorify and I choose to stop it. This is often enough to allow real humility to begin to grow.

Part of developing the right mindset necessary to carry out our Lord's command to do the works of mercy, is understanding the reason for the command. An example will help. A homeless man comes and asks a guy if he can get him a motel room. The guy's got a lot to get done but he knows he should try to help. When he does, it's one frustration after another – no one at this motel, the next one has no vacancies, they go to another town and it's the same thing; the whole thing is starting to take up a good part of the day and the guy is getting mildly irritated. In the meantime, the homeless guy is sharp enough to figure out through their conversations that the guy trying to help him has a lot of people coming to him for all kinds of different things and that he has a lot to do. The homeless guy tells him how lucky he is because he's got nobody. Finally, the guy trying to help takes the homeless guy to a more distant town and gets him a room at a fairly nice, but still modest, motel that also serves breakfast. The guy is almost ecstatic – a nice bed, clean odor-free room, no drunks or addicts around like he's used to; and he says, almost to himself – maybe it'll even be a hot breakfast. Now when the guy who got him the room was driving back, all of this started crossing his mind. He realized how grateful the guy was in receiving so little, things that he takes for granted. He is humbled, his irritation is not only gone but he's sorry for it, and he's thankful for the guy who came to him. Who helped who? Is it not true that the guy who paid for the room received a lot more than he gave? The Lord put that homeless guy in his path as a gift to him, not vice versa. What was a few hours or a few dollars? It was nothing. This is for each of us individually to take and act on but as we move forward with "pastoral planning" maybe we should also be motivated to talk a little about how as a pastorate we might be prepared to carry the corporal works of mercy. Will not our Lord bestow His graces if we serve Him with a meek and humble heart?

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.