

The Poor And St. Vinnies

The Poor And The St. Vincent De Paul Society.

By a Vincentian Father.

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THE POOR, WHY WE SHOULD EVER HELP THEM,

And,

THE PART PLAYED BY THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF THAT HELP.

SECTION I.

WHY WE SHOULD HELP THE POOR.

“Amen, I say to you: As long as you did it to one of these, my least brethren, you did it TO ME,” and “Amen, I say to you: As long as you did it not to one of these least, neither did you do it TO ME” (St. Matthew 25:40 and 45).

THE Poor! That is the subject of this paper, and, by that term “Poor,” the writer has principally in view those who suffer from a real shortage of this world’s goods — a condition of things that is accentuated if they should also happen to be sick.

There are other kinds of poverty besides this. Indeed, there are worse kinds. Of these the greatest and saddest is spiritual poverty, arising out of either ignorance or neglect to use the knowledge a person has. There are people who know little, or nothing, about God and God’s dealings with mankind, whereby He raises them from the low level of nature to the supernatural plane, and destines them for eternal union with Him as courtiers round His throne. They know nothing of the real nobility of human life. They may have plenty of this world’s goods, so that envious fellow-men regard them as rich, but they are poor with the worst of poverty. Others there are, who know these things, and who know that, to reach to the lofty destiny God has in mind for them, they must live lives of obedience to His laws; but this they will not do, simply because the sinful attractions of the world appeal too strongly to them. Hence, though they, too, may be rich in this world’s goods, they are the poorest of the poor in the things that really count.

Reference will again be made to them before the end of this paper, when we are treating of the work of the St. Vincent de Paul Society; but, for the present, when we speak of the “Poor,” we speak of those who are more or less in want, and especially if, in addition to this, they are sick.

Well, then, first of all, there always will be poor people in the world. The Master Himself declared: “The poor you have always with you, and, whensoever you will, you may do them good” (St. Mark 14:7). We all know that there is a political system in operation in one part of the world to-day, which claims that, when it has come to its full development, there will be no rich or no poor. We all know, too, that the advocates of that system are very active in our own midst here in Australia, fully

determined to put their theories into practice amongst us. It is a pity that so much enthusiasm, ability, and energy should be wasted in the pursuit of this dream, especially as there are so many terrible evils mixed up in it with a great deal of good. Dream it certainly is, because it is opposed to Human Nature, in consequence of which, as soon as all have been reduced to the one level, inequality will begin again, and, once again, the poor will be with us. (Communism, as is well known, abolishes some inequalities, but replaces them with others.)

It is idle to seek to overthrow Human Nature. We all saw a classic instance of this in the recent calamitous World War of 1914-18. Not so long before it burst in all its horror upon the world, there appeared a book, written by Norman Angell, which was hailed with intense enthusiasm. It gave a masterly exposition of the operations of the great financiers of the different countries, and showed how much English money was invested in German securities, and vice versa, and how all the great countries were similarly intertwined with one another in matters that affected their financial standing.

From this interlocking, the author drew the conclusion that war was an impossibility, precisely because of this self-interest.

The writer of this paper vividly recalls an argument that occurred at the time between an ardent supporter of Norman Angell and another man who disclaimed any great knowledge of finance but had the philosophic turn of mind. After listening for a time to the enthusiastic champion of Angell's views, the philosopher said calmly: "My friend, you are overlooking the biggest factor of all in the making of war — viz., Human Nature. As long as man is as he is, when national pride is touched, all the financial complexities in the world will not stop war." Unfortunately, it was not long before the nations were at one another's throats, and when next the two parties in the argument met, the advocate of Norman Angell's views was wearing khaki and serving as a surgeon in the army of the Allies. He sadly admitted that his opponent had taken the right view of the situation.

Yes! Human Nature has to be always reckoned with and, should Communists and all advanced Socialists ever see the day when they shall have forced their system on a reluctant world, they will see that same factor of Human Nature again producing inequality, and the Master's words will again be true: "The poor you have always with you."

At any rate, there is no doubt that at present the poor are with us. Many are poor today who never dreamt that such would be their condition. They have known much better days, so that to their present poverty is added bitterness of feelings against the world in general, and, in many cases, against individuals whom they blame for their decline in fortune. There is even bitterness against God, so that spiritual poverty is superadded to material poverty.

It is, then, the purpose of this paper to show, first of all, why we, Catholics, should help to the fullest extent of our ability; and, secondly, to advocate the cause of the St. Vincent de Paul Society as a divinely given method of applying our help with the greatest possible efficiency.

WHY, THEN, SHOULD WE HELP?

(1) Purely Natural Reasons.

(a)

The poor are our fellow human beings, and that, too, no matter to what class they belong, to what religion, what political party, what nationality. One human being should ever have compassion for

another who is in want or suffering, and, to the honour of humanity be it said, it is not often one meets with men so heartless as not to be moved by the distress of others. Indeed, in this respect, the Australian people enjoy an enviable reputation for their spontaneous generosity whenever a case of genuine distress is brought to their notice. Still, we deserve this rebuke, viz., that it has to be brought to the notice of many. They do not see it for themselves, and the reason usually is that they have become so frenzied in the pursuit of pleasure and self-indulgence that they have become selfishly insensible to what others around them are suffering. They wouldn't let a dog go hungry, and they are quick to see its plight; but, where human beings are in question, they fail to see, and hence, unconsciously, they are selfish examples of believers in the doctrine of the "survival of the fittest." It must not be so with us. Humanity, alone, should impel us, in these hard times, to be quick to see and prompt to act, even to the extent of self-denial, when our fellow mortals are pinched with want, and still more when to want is added sickness.

(b)

We may know poverty ourselves some day, and the kind offices of charitable people may be much desired by us then. In these days of anxiety, few are safe, and it is a very wise man who can say what the future will bring forth. As was said above, there are people poor today who never for a moment thought such circumstances should arise for them. It may be our turn next. In any case, even when times are normal, a bout of sickness for the breadwinner of a family can alter the whole face of things for people who never before knew anxiety about the "what shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed."

One thing is certain as a result of the universal experience of mankind, and that is that, in exact proportion as we shall have been compassionate and sympathetic with the poor and distressed in the hey-day of our prosperity, in that same proportion will others be kind to us, should misfortune come.

For these two purely natural considerations, therefore, we ought to keep our eyes open to see the misery around us, and our hearts kindly disposed to come to the relief of our fellow-men, no matter what their class, religion, political conviction, or nationality. They are human beings; so are we. They are in distress. We can help them. It is, therefore, a duty of common humanity to do so.

There are, however, much higher reasons than these to impel us to help our less fortunate brethren. To do so purely out of natural sympathy is, at best, only a natural virtue, such as we should expect to find in one savage towards another. Such assistance has nothing of the supernatural about it, and consequently can expect no supernatural recognition. Let us, therefore, pass on to these more important reasons for our benevolence and beneficence.

(2) Supernatural Reasons.

(a)

God commands us to succour the poor: — Every human being is a child of God, and, consequently, we are brothers and sisters, all under the common Father of all.

Now God has given, from the beginning, the command: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." That word "neighbour" is all-embracing. It is not confined to those who are immediately bound to us by ties of blood; nor is it confined to those who are our friends; nor yet to those who, though not in our circle of friendship, live in our immediate vicinity; nor even to all those who claim Australia as their common country. No! There are no limits. This was made indisputably

clear, when, in the fullness of time, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity came to our earth in human form.

On one occasion, when, in answer to a query, He had confirmed the ancient law of loving the neighbour as oneself, His questioner further asked: “And who is my neighbour?”

He could have answered in direct terms; but He preferred to paint a supposititious case, and draw the reply from that. He represented a man attacked by robbers, wounded, stripped, and left in his misery helpless by the roadside. It is well to impress here that Our Lord was speaking to Jews, and the text indicates that the afflicted man was a Jew. The importance of remembering this will be seen when we now examine the conduct of the three who passed along the road and saw the miserable condition of the victim. The three were — a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. The two former were Jews, who should, therefore, naturally have had compassion for a fellow-countryman in distress; moreover, their very office should have made them examples to those who held no such official position. What did they do? Nothing! They left the poor man in his suffering. The third was a Samaritan. Now, there was great enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans, both from the racial and the religious point of view. It would not, consequently, have occasioned any surprise if this Samaritan had imitated the Jewish priest and Levite. The victim was his enemy — at least, he was of a race which he despised. Yet Our Lord represents him as exercising all the offices of kindness, providing for both the present and future wants of the sufferer.

Then Our Lord put the question to him who, sought to know what was meant by that word “neighbour”: “Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbour to him that fell among the robbers?”

The answer, of course, was obvious: “He that showed mercy to him.” Our Lord’s picture was now complete, and the lesson could be drawn in emphatic terms: “Go, and do you in like manner.”

Even our enemies, then, must come under our observance of Christ’s Law of Universal Love, and this He stated categorically at another time, when He said: “Love your enemies. Do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you.”

After having said those striking words, He gives the reason thus: “That you may be the children of your Father, Who is in heaven, Who makes His sun to rise upon the good and bad, and rains upon the just and the unjust.

“For, if you love them that love you, what reward shall you have? Do not even the publicans do this? And if you salute your brethren only, what do you more? Do not also the heathens this?”

His followers are expected to rise above personal likes and dislikes, above class distinctions, above differences of nationality, creed, or political opinion; they must be like His eternal Father, whose love knows no limits. Hence, He concludes: “Be ye, therefore, perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Included in that universal love are, of course, the poor; and especially the sick poor, and God’s command, reiterated and confirmed by Christ, is the all-impelling motive for our service to them. Indeed, there can be no real love of God without this love of the neighbour, especially when his poverty puts him in need of our practical love. St. John distinctly says: “If any man says: I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar. For he that loves not his brother, whom he sees, how can he love God, Whom he sees not?” and, dealing more specifically with the case we are considering, he says: “He, that hath the substance of this world and shall see his brother in need, and shall shut up

his bowels from him, how does the charity of God abide in him?" No! There can be no real love for God in the heart of the man who neglects the poor, and, if there is no love for God, there can be no heaven, because this is the greatest and the first commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole soul — with all your strength and with all your mind."

God commands, then, and Christ confirms the command. Indeed, He even raises the standard higher, because, whereas the old command was to love the neighbour "as ourselves," He says: "A new commandment I give you — that you love one another as I have loved you," and He loved even to the extent of dying for all: "Greater love than this no man has than that a man lay down his life for his friends."

God commands, Christ confirms the command and set a yet higher standard — no motive can be greater than that. To neglect the command necessarily involves punishment, and, though we had no reason to expect it, the observance of the command ensures abundant blessings for Time and Eternity. This is the second of the supernatural motives.

(b)

God will punish disobedience, and will reward observance: —

He will punish: — The classic proof of this is derived from Our Lord's own words, when He describes the Last Judgment scene. He says: "Then shall the King say to them that shall be on His left hand: Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, which was prepared for the devil and his angels. For, I was hungry, and you gave Me not to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me not to drink; I was a Stranger, and you took Me not in; naked, and you covered Me not; sick and in prison, and you did not visit Me.

"Then they shall answer Him, saying: Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a Stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister to You?

"Then He shall answer them, saying: Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it not to one of these least, neither did you do it to Me!"

It is certainly a very striking fact that what the Lord selects, out of all the black record of human crime, to justify eternal reprobation is the neglect of the social duty of wealth. We are only too eager to seize on the promise of eternal beatitude, in consequence of the discharge of that duty, and we take complacency in the thought that we have thereby done well: but we forget that, while God need not reward us for doing our duty, it is a matter of eternal justice that He should punish us for the neglect of it.

He emphasises the same idea in the case of the parable of the man and the beggar at his gate. He says: "There was a certain rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and feasted sumptuously every day. And there was a certain beggar, named Lazarus, who lay at his gate, full of sores, desiring to be filled with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, and no one did give him."

Continuing, he pictures the fate of the two: "And it came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died, and was buried in hell."

Then, he represents the rich man, in his misery, begging that Lazarus be sent to bring him relief, and Abraham's answer was: "Son, remember that you did receive good things in your lifetime, and

likewise Lazarus evil things; but now, he is comforted, and you are tormented,” and the reason is obvious — viz., that the rich man failed to help his poor neighbour.

In both those examples quoted, stress is laid on the punishment in the next life. Oftentimes, too, there is punishment even in this. At any rate, there is often this much punishment that the blessings promised to those who succour the poor are not given to those who fail to do so, and life is all the poorer in consequence. We shall now proceed to consider these rewards.

God rewards, both in Time and Eternity, those who obey His law of Love in this respect.

Sacred Scripture, of both the Old and New Testaments, abounds in the most wonderful promises of temporal and eternal blessings.

Let us classify some of these from the Old Testament first: —

In Tobias or Tobit (4:7 to 12), we read: “Give alms out of your substance, and turn not away your face from any poor person; for, so it shall come to pass that the face of the Lord shall not be turned from you. According to your ability, be merciful. If you have much, give abundantly; if you have little, take care even so to bestow willingly a little; for, thus you store up for yourself a good reward for the day of necessity. For, alms deliver from all sin, and will not suffer the soul to go into darkness. Alms shall be a great confidence before the Most High God, to all them that give it.”

In the Psalms (40: 1 to 4): “Blessed is he that understands concerning the needy and the poor. The Lord will deliver him in the evil day. The Lord will preserve him, and give him life, and make him blessed upon the earth and deliver him not up to the will of his enemies. The Lord will help him on his bed of sorrow.” (It is Psalm 41:1-4 in the Hebrew)

In the 111th Psalm, verses 5 and 6: “Acceptable is the man who shows mercy and lends. He shall order his words with judgment, because he shall not be moved for ever.”(It is Psalm 112:5-6 in the Hebrew.) In the Book of Proverbs (22:9): “He, that is inclined to mercy, shall be blessed: for, of his bread, he has given to the poor.”

In the same Book (Proverbs 28: 27): “He, that gives to the poor, shall not want.”

Again, in chapter 31, mention is made of the valiant woman, and it is said of her: “Far and from the coasts is the price of her.” Then, all sorts of blessings are poured upon her because of her many good qualities, amongst which is numbered this, that “she has opened her hand to the needy, and stretched out her hands to the poor.”

In Ecclesiasticus (4:1 to 4 and 10 and 11), elaborate directions are given on this subject of consideration for those in distress, and a beautiful promise is added. The words are: “Son, defraud not the poor of alms, and turn not away your eyes from the poor: Despise not the hungry soul, and provoke not the poor in his want. Afflict not the heart of the needy, and defer, not to give to him that is in distress. Reject not the petition of the afflicted, and turn not away your face from the needy. In judging, be merciful to the fatherless as a father, and as a husband to their mother, and you shall be as the obedient Son of the Most High, and He will have mercy on you more than a mother.” What a beautiful promise!

In the same Book (7:36): “Stretch out your hand to the poor, that your expiation and your blessing may be perfected.” (See also verses 32 to 36.)

In chapter 29: verses 15 to 17: “Shut up alms in the heart of the poor, and it shall obtain help for you against all evil. Better than the shield of the mighty, and better than the spear, it shall fight for you against your enemy.” (See also verses 12 to 17.)

Finally, in chapter 31, verse 28: “The lips of many shall bless him, who is liberal of his bread.” (See also verses 23 to 28.)

In Isaias [Isaiah] (58:7 to 11), there is a long passage, but it is so beautiful and so encouraging, that it were a pity not to insert it here. It reads thus:

“Deal your bread to the hungry, and bring the needy and the harbourless into your house. When you shall see one naked, cover him, and despise not your own flesh.

“Then, shall your light break forth as the morning, and your health shall speedily arise, and your justice shall go before your face, and the glory of the Lord shall gather you up. Then shall you call, and the Lord shall hear; you shall cry, and He shall say: Here I am.

“If you will take away the chain out of the midst of you {that is, the burden that oppresses the poor, and so holds them like a chain}, and cease to stretch out the finger {that is, hard words and raileries at the poor — the finger of scorn}, and to speak that which profits not; when you shall pour out your soul to the hungry, and shall satisfy the afflicted soul then shall your light rise up in darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noon-day, and the Lord will give you rest continually, and will fill your soul with brightness, and deliver your bones, and you shall be like a watered garden, and like a fountain of water, whose water shall not fail.”

That completes a wonderful list, of promises from the Old Testament, selected from a bewildering collection. They promise every blessing in life and in death, blessings for body and soul, blessings for Time and Eternity.

Now let us pass to the New Testament. There is no need to give any long list, because Our Lord’s own classic promise covers all. Before passing to that, let it suffice to give but two, and these from St. Paul. In his Epistle to the Hebrews (13:16), he says: “Do not forget to do good and to impart; for, by such sacrifices, God’s favour is obtained.”

In the second letter to the Corinthians (9:6 and 7), he writes: “Now this I say: He, who sows sparingly, shall also reap sparingly, and he, who sows in blessings, shall also reap blessings. Everyone as he has determined in his heart, not with sadness or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Now we come to the great promise of all. It is Our Lord’s own, and is given in chapter 25 verses 34 to 40, of St. Matthew’s Gospel, where He painted for us the awe-inspiring scene of the Last Judgment.

He says: “Then shall the King say to them that shall be on His right hand:

“Come, ye blessed of My Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

It need hardly be remarked that those, who shall be fortunate enough to have those words addressed to them, shall receive in that reward all that can satisfy the heart of man. Let us now listen further to Our Lord; He goes on to give the reason for such a blessing on the happy ones. He says: “For, I was hungry, and you gave Me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me to drink; I was a Stranger, and you

took Me in; naked, and you covered Me; sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.”

Naturally, this arouses amazement in the minds of those so addressed, and Our Lord represents them as asking “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and fed You; thirsty, and gave You to drink? And when did we see You a Stranger, and took You in — or naked, and covered You? Or, when did we see You sick or in prison, and came to You?”

Then the Saviour tells us what shall be His answer to that query, and, in telling us, He has given us the principle which has been the impelling factor in all works of Christian charity from the day Our Lord spoke, and which will inspire the same charity till time shall be no more. Listen to Him: “The King, answering, shall say to them: Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these, my least Brethren, you did it to Me.”

These fortunate ones had done many acts of Christ-like charity during their time on earth. They had not shut their eyes to the misery round about them; they had not shut their ears when others told them such misery existed, although they were not in a position to see it for themselves. Moreover, having been, or heard, they had “understood concerning the needy and the poor,” and, understanding, they had sympathized — giving expression to their sympathy in the practical form of help, when they could do so, or of kindly encouragement when their hands were tied by the lack of personal possessions. All this they had done, not from mere natural sympathy, but for the supernatural motive of the love of God, because they knew that only works done under the impulse of Grace can merit an eternal reward. It might have been that they were sometimes not in the state of Grace, when they did these acts for God’s sake. On such occasions, they did not merit the reward of heaven, but they did win mercy from God, which enabled them to repent sincerely and get back into the state of God’s favour. At any rate, the end of life finds them in Sanctifying Grace, and they are gladly surprised to find that many of their “little unremembered acts of kindness and of love,” done through the years of their pilgrimage, have merited for them a wondrous reward. They are surprised to find that Our Lord Himself has treasured up all those little acts and regarded them as personal favours — favours done to Himself.

One can always find beautiful thought in the contemplation of the scene related in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of St. John. Our Lord had come, in His wanderings after souls, to Jacob’s well, at Sichar, a city of Samaria. The Gospel narrative is touching in its simplicity. It says: “Jesus, therefore, being wearied with His journey, sat thus on the well. There comes a woman of Samaria to draw water, Jesus says to her: Give me to drink. For His disciples were gone into the city to buy meats.”

He was hungry, thirsty, weary. It is a great help to us, poor mortals subject to the miseries and necessities of life, to see that the God-man Himself experienced all the same miseries as we, with, of course, the single exception of sin. That, He could not experience. Temptation? Yes! Sin? No!

Now, had we lived in those days, and had we known that He was God, would we not have counted it the greatest honour of our lives if we had been privileged to supply His needs — to give Him food, drink, clothing, shelter, when He suffered from the want of them?

Well, there is no reason why we should envy those who did have that privilege. He has made it possible for us all to claim it, by identifying Himself with the poor, and taking as done to Himself what we do, for the love of God, for our fellow human beings in distress.

Need any more be said on this point? There are poor people in the, world around us; there always will be. We should help them, no matter who they may be. Every motive, both natural and supernatural, is there to urge us to it — our common humanity on the natural side, the command of God on the supernatural side, with its concomitants of fear of punishment for neglect of that command and hope of unspeakable rewards of Time and in Eternity. Yes! We should help the poor.

SECTION II.

THE PART PLAYED BY THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF OUR HELP.

Poverty and distress may be found in very many forms. The Church, beneficent mother that she is, has made provision in different institutions to meet, as far as she possibly can, every need of suffering humanity.

An examination of the charitable institutions conducted by religious communities and others, under the guidance of the Catholic Church, in our own land of Australia would, we venture to think, cause much surprise even to our own Catholics, both on account of their number and the variety of the forms of distress for which they cater. It can with truth be said that there is scarcely a need of the poor and afflicted for which there is not provision made. As at the beginning of this year the number of orphanages approaches 40, and that of hospitals exceeds 30. Magdalene Homes, in one form or another, total 10; homes for the aged poor, 9; foundling hospitals, 6. Then there are poor schools, industrial schools, hostels, deaf and dumb institutes, a hospice for the dying, and various other institutions, each meeting some particular call of poverty or affliction.

Some of these are, of course, self-supporting, at least in part; but by far the larger portion of them are supported by the charity of our Catholic people.

In the light of all that, it might reasonably seem that all that has been said in the first section was unnecessary. Our Catholic people as a whole are certainly wonderful in their charity to these institutions and their inmates; moreover, they do much in private charity, and no appeal is ever made to them in vain. The question, however, is one for each individual. Are all doing what they could, or is it the same faithful comparative few that are doing this wondrous work? Furthermore, even in the case of those that are doing something, what is their attitude of mind? It is easy to adopt a wrong attitude in this matter. It is easy to conceive the idea that, because one does something to relieve want, or help deserving causes, he deserves praise and commendation. That would be to forget that one is only performing a duty — obeying a command of God, disobedience to which involves severe punishment. There are few lessons in the Gospels so clear as that the possessions that we have, over and above the legitimate demands of our station in life, are by no means, ours, in the sense that we are the owners of them in the sight of God. We are not owners, we are but stewards of the possessions of God, and if, owing to the inequality of talents in individuals and the inequality of opportunity, which is part of God's designs for mankind, we find ourselves possessed of more than we legitimately need, while others are in want, it is an absolute duty for us to share our superabundance. We do not deserve commendation for merely discharging that duty, but, because God is so good, He does reward in a divinely munificent way.

The remarks, therefore, of Section I. should have their value in this way: — Those who so far have not been doing their duty to their afflicted brethren should see from them that it behooves them to make a beginning at once and persevere in this branch of well-doing to the end, while those who have been doing something should ask themselves two questions — viz.,

(a) Am I doing all I can and should?

(b) In doing even what I have done, have I preserved the right attitude of mind, that is to say, have I regarded myself as having done something wonderful, rather than at having done only what I was bound to do?

Returning, then, to our theme, the Catholic people as a whole are very remarkable in their support of the many charitable institutions that are in existence in our midst, under the guidance of the Church, and, though this paper has for its purpose to advocate the cause of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the writer himself, and certainly the members of that admirable society would be the very last to press the claims of the work sponsored by them, if that meant any subtraction from the assistance given to all the other forms of charity to which we have referred. By all manner of means, you who have helped hospitals, orphanages, Magdalene Homes, etc., continue to do so, and do even more if you can; but, now, give some consideration to what will be written in the remainder of this paper!

(a)

THE STORY OF THE ORIGIN OF THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY.

The opening years of the last [19th] century found France in a sad state. The French Revolution, as it will ever be called — the great Revolution amongst several that have disturbed that country — was just over, and the nation was in a chaotic state, economically, socially, religiously,

The great struggle had been like the eruption of a volcano, after long rumbling had told of the unrest beneath. For a long, long time the ordinary people had been seething with discontent under the oppression of the aristocrat and upper classes generally. There can be no doubt that there was good reason for all this unrest, and there was not wanting leaders and agitators to keep the mind of the down-trodden classes in a perpetual state of ferment. At last, they felt their power sufficiently to come out into the open and precipitate the long-threatened conflict, in which the throne tottered to its fall, and most of the old established social and political fabrics were shattered.

Poverty had been the impelling cause of the revolt, and, as usual in such cases, the people generally had hugged the delusion that, once the old system was destroyed, a new era of peace and prosperity would immediately begin. Such however, is not the usual course of human affairs. Any conflict on a large scale must leave exhaustion in its train, and time must elapse before things begin to re-adjust themselves, even if the new system has great advantages over the old. It is like the calm that follows a storm, when leisure is given to the onlooker to survey the wreckage that the storm has caused. Before a brighter day dawns that wreckage must be swept away, and the initial steps must be made at reconstruction, which, in its turn, takes years to manifest its fruits. Not till then does this old earth of ours begin to look, once again, a pleasant place for the habitation of man.

The French Revolution set out to remove poverty and oppression. Its first work was one of destruction, and, at the beginning of the last [19th] century, the calm had come with ruin all around. Many a bread-winner had gone down in the struggle, and where poverty had abounded before, it did still more abound after.

Poverty, however, is not the worst of evils. The world has seen two small nations go through long periods of poverty; but they accepted it in a Christian spirit, rising thereby to great heights of moral greatness that won the admiration even of a material and unsympathetic world. Those two nations were Ireland and Poland. True, while they did bear their cross in a Christian spirit, they never

ceased to urge the just claims of free-born men to liberty and a reasonable share of this world's goods, and in this they were perfectly right. Well had it been for France if her people had preserved the same mental and spiritual outlook that distinguished the people of Ireland and Poland. They would then have been able to face the inevitable reaction after the destructive period with, at least, their faith in God unimpaired.

Unfortunately, it was not so. The leaders in the revolutionary movement had become steeped in the infidel philosophy of Voltaire, Rousseau, and the Encyclopedists, and they had sedulously disseminated these ideas through the ranks of the people generally. Consequently, when the calm of exhaustion came, it was at once apparent that the erstwhile glorious Catholic Faith of the French people had been undermined. Atheism and agnosticism had spread afar, and the enemies of the Church gloated over what seemed to them the deathbed of Catholicism, and, indeed, of Christianity. Many who still called themselves Catholics were so only in name; they did not practise their religion; faith was weak; and morality sank to a very low level.

It was into the midst of a world such as this that a child was born who was destined to write his name in large and lasting characters across the pages of the histories of France and of the Church. His father was first a military man, then a professor, and, finally, a doctor. The family name was Ozanam, and to the child was given the Christian name of Frederick. Frederick Ozanam! What a world of glorious achievements in the cause of all that is noble and good is conjured up by that name! His life was not a long one; he died when he was but 40 years of age, but, in that comparatively short life, is crowded a record of good deeds, and of permanent work established, that might well be the envy of many who have lived beyond the allotted span of three score years and ten. [He is now numbered among the Blessed.]

Frederick was a precocious child. Indeed, so early did he manifest maturity of mind that we may well question was he ever a child, as we know children to be. When he was only 15 years of age, he wrote a defence of the doctrines of the Church against the errors of the Simonians (the followers of Henri de Saint-Simon) which called forth the wondering eulogy of such a master as Lamartine. At 17 he went through a trial with regard to his Faith which others have experienced at much later years, and he issued from it with a purpose that stamped him as old far beyond the number of his days.

This incident is of immense importance to anyone who is anxious to know something of the origin of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. It may be said that it was as the result of the struggle which it records that, at a later date, this wonderful society was called into being. That may seem a strange thing to say, but the story of subsequent events will prove it to be perfectly true. In later years, he spoke of this trial of faith as "the horror of those doubts pursuing us even at night to the pillow we have drenched with our tears." In his extremity, he entered a church one day and prayed with all his soul to be delivered from the temptation that assailed him, promising that, if God gave him light to see the Truth, he would for ever after devote himself to its defence. Peace came. Faith's light shone brightly again in his soul, and he tells us himself: "I vowed to consecrate my days to the service of that Truth which had given me peace."

His vow was soon to be put to the test. The next year he left his father's home at Lyons to go to the University of Paris, where he was to complete his studies for his career in life. At the very outset, he found amongst his fellow-students all the irreligion of which we have already spoken as being a too general condition of things amongst the French people after the Revolution. Faith was dead in many

of them, weak in many more. They openly scoffed at religion, and their moral conduct was deplorable.

It was all a sad shock to him after the lively faith and fervent devotion to which he had been accustomed in his own home.

What, however, shocked him more was to find that the very professors themselves openly attacked the Church and her doctrines, teaching all sorts of errors to those young students in the most dangerous years of their lives. We have already said that the infidel philosophy of Voltaire, Rousseau, and the Encyclopedists had permeated the rank and file of the people. Let us add that, amongst the crowning horrors of the Revolution period must be numbered two, as indicative of the depths to which religious feeling had fallen. The first is that one of the great churches of Paris had been stripped of every sign of its sacred purpose, and had been turned into a mausoleum for the burial of the great men of France — many of them, in their morality, a travesty on the idea of greatness — so that, what had been a centre for Catholics was now “without a Cross, a sepulchre where no religious idea lingered.” The second is that in the Cathedral of Notre Dame itself, the mother church of the nation, not merely had the Blessed Sacrament been banished, but those miscreants had actually enshrined a statue of the Goddess of Liberty on the altar.

Knowing all this, it does not surprise us to find the professorial chairs of the University disgraced by teachers of infidelity; but it is easy to understand what a shock it was to Ozanam.

His vow to serve Truth all his days was fresh in his memory, and he burned to defend the Church against both the professors and his fellow-students. At first, however, he did not know his companions. He did not know that, amongst so many young atheists and libertines, there was a fair sprinkling of splendid Catholic youths, who all felt the same indignation as he did. That fact he discovered by a trifling happening. One day, when the professor was unusually violent in his impious denunciation of the Church and Christianity, Ozanam could not repress showing his disgust by shrugs and other actions, which drew on him the attention of those around — attention that was hostile on the part of the majority, but attention that was frankly commendatory from at least one. After the lecture, this latter sought him out, and then began a holy friendship that lasted all through life. Soon others were joined to the two, and a little band of Catholic youths began to associate with one another, and discuss what they could do to oppose the baneful influence of those around them.

Presently they formed themselves into a little Study Circle, to equip themselves with arguments to refute the wrong teaching of the professors and the erroneous opinions of most of the students. Very soon the lecture hall of the University became the scene of animated discussion, and the young Catholic champion had the courage to even openly question the teaching given from the professorial chairs. Ozanam soon became the natural leader, and, under his guidance, they sought for assistance and advice from an older man, Monsieur Bailly, who became deeply interested in these courageous young men. Through him, a meeting was arranged with the famous Dominican preacher, Père Lacordaire, who thenceforth frequently joined in the activities of the Study Circle, and gave to the instruction of Ozanam and his friends all his great learning and polemical skill. Other famous men were also gradually attracted — men like Montalembert, SaintBeuve, Savigny, Ampere, and others.

Finally, in the course of an argument, that was particularly heated, between the Catholic youths and some of their opponents, a taunt was thrown into the teeth of Ozanam, who had defended the Church and Christianity by an able exposition of all that these two great forces had done for the world down through the ages. This taunt was: “Yes, you have a right to speak of the past. In bygone

days Christianity did indeed work wonders; but today Christianity is dead, and you, who boast of being Catholics, what do you do? What works can you show which prove your Faith, and can claim to make us respect and acknowledge it?"

Thanks be to God for that taunt! It set Ozanam thinking deeply and praying much for guidance. So far he had tried to keep that vow of his: "I will consecrate my days to the service of that Truth that has given me peace," and he had tried to keep it by what seemed to him the obvious way — viz., that of argument in its defence. Results, however, were disappointing.

From out of all his cogitation and prayer there soon arose in his mind the conviction that, though argument must still be one weapon, there was need of another and more appealing one. As he pondered, there came before his mind the scene in far distant days when St. John the Baptist, from his prison, sent messengers to ask Christ the question: "Are You He that is to come, or look we for another?" The answer given by Our Lord seemed to him to fit exactly the circumstances in which he and his young companions were placed. Christ could have answered simply: "Yes, I am the Messiah!" But He preferred to appeal to His works. "Go, and I tell John," said He, "what you have heard and seen the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead rise again, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them."

Ozanam tells us all this himself. In a letter to a friend he wrote: "They were right — the taunt was but too well merited. Then it was that we said to one another: Let us to the front! Let our deeds be in accordance with our words!

"But what were we to do? What could we do to prove ourselves real Catholics, except that which pleases God most — viz., succour our neighbour, as Jesus Christ did, and place our Faith under the safeguard of charity."

Immediately, seven of these young men, with Monsieur Bailly, who was much older than they, began to discuss a scheme for helping the poor in their homes.

THUS BEGAN THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY.

The first conference — as each branch of the society is called — was composed of eight, whose names should never be forgotten. They are: Frederick Ozanam, Paul Lamache, Jules Devaux, Francois Lallie, Auguste le Taillandier, Felix Clavé, Monsieur Bailly, and another about whose name there has been much discussion. A great friend of the society, and one who has read everything he could find, about the work it has done and is doing, tells us that the eighth member at the first meeting of that first little conference later became a priest, and founded the institute known as the Brothers of Charity. His name was Pierre Triest. The year of its beginning was 1833.

Having paid this small tribute of affectionate remembrance to those eight, whose work has spread so far since that eventful day about 100 years ago, let us return to our reflections on Ozanam.

He had vowed to serve Truth all his days. He had tried argument. The results disappointed him. Still bent on serving Truth, he cast about for another way, whilst, of course, never losing sight of the power of well-informed and well-marshalled argument. The other way he found in charity to the poor, especially in their homes. Straightway he began to employ that method, and the result is the St. Vincent de Paul Society as we see it today. It represents "Service to Truth, by Service to Works of Charity."

(b)

HOW THE SOCIETY STANDS NOW, AFTER 100 YEARS.

Wonderful are the ways of God! The Holy Spirit Himself, inspiring St. Paul, has given us that memorable rhapsody:

“O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are His judgments, and how unsearchable His ways! For, who has known the mind of the Lord? Or, who has been His counsellor? Or, who has first given to Him, and recompense shall be made him?

“For, of Him, and by Him, and in Him are all things. To Him be glory for ever and ever. Amen!”

The events we have related and the consequences of them in the world today amply justify us for using the glorious words in connection with this society. A mere boy is tried by temptations against Faith. He issues from them in peace, and then vows to spend his life in serving the sacred cause of Truth. A few young men, just out of their teens, become fired with his enthusiasm, precisely because they find themselves in a set of circumstances which were none of their making. They meet to discuss what they can do to meet the need they see in their own immediate surroundings. How could they dream that out of their poor, puny efforts would grow a mighty, world-wide organisation, and that organisation the very one seemingly best calculated to meet the needs of religion, not for the moment only, but for the days that were to come, long after they themselves would have died — not for their immediate surroundings only, but for all the world!

We are not so surprised, when we see a priest become the founder of a religious institute, and that institute gradually develop into a big organisation, although, even in the case where that has happened, as it so often has, the original founder was always humble enough to be content to try to meet the need he saw just at his hand, and, consequently, never, or seldom, foresaw the mighty development. He certainly might have wished for it; but he was content for the time being to be an instrument in the hand of God for the purpose that was present at the moment, St. Vincent de Paul himself certainly never thought his congregation of priests would spread all over the world; still less did he imagine that his Daughters of Charity would become so numerous and so world-famed.

No! Even the institutes that priests have founded were not foreseen usually in the minds of their founders, as destined to accomplish mighty works for ages long after the mortal life of those founders had ceased; but Ozanam and his companions were not priests, but laymen, and very young and inexperienced ones, too; they planned but for the evils they saw in their own day. Yet, what do we find? A year or two ago, the centenary of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was celebrated all over the world, and the following astounding figures will answer the question: “What do we find today?”

The figures given on that occasion were certainly astounding. The number of Conferences (which is the name used to describe what we usually call “Branches”) is no less than 12,000 throughout the world, and of these there are about 350 in our own country, Australia.

The number of members, counting both active and honorary members together, is nearly a quarter of a million throughout the world, and of these there are nearly 7000 in Australia.

As for the amount of money dispersed in various forms of charity, it is hardly possible to say what that is throughout the world, but that, it must be very large is clear from the fact that, in Australia alone, it amounted to about £38,000 for the year immediately preceding the centenary. (1932) Where that great sum is derived from each year we shall see later in this paper, when we come to appeal for more, and yet more.

(c)

NOW, WHAT WORKS DO THESE MEN DO?

In answer to this, it is necessary to remind readers of what has been already said, when speaking of the origin of this society.

The distinctive work that Ozanam and his companions had in view, when they began this exercise of charity, was the visitation of, and assisting of the poor in their own homes.

Not long before he died, the late Superior-General of the Vincentian Fathers addressed a Circular Letter to all his priests scattered through the world. In that letter, he drew attention to the approaching celebration of the centenary of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

(The writer would wish to insert a little explanation here. He is himself a Vincentian Father, and he feels that, because of that, and because of so much reference to St. Vincent in these pages, the impression might be created in the minds of some that he is claiming the society of which we are treating as having been founded by the saint, He is doing no such thing. It would be absurd to do so, seeing that St. Vincent lived 300 years ago, while this society is in existence only 100 years. No! This society is not the peculiar possession of the Vincentian Fathers. Every priest, whether secular or regular, should be deeply interested in it; but, naturally, Vincentians feel a special claim on their interest, seeing that, when Ozanam and his companions began the work, and looked round for a patron, a guide, and a name, they selected St. Vincent de Paul, and drank deep of his inspiration, because of his world-wide fame as an Apostle of Charity.)

With this explanation, let us resume. The late Superior-General wrote:

“Frederick Ozanam, Christian with all the strength of his being, renowned and honoured Professor of the University of Paris, realised that the ‘better part’ for Christian zeal is love for the poor — love for the chosen ones of Our Saviour. Like St. Vincent, he realised that the great means for winning souls is corporal assistance. Ever like St. Vincent, he wished that a member of the Conference, one who visits the poor, should be himself the first beneficiary of his own charity. Consequently, he placed under the protection of Charity for the Poor, the Faith, the spiritual life, the holiness, of those who would come to join the Society of the Conferences.

“This society, then, is a branch of the great tree of Charity, whose life-giving sap is drawn from the Heart of Our Lord, passing en route through the heart of St. Vincent.”

Yes! Charity for the Poor, and especially by visiting them in their own homes. That was the original idea, and, though many works have been added in the course of time, visitation of the poor remains, and ever will remain, the distinctive work of the society.

Ozanam was particularly insistent on this, after the little society had had some experience in the work. We said above that, in the design of God, this society seems to be the very best means calculated to meet the needs of the times. Why so? Because, in the days that have passed since Ozanam lived and died, religion, outside the Catholic fold, has lost much of its hold on the world. At least dogmatic religion has done so, and, in its place, has arisen a creed-less religion that recognises no good save in the pursuit of works for the reduction of the gap between the very rich and the very poor. In other words, it is a religion whose one purpose is the more even distribution of the world’s wealth. Very good, as far as it goes, but it is a religion that glorifies the claim of humanity and makes light of the claims of God, and it forgets that, in the old Catholic religion, there

was all the necessary machinery for uplifting man's temporal condition, while not failing to give God His proper place, by firm adhesion to the creed, which His Own Son taught during His life on earth, as being necessary for salvation: "Go, teach all nations — all things whatsoever I have commanded you," and "He that believes not shall be condemned." This society is essentially a Catholic society, and, therefore, has all the belief God commands, whilst by its work for the poor, it does all that the greatest humanitarian can demand. In this way, it seems divinely destined to meet the special need of our times, and will, under God, do much to bring mankind back from the maze into which it has wandered.

The charitable work for the poor needs a study of the great social question, if it is to be done in an enlightened way, and with best results. Ozanam saw in visits to the homes of the poor a splendid way of teaching this to the Brothers of the Conferences. He says: "The knowledge of social well-being and of reform is to be learned, not from books, not from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man's garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind. When the conditions of the poor have been examined — in school, at work, in hospital, in the city, in the country — everywhere, where God has placed them, it is then and only then we know the elements of that formidable problem, that we begin to grasp it, and may hope to solve it."

Visitation, then, with a view of relieving, especially in the homes of the poor. That is the distinctive work undertaken by the St. Vincent de Paul men. They do not, however, stop there. Their "Manual," in its second rule distinctly states: "No work of charity should be regarded as foreign to the Society." Hence, their works are many and varied. Each country, in which they are established, has its own particular needs; indeed, in the same country, there often arise different needs in different parts. It would be impossible to give a list here of all they undertake; it will suffice for the general purpose if we indicate their activities in New South Wales, within which this paper is written.

We find there in this year of 1934 three institutions under their care — viz., the Home for Orphan or Destitute Boys at Westmead, the Home for Abandoned and Unwanted Babies at St. Anthony's, Croydon, and the Seamen's Institute.

We find also that they visit sick men in hospitals; they visit prisoners in the jails and endeavour to look after them when released; they look after boys on probation from the Children's Court; they collect eggs for hospitals and for the old people of the Home for the Aged Poor under the Little Sisters of the Poor. They do what they can for the blind, though we have not as yet a Home of our own for them [St Lucy's was to be built in later years]; they distribute good reading matter wherever they can: they form Boys' Guilds and foster the Boy Scout Movement: they pay school fees for poor children in Catholic schools; they form catechism classes in remote districts, where there are no Catholic religious to do the work; they secure free medical attention for the sick poor; they secure Old Age and Invalid Pensions; they provide periodical outings for the children in our Catholic orphanages; they clean up cemeteries and keep them in order.

Yet many other works they do that may seem to be of minor importance, but which are all productive of good. Such are the following: — they call at State Homes on Sunday mornings and take Catholic children to Mass; they cut and trim the hair of male inmates at Orphanages and the Home for the Aged; and, in country districts, they undertake to supply the nuns with firewood, especially during the winter months.

Many of these works require funds. Of this we shall speak later. Suffice it to say here that, whenever funds are required for any of the above works, they are drawn from whatever money the Conference has as a result of the contributions of charitable people. There is, however, one great work, which they maintain entirely by a small contribution from the members themselves, and that is, the maintaining of bursaries for education of priests — the society's funds are not used for that purpose.

Finally, they place themselves unreservedly at the beck and call of the Parish Priests, to do whatever they can to help in parochial works, holding themselves entirely under his authority.

It will be seen that many of the works are concerned about the needs of the body, whilst others have for their direct purpose the soul's requirements, though, even where they care for the body, they have always the soul in view. That was what Monsieur Bailly meant, when he said to the young members of the first Conference: "If you really want to serve the poor and yourselves, direct your charity to moral and spiritual, rather than to material improvement. Do not let it be a mere doling out of alms."

Concluding this section, let us ever remember that Christ's charity was universal. In the light of that, the St. Vincent de Paul men, seeking as they do to imitate the Divine Model, do not question the religious belief of those who seek their aid. Their very motto is: "The title of the poor to our commiseration is their poverty itself. We must not ask to what party or sect they belong."

Ozanam was very emphatic about this. On one occasion, when a minister of one of the non-Catholic sects had collected some alms, he entrusted it to Ozanam for distribution, owing to the admiration he had conceived for the young society. At the next meeting of the Conference of that locality, a debate arose as to how the help should be applied. Some of the members were of opinion that it should be applied first to the Catholic poor, and, if anything remained, that should then be given to Protestants in need. Ozanam was very annoyed, and he cried out vehemently: "Gentlemen, if it be not thoroughly understood that we succour the poor, quite irrespective of class or creed, I will at once return to the Protestants the alms they have entrusted to us, and I shall say to them: 'Take it back; we are not worthy of your confidence'."

It is important to remember this, as we shall need it when we come to consider why we should give particular attention to the needs of this society in our donations.

(d)

WHENCE COME THE FUNDS OF THE SOCIETY?

Principally from the generosity of our Catholic people.

It might easily be thought by those who are not Catholics that the members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, are wealthy men, who finance this wonderful work. They know little, or nothing, about any of our Catholic activities. If they trouble to enquire at all, they find that, in many of our parishes, there are 10, 20, 30 men who devote a good deal of their time to the society. After all, 30 or 40 men out of the total number in a parish is very small, and non-Catholics can be pardoned for not knowing whence the funds do come. Catholics, of course, do know. They see these members of the society in their daily lives, and they know them to be for the most part working-men, using the term "working" in a wide sense. At any rate, wealthy men are few amongst them, not that there is any reason why a wealthy Catholic should not be a member, but the fact is that Catholics, as a whole, do not belong to the well-to-do class.

The consequence of this is that the members could not finance the works of the society, even if they wished to do so. Indeed, it would not be desirable that such should be the case, because that would limit this amazing charity to the few, whereas the whole purpose is better served where many share in it — the multitude giving what it can, and the members of the society doing the active work of dispensing. What makes the goodness of these men shine out most conspicuously is that they not only do the work, sacrificing much of their leisure time to it, but they contribute as far as they can to swell the funds which they, themselves disburse. In addition to adding their mite when any appeal is made to the Catholic people in the churches, and remembering the Poor Box often during the year, they actually have a secret collection at their weekly meetings to which all give whatever they can afford, and the way in which that collection is taken up is such that no one knows what his neighbour gives. There is no room for ostentation on the part of those who can afford more, nor for embarrassment on the part of those who can afford less. It is not, then, from the members themselves that the large sums come which keep this stupendous movement of charity going.

Whence come they? We have already said — from the generosity of the Catholic people, principally. Some few, who are not Catholics, have a genuine appreciation of the work, and make donations from time to time; but it is from periodic appeals in the churches and from the Poor Box, which is to be found near the door of every one of our churches, that the bulk of the money comes.

Some Catholics make donations in money or in kind sometimes, and, on all-too-rare occasions, we hear of bequests by Will.

There, then, are the sources from which are derived the means to help the poor and keep up the institutions and special works fathered by the society —

- (a) Periodic appeals in our churches;
- (b) the Poor Box;
- (c) occasional donations in money or kind; and
- (d) very occasional bequests.

Let us say a little word about each of these in turn: —

(1)

PERIODIC APPEALS IN OUR CHURCHES.

Wherever there is a Conference, or branch, in a parish it is almost the universal practice to get some preacher to make an appeal at all the Masses on some one Sunday in the year. Occasionally, there may be another such appeal made should the demand on the funds be so great as to leave the members crippled in their charitable activities.

The story of these appeals is one that reflects infinite credit usually on our people. Many of them do their very best on these occasions, realising that, in giving to the society, they are really giving to Christ Himself.

This being so, why is this paper written?

For four reasons.

The first is to congratulate those who really do their best, especially if, in order to do so, it means that they have made sacrifices.

The second is to urge these same people to ever keep their motive pure, giving what they do give out of pure love of God and of their fellow-man, without seeking for any commendation in consequence.

The third is to bring the matter before the minds of those of our Catholic people who either give nothing or who do not give as much as they can.

The fourth, and last, is to tell all our Catholics, and as many others as wish to learn, what a wonderfully providential thing it is that there exists a society like this, and to let them know something about it, which, perhaps, previously they did not know.

With regard to this last point, it is well to remember that advertisement is entirely against the spirit of this organisation. The Master Himself said: "Let not your left hand know what your right hand does," and the St. Vincent de Paul man is trained to ever keep that in his mind. There is no boasting, no loud fanfare of trumpets, about what is done, and, indeed, it is with some trepidation that the writer has penned these lines; but, after all, this is not advertisement — it is but letting people know that the society exists, what are its aims, what spirit actuates it, and, if some reference has been made to the amazing progress that has been made, it is not in any spirit of boasting, or of advertisement, but simply that all may recognise that "the finger of God is here." No purely human calculation could have been solely responsible for it.

(2)

THE POOR BOX.

It stands at the door of all our Catholic churches. To the eye of faith, it is Christ's right hand extended on behalf of His poor. What it signifies to the worldling does not matter.

Our Catholic people, as a whole, look at it with faith's eye, and, consequently, it echoes to the sound of their humble coins all through the year, and the multitude of small contributions amounts to a considerable sum — each contribution a donation to Jesus Christ, be it ever so humble. We stand amazed at all the good that is made possible through its agency, and is made actual by the devotion of the St Vincent de Paul men; but the writer would ask: "Are all as mindful of it, as they should be? Do parents teach their children the valuable lessons that can be learned from it." There is no doubt that this is a selfish age. Enjoyment is the god of many, all too many, and Catholics are not altogether free of guilt in the matter. There can equally be no doubt that, if parents were to teach their children to deny themselves even a small pleasure to give a proportion of their little means of self-gratification to Christ in the person of the poor, results would be much greater in the way of possible good, a race of children would, grow up who would be more unselfish in their homes, and, when manhood and womanhood came to them, they would be much more considerate of their less fortunate brethren. The Church would be the gainer through their charity; the cause of Christ would be advanced, and outsiders would be led to greater admiration, the forerunner of more conversions to the Faith. Catholics! Love the Poor Box in your church! You may not be able to give much when periodic appeals are made, but, if you frequently spare a little for the Poor Box and teach your children to do the same, you will be the gainer, the Church will advance, and many poor will know better days.

(3)

DONATIONS, IN MONEY OR IN KIND.

We have already said that such donations are given; but are they anything like as frequent as they might easily be without much sacrifice? The writer cannot but feel that there are times when people forget, and need to be reminded.

Sometimes, an unexpected success comes the way of one or other of our people, the result of which is that they are somewhat the richer, on rare occasions very much the richer. They have reason to be very grateful, and no doubt they are; but, do they think of making a donation then to any one of our Catholic charities, in order to prove their gratitude. He would not ask that the St. Vincent de Paul Society and its works should be considered in preference to other charities, but he would ask that it be considered sometimes.

With regard to donations in kind, he had often felt that all the people need is guidance from their leaders. He knows of one Conference which obtains from all the bakers of the surrounding district — non-Catholic as well as Catholics — all the bread they have over on a Saturday night, and distributes it on Sundays to poor families. He knows of another Conference which appealed for cast-off clothing, and got enough from the people to supply for the time not only their own particular claims, but those of one or two contiguous Conferences. The district in question was a rather well-to-do district, and there were, as usual, people who said there was no need of a St. Vincent de Paul branch in that parish.

That raises a big question. The writer feels that there ought to be such a Conference in every parish, quite irrespective of whether there are poor families or poor individuals there or not. He feels that, first of all, the number of parishes where there are no poor at all is very few. Moreover, he feels that, even where there are no poor, the rich people should be given the opportunity to help less fortunate parishes, and to back up the special works of the society. Finally, he feels that, seeing that the main aim of the society is “the sanctification of its members through works of charity for the poor,” it cannot but be good for any parish to have even a small body of men aiming at more than usual holiness in this way — it must bring blessing on the other works of that parish.

In general, it seems fair to say that donations, in money or in kind, should be more frequent than they are, and that they would be so if more direction were given to the ordinary people. They seek but to be guided; they are willing to follow any good lead.

(4)

BEQUESTS, BY WILL.

Sometimes, but all too rarely, we hear or read of Catholics who have remembered the poor in their wills. Here, again, we have no right to ask, nor do we ask, that the St. Vincent de Paul Society should be remembered more than other charities. We are pleased no matter what Catholic charities are helped. What we deplore is that so many Catholics who have this world's goods die and leave all to their families.

Let us examine why some are richer than others and some poorer. In ultimate analysis, it will be found that God has been exceptionally good to some, and less so to others, for reasons best known to Himself.

A man may say: “I have worked hard for what I have, and it is mine to do with it what I wish.” The answer to that is plain: “You have worked hard, and have shown great ability and perseverance; but others have worked as hard as you have done, and with equal ability and perseverance, and yet they have not had success to the extent that you have. The fact is, the opportunity came your way and it

didn't come theirs. Now who gave the opportunity? Wasn't it God? Therefore, if you have more, it is because God, for His own wise reasons, was good to you in a way that He was not to them.

Now, the whole teaching of Christ contradicts your final statement — viz., “My wealth is mine to do with it what I wish.” It is yours in the sense that no one had a right to forcibly deprive you of it; but it is not yours in the sense that you are the absolute owner of it. It is God Who owns it, and you are a steward under Him to use it well. You are entitled to make reasonable provision for your dependents, but, beyond that, you have a duty to your less-favoured brethren. You will notice, if you are observant, that, in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the former was condemned, not because of any positive cruelty to the latter, but simply because he neglected to succour him. There can be little doubt that many of the wills of wealthy people are displeasing to God, and they often bring their own punishment even in this life — we have seen many children ruined because of the wealth they inherited. It led them into fast ways, and temporal and spiritual ruin followed.

Wealthy Catholics should remember our Catholic charities, and, amongst these, we put forward the claims of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

(e)

NOW, WHY SHOULD THIS SOCIETY BE CONSIDERED.

In this question we include all four sources of revenue — viz., periodic appeals, the poor box, donations in money or in kind, and bequests by will. Why should we take these into consideration, each according to our respective means?

This is really the reason why all the preceding pages have been written. The design was to bring the claims of this society prominently forward. We repeat that there is no desire on the part of the writer, nor would the St. Vincent de Paul men thank him if he had any desire, to take away one particle, of the interest that different Catholics show in different charitable institutions. Keep up that interest by all means. After all, you do the duty that Christ imposes if you are mindful of the poor under any of the forms of poverty; but there are not a few who seem to take interest in none. If this paper has the effect of moving even some to begin to do their duty in the way of helping any Catholic charity, the writer will be well rewarded: if it moves some to interest themselves in the St. Vincent de Paul Society, he will be pleased, because their work is dear to him, and he sees great possibilities for the Church in it.

When, then, the reasons that follow are examined, it will be found that much that is contained in them might easily be applied to any of our charitable works; but it will also be found that there are some considerations that have special reference to this Society.

(1)

First, then, it is a safe way of giving to the poor.

This appears in two ways — viz.,

(a) that what is given will go to deserving cases, and

(b) that practically all we give reaches the poor.

(a)

Deserving cases: —

When we give charity to people we do not know we are very apt to be victimised. Many of these people are very skilful in deception — they can tell a plausible tale that would move the heart of a stone.

Now, the men of the society are men of the world. They move about amongst other men, and they soon get to know the wants of their own district. They learn what are genuine cases and what are not. Moreover, they do not usually give money. They give an order for the necessary food, or clothing, or medicines, and it is not within the compass of each individual member to use the funds of the society as he wishes. A meeting is held every week at which all cases are discussed. If there is urgency so that the weekly meeting cannot be waited for, it is usually the president or the secretary who has the right to act, and, even in that case, they must report to the next meeting. In this way mistakes are reduced to a minimum.

(b)

All our money reaches the poor, that is to say, it reaches Christ. There have been scandalous examples in recent times where a great deal of public money was collected for some charitable or philanthropic purpose and only a small fraction of that money reached the goal for which it was intended. The rest was found to have been swallowed up in munificent salaries to the organisers, if not in other less deserving ways.

It is not so with any money entrusted to the St. Vincent de Paul Society. It is their proud boast that they have not one single salaried officer in all their world-wide organisation. This must, of course, be properly understood. Such a work as theirs cannot be carried on without a great deal of correspondence, and it may be necessary for the Central Council to employ typists, etc. It may be that some of these belong to the society, but the contention is that no money is paid to anyone to do the work of the society as a member.

Consequently, practically all that is given by the people reaches the object for which it was given. Necessary expenses alone are subtracted.

This argument, of course, applies with equal force to all our charitable institutions. Most of these are conducted by religious, who work without salary and purely for the love of God. Consequently, there is nothing in this argument of safety that gives the society any special claim, but it does give to it an equal claim.

There rises before the imagination a picture in which there are three outstanding figures. First of all, at one end of the picture stands a poor person, and, as you gaze on him with eyes of faith, there gradually takes place a transformation scene, such as was common on the old legitimate stage — gradually the poor person fades from sight, and in his place stands the figure of Christ, with hand outstretched to receive. At the other end of the picture there stands a Catholic person charitably disposed, with hand outstretched to give. In between stands the St. Vincent de Paul Society, receiving from the donor and passing on his gift to the poor person, that is, to Christ Himself, because the words of His assurance come back to memory: “As long as you did it to one of these, my least brethren, you did it to Me,”

(2)

The second reason for considering the claims of this society is that, by giving to it, you give to a wonderful variety of charitable works,

some of which are not provided for in all our other activities. There is no need to labour this here; turning back a few pages, the reader can refresh his memory with regard to the objects the members of the Conferences strive to meet, and the extremely elastic nature of the rule, which says: “No work of charity should be regarded as foreign to the Society,” gives assurance that any new need that arises will be met, as far as it will be possible.

The beauty of the works, too, must commend them to all, and, when it is borne in mind, as it should ever be, that the material assistance given is not an end but the means — a means — viz., to reach the soul, and bring back Catholics to the practice of their Faith or confirm them in it, and, in the case of non-Catholics, to reveal to them the beauty of the Catholic Faith in practice, and so break down the walls of prejudice and open the way to entry into the light, a new value is given to the activities of the society.

Much of what has been said in this short expansion of this reason applies to our other Catholic charities, or to some of them; but the fact that most of the work of the St. Vincent de Paul man is done out in the world, and not within the enclosure of an institute, means that there is a greater opportunity for good here.

(3)

The third reason is the one on which, as the writer, I would wish to lay most stress. It is this: This movement deserves special consideration, because it is carried on by laymen.

Why should that make any special appeal? Is it that, because it is laymen who do this work, that that should mean greater efficiency than if it were done by Priests, Brothers, or Nuns? Certainly not; but we are all anxious that the Faith should spread amongst “the other sheep that are not in the fold of the Church,” and, hence, we are anxious that the beneficent work of that Church should come prominently before the gaze of the world, not for the sake of human applause, but because nothing appeals more to those who are hostile than to see Christ’s charity in action

It is hard to understand why, for instance, the manner in which our people flock to church in the early hours of Sunday morning, while the churches of other people are silent and empty, does not make non-Catholics pause and consider that there must be some extraordinary vital force in the Catholic religion which bespeaks Divine action. The fact is that many people never see these things. They are in bed when our people are flocking to church.

It is the same, in another way and for another reason, in the works of our religious institutes. Outsiders cannot but see these institutions dotted all over the country and they cannot but know that wonderful work is done in them; but they look upon all religious as professionals, simply doing the work that is assigned to them, and many of them hate the sight of a religious dress; but when they see laymen giving up their leisure hours to work for Christ, without the slightest human reward, and without questioning the creed of those they help, they are compelled to take notice, and we know of many instances where people have been profoundly impressed by the self-sacrifice of the St. Vincent de Paul man, and, in consequence, there have been not a few conversions, whilst, in many other cases, minds have been rendered less hostile to the teachings of the Church that has produced such a society.

When, therefore, more of our people help to swell the funds, the works that will be possible will be increased, and the charitable spirit of the Church will become more and more manifest to outsiders.

Moreover, to supply the society liberally with the means to do their work has an effect on the present members themselves, encouraging them to persevere in spite of the weariness and disappointments that must come their way. Other men, too, will be likely to be drawn into the ranks and become active workers for the cause, when they shall see the increased good that will result from more means to extend the work.

Finally, it has ever to be borne in mind that the real end of membership in the society is “the sanctification of the members.” The actual amount of charitable work accomplished is not the real test of success in this matter. The test is — are the members becoming holier men?

With such an object constantly kept before them, it must naturally follow that there is in each parish, where a Branch or Conference exists, a body of men aiming at a high degree of Catholic life, and helping towards that end by mutual good-example.

Now, the more numerous men like these become, the greater must be the blessing from God on the other works of the Church, and the greater must be the influence for moral good of such men scattered through the community. It is Catholic Action in its best form.

CONCLUSION.

This has been a long disquisition, and it would not be surprising if much that was said in the beginning, or middle, of this paper may be lost sight of in the multitude of suggestions made.

It may, then, be useful to summarise it all.

The paper is divided into two sections — viz.:

- (1) Why we should help the poor at all, and
- (2) Why we should help the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

The first question — viz., “Why should we help the poor?” is answered by giving two general groups of reasons — viz., purely natural ones and supernatural ones.

The natural ones are: —

- (a) The poor are our fellow human beings, and
- (b) We may be poor some day ourselves and need the help of others.

The supernatural ones are: —

- (1) God’s command, with the consequence of His punishment for disobedience, and
- (2) The rewards, for Time and Eternity, which He so generously promises.

The second question — viz., ‘Why should we help the St. Vincent de Paul Society?’ — is answered by a series of talks on different phases of that movement.

We treated of: —

- (a) The Story of the origin of the society in 1833;
- (b) How the society stands after 100 years;
- (c) The works undertaken by its members;
- (d) The sources from which come their funds, with a few remarks on each of the four —

viz., periodic appeals in the churches,
the poor box,
donations in money or in kind,
and bequests by will.

All this led up to the final sub-section, which deals with the vital question — the very purpose for which this paper was penned — viz.: —

(e) Why we should consider this society when we are debating in our minds the distribution of what money we can spare amongst the numerous charitable works sponsored by the Church.

We found these reasons to be: —

(1) It is a safe way of investing, because

(a) only deserving cases will be helped; and

(b) practically all we give will reach Christ, in the person of His poor. Overhead expenses are practically nil.

(2) The works are so varied and so beautiful, and some of them are not done by any other agency in the Church in our midst.

(3) The last reason, and the most impelling one in the mind of the writer, is — that this work is done by Catholic laymen, who mingle with the people of the world, and, thus, bring prominently before their eyes the beneficent charity of the Church, so that it seems fair to assume that this influence may be to some extent more effective than that which is wielded by professional religious.

If even a little good is done by this paper, the writer has all the reward he seeks. Members of the society reading it can find, if they try, reminders of what should be the spirit actuating them in all they do.

The general Catholic body reading it, may be urged to greater fidelity in co-operation, if they have already tried to be faithful, or to become co-operators, either by joining up or by helping in a financial way, if they have not already done so.

All, without exception, should ever keep in mind those emphatic words of Our Lord: “Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it not to one of these least, neither did you do it to Me — therefore, depart from Me, you cursed!” and those consoling words that are the counterpart of this denunciation: “Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these, My least brethren, you did it to Me — therefore, come, ye blessed of My Father!”
