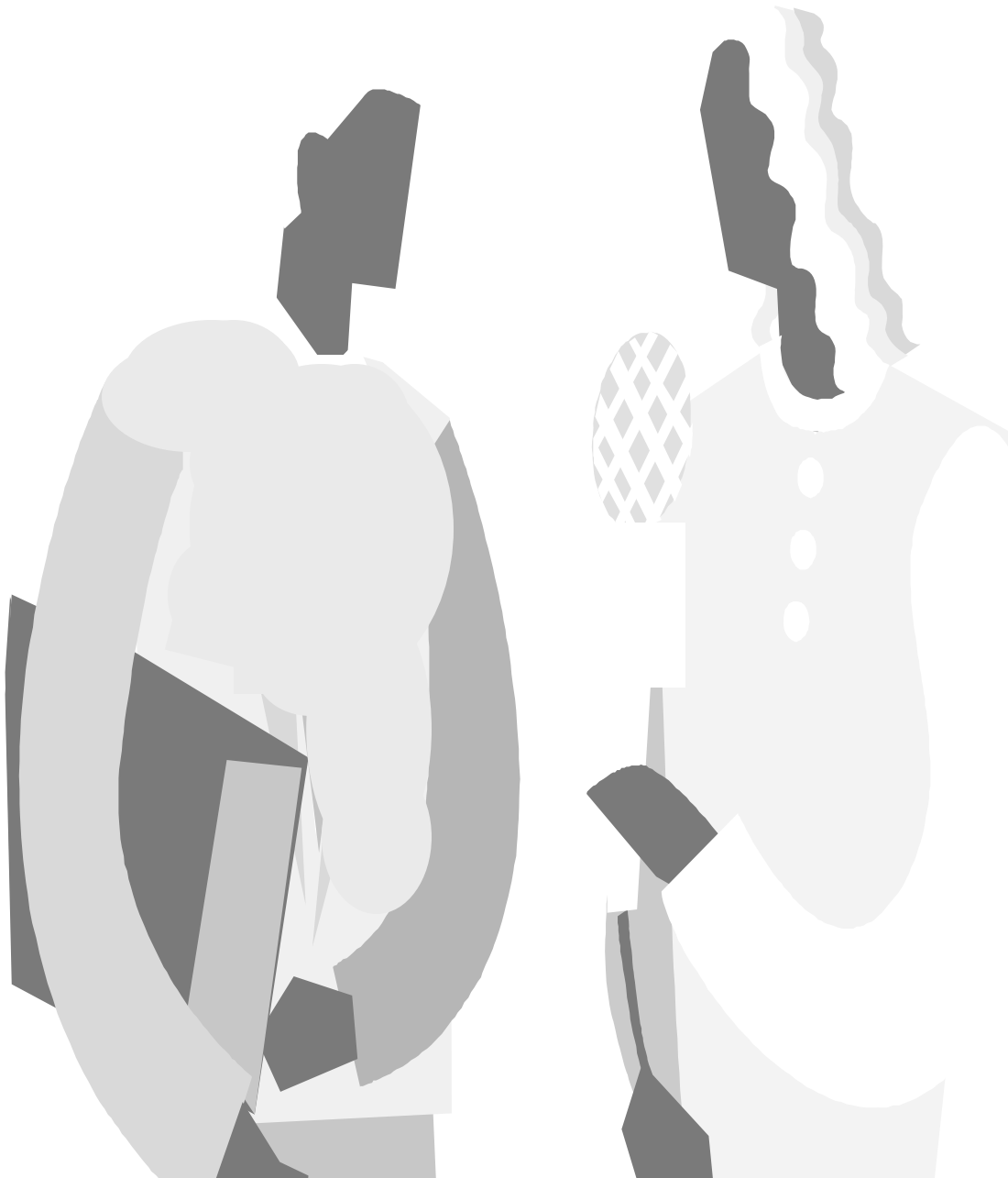


The Home Visit

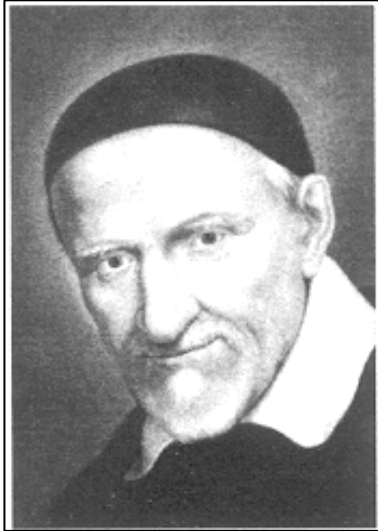


An examination of the most basic Vincentian



St. Vincent de Paul Society
At the Heart of Giving

VINCENTIAN WORDS TO LIVE BY

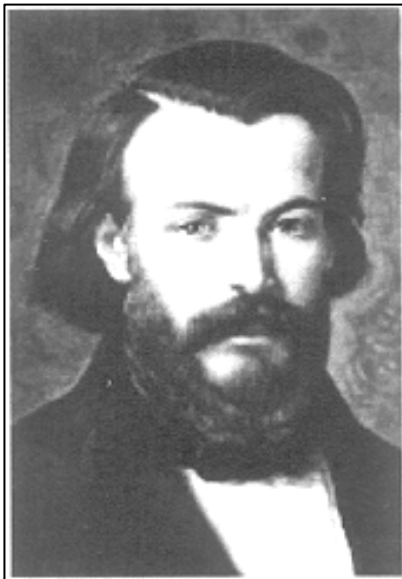


"After the love of God, your principal concern must be to serve the poor with great gentleness and cordiality, sympathizing with them in their ailments and listening to their little complaints ... for they look on you as people sent by God to help them. You are therefore intended to represent the goodness of God in the eyes of the poor."

-St. Vincent de Paul, 1657

"As for your conduct toward the poor, may you never take the attitude of merely getting the task done. You must show them affection; serving them from the heart; inquiring of them what they might need; speaking to them gently and compassionately; procuring necessary help for them without being too bothersome or too eager."

-St. Louise de Marillac, 1647



"Knowledge of the poor and needy is not gained by pouring over books or in discussions with politicians, but by visiting the slums where they live, sitting by the bedside of the dying, feeling the cold they feel and learning from their lips the causes of their woes. "

-Blessed Frederic Ozanam, 1845

Words spoken to Frederic Ozanam:

"Because you see Christ in his poor, I know you will approach each one you visit with humility as His servant. Always remember, that if we had been through the hardships they have had to meet -if our childhood had been one of constant want - perhaps, we too would have given away to envy and hatred, as I must admit have many of the poor in this quarter. But be kind and love, for love is your first gift to the poor. They will appreciate your kindness and your love more than all else you bring them."

-Blessed Rosalie Rendu, 1833



Part I. THE “WHAT” - RELATIONSHIPS

*INTRODUCTION: The “home visit” is the basic, most fundamental activity of a Vincentian ministry -- going to the poor to provide assistance. We must first understand “**what**” this activity really is. Later, in Parts II and III, we will examine the “how” and “why” of home visits.*

A. Definition of a “*Relationship*”

The dictionary defines a “*relationship*” as the “*state of being mutually interested or involved.*” The degree of the relationship depends on the type of relationship -- friends, husband-wife, parent-child, employee-employer, customer-clerk, social worker-client, etc. In this Part, we are interested in those relationships which develop between a Vincentian and someone who is helped.

This relationship is a “*helping relationship.*” This is defined as “*the relationship that exists as a result of doing something for someone that she is unable to do for herself, or helping her do it herself.*”

Such a relationship develops between Vincentians and the people they help no matter how brief the contact. The helping relationship in Vincentian work can never be regarded as just a simple humanitarian or philanthropic relationship. Yes, there are natural, human elements in it, but the Vincentian’s work is done in a wider, supernatural context. Therefore, the Vincentian helping relationship is a “*supernatural*” relationship viewed in the context of Christ’s saving redemption.

The aim of Vincentian work is the development of relationships between individuals and God, through the person of Christ. The development of this relationship involves a healing process. Members of SVdP are deeply involved in this process through their role of service to the needy and suffering. Vincentians help develop and help this relationship by transforming situations which make the lives of people less human - situations which prevent relationships from developing with one another and with God.

This work also transforms Vincentians and develops *their* relationships with God and others. It puts them in closer touch with God’s healing presence as found in the world -- first among each other, and then in each Vincentian’s contact with those who suffer.

Vincentians are used as a “*channel*” or “*instrument*” for bringing this healing presence of Christ to others and developing this supernatural relationship with God. Each individual “*helping relationship*” that a Vincentian develops with someone has to be viewed in this supernatural context. Vincentians, through spiritual readings, prayer and the Sacraments, have to see themselves as being channels or instruments bringing Christ to others in need, and of seeing Christ in others in need.

St. Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam captured this spirit and heritage from the Gospel message and it became a part of their life and work. It has been passed on to all Vincentians through the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

B. Studying the “*Helping Relationship*”

Many things we do are a matter of habit. When we want to improve or use something to better advantage, especially things we do as a matter of habit, we must stop and take a closer look at it. We try to become conscious of our action and what steps are involved (in our work, play, family relationships, special skills, etc.). When a person becomes conscious of what he’s been doing automatically up to then, he is in a much better position to evaluate it (find what its strengths and weaknesses are) and, in general, to improve it.

Knowing more about the *“helping relationship”* can help a Vincentian look at his own attitudes and skills to evaluate ways to help improve the *“helping relationships”* he will make in the future.

Any real help that takes place is the result of a helping relationship. Once a good, trust-filled relationship is established, many good things can happen. People are more apt to help themselves, to take suggestions, and to work on particular problems. Many Vincentians can remember a case in which the client initially was not open to talk about her problems, or to look at ways she could help herself. But when the Vincentian worked with her, showed sincerity and willingness to help, the client realized he was a friend and could be trusted. It was at this point that the client was willing to talk about and risk doing something about her problems.

COMPONENTS OF THE *“HELPING RELATIONSHIP”*

1. **Understanding the person and background.**

(a) *Knowledge of the emotional needs of people is very helpful.* Some of these needs include: to be wanted or needed, to be independent, to feel loved and secure, to feel useful, and to receive recognition for past performances. Everyone, whether rich or poor, has these emotional needs. They are usually met by loved ones, friends, co-workers, or by status in a community, or on the job.

(b) *Know how hard it is for someone to ask for help of any kind.* People rarely want to be helped. To ask means:

- You recognize that there is something wrong and that you are helpless to do anything about it without asking for help. In short, you are admitting that you failed.
- You not only have to admit to yourself that you’ve failed and are helpless to do anything about it, you must also admit it to your family and confess it to someone outside the family (*a Vincentian*) -- most likely a total stranger.
- You have to be willing to let another person advise you and have power over your life.
- Everyone has a fear of the unknown. When you ask for help, you do not know where this will lead or what changes will have to be made. You know the present situation is bad, but at least you feel somewhat secure, whereas the future is unknown and the changes you may be required to make may not guarantee greater security.

2. **Positive regard and genuineness.**

This has to be *Christian* sincerity. You are interested because you really care about the person and are interested in relieving any suffering that person is undergoing as Christ would. People pick this up quite readily. You can say the wrong thing, but if the client feels you are sincere in wanting to help, and respectful of her dignity, you will succeed.

3. **Understanding your own motivation and prejudices.**

“One of the principal acts of charity is to bear with our neighbor. We must realize this undoubted truth: that the difficulties we have with our neighbor spring more from our own poorly managed tempers than from anything else. Friendliness is the outward effect of charity in the heart. It springs from the heart and shows how very glad you are to be with a particular person.

You must know yourself and *“what turns you on or off.”* Since we are all human, we tend to give more help to the needy we like. We tend to like people who appreciate our help and thank us because this makes us feel good. We may like helping an elderly person because this reminds us of the concern we have for our own mother or father. Or we may like a person because her house is neat and clean, or because her children are respectful and quiet.

Conversely, we tend to give less help to people we dislike -- people who never thank us and seem to expect help, or whose house is sloppy. We may shortchange a person who reminds us of someone who was mean to us as a child, or someone whose children are undisciplined.

We must examine both our way of doing things and the feelings we get when visiting. Ask yourself how your feelings affect your judgment. Make your decisions on the more objective basis of need, and getting people to help themselves. We must learn to be tolerant and accepting of ways and behavior (cultural, religious, political, etc.) that are different from ours. We should never try to force our values on others.

4. **Some knowledge of the “helping skills” is very helpful.** These include: interviewing, referral (we should know the agencies and the social services system), confidentiality, etc.

5. **Experience in applying these skills is important.** Like all things, *practice makes perfect*. You will get better in time. At the beginning, you should not expect to be operating like Vincentians with years of experience. If you do, it could lead to a lot of frustration.

C. Conditions to Assist the “Helping Relationship” Grow

1. Good communication includes a lot of listening.

How many times have you heard another Vincentian comment that “I just had a case” in which they just listened and offered no advice, yet, when the session was through, the client remarked “*Thanks for helping me solve my problem.*” The Vincentian had become a sounding board which helped the client put her problems into words. It helped her see what solutions existed more clearly as she verbalized her problem and the alternatives available.

2. **You must gain trust** (the person being helped knows you understand what he is feeling and feels confident in you).

(a) *Empathy is important.* It means “*I know that it must hurt*” or “*I know it is difficult.*” Empathy is not pity, but is an act of compassionate understanding. It says “*I can understand how you feel and feel it with you in a limited way, even though I may not feel that way myself.*” You can empathize with a person and not totally agree with them.

An extreme example would be: a woman complains about her husband to an empathetic person who would reply: “*I can understand how hard this makes your daily life. I cannot judge, for I am not you, but with the feelings you have for him, what do you think you can do?*” This is both accepting and constructive. If the woman cannot suggest a solution, then a referral to a counselor may be needed.

(b) *Empathy comes from strength, not weakness.* It is strong because it never judges. It strives to understand but never condones. And it maintains the difference.

3. **You must allow the person being helped to express negative feelings** without loss of face or fear of blame. She should be allowed to discuss her feelings without fear of being shamed by the Vincentian, including negative feelings about the Church, her pastor, the welfare system, etc. The Vincentian must not take what is said personally or try to defend the Church, the pastor, the welfare system, etc. in the beginning.

Clients should be allowed to discuss their feelings without fear of being condemned. For many people, it is a unique experience to talk with Vincentians who, instead of criticizing or admonishing, listen with non-judgmental understanding. Many Vincentians have heard the following comment after a visit: “*It has been such a help to talk with you. You’re the first person I have ever told this to. I see you understand.*”

4. **You must do what you say you will, or explain why you are not able to.**

5. **Help includes emotional or moral support.** It says *"I am here to help if you want, and you can use me. Whatever you do, I will not desert you as a friend."*

6. **Self-help requires self-involving behavior** from the person being helped. This is the aim of Vincentian work -- helping people help themselves. The Vincentian should not do everything for the person or family if they can do some of the things themselves. This avoids having people become dependent on Vincentians.

7. **Confidentiality is the most important aspect of building a relationship on trust.** People are sometimes afraid to share their problems because they don't want other people to know about them, especially friends or neighbors. People will more easily seek help if they know what they say will not be made public. People who come to SVdP have a right to expect the conference to use the information about them constructively on their behalf. This means protecting information against improper disclosure and, only with their consent, sharing pertinent information with agencies or others as the situation warrants.

D. General Guidelines

1. **Start with the person.** At the beginning, it is wise to center your attention on the problem that has been presented (the need for food, clothing, rent, loneliness, marital problems, etc.) rather than pursuing other areas that the client hasn't brought up (going to church, an abusive adult child, getting a job, etc.). Once you help with the problem that has been presented, the client sees you as interested in her as a person, trusts you, and a relationship begins to grow. Once the immediate need is resolved, the person will be more willing to discuss other subjects that you may want to bring up.

2. **We must center our attention on reality** and not on the need to be liked personally or to satisfy our own conscience. There may be unpleasant things we have to do or tell people. In helping others, we must deal with reality -- real sorrow, real hate, real sin and real despair.

3. **The way we give things is more important than what we give.** Material things last only a short time, whereas *how* we give them lasts forever - giving people proper dignity and respect.

4. **Humility is needed.** This humility is not one in which we short-change ourselves or be falsely modest, but one in which we face the facts. We have to be honest with ourselves and admit we do not know what is exactly right for another person most of the time. We are extremely blessed if we know exactly what is right for ourselves! Remember that the problem remains the responsibility of the client. Don't be too quick in telling a person what you see as their problem.

E. Conclusion

A Vincentian's reactions are not the 'natural' reactions of one person on the street towards another. While she may initially have such reactions, these are tempered by other influences such as knowledge, experience and, above all, the realization that she brings Christ's healing presence to others.

The Vincentian should react, not to the client's actual outward behavior, but to the reasons for this behavior. To the experienced Vincentian, "*anger*" may mean anxiety. "*Unwillingness to share information readily*" may come from distrust or a fear that you will make a report to the welfare office. "*Lying*" may result from a belief that you might be embarrassed, shocked and not help if the facts were known.

Many Vincentians have observed a great deal of human suffering, so their reactions are also mellowed by their training and experience. Some have been with the needy, suffering in their disappointment, sorrow, physical pain, death, crippling frustration, and so on. These Vincentians cannot help but respond with more spontaneous understanding and acceptance.

Some people ask if Vincentians “*get worn out controlling or concealing their natural reactions?*” The point is that your natural reactions will eventually be different from those of the untrained person, as both your perception and judgment are modified by training, by experience, by the wisdom imparted by the Holy Spirit, and by the love you will come to learn from Christ. No one ever reaches perfection of understanding and acceptance, but that should not slow us down in striving for that condition.

Part II. The “HOW” - INTERVIEWING

INTRODUCTION: We go to the homes of those in need. We “interview” a client during a home visit to find out certain basic information as well as to better understand their needs and circumstances. We also want people to be relaxed and honest; their own home is the best environment for that to happen.

A. What is Interviewing?

DEFINITION -- An interview is a conversation usually between two people. It is carried on and guided by one person who has both a definite plan and a goal in carrying on the conversation.

In many ways an interview can be simple if we use common sense. However, at times, an interview can be complicated and calls for a good deal of skill and experience. You can learn how to do good interviewing.

All of us have conducted an interview or been interviewed. When you register your child in a new school and you see the principal, the principal interviews you and perhaps your child. When you go to the hospital, the admissions clerk interviews you. If you get a traffic ticket, the police officer interviews you.

An interview is more than just a friendly conversation, although it certainly should be carried on in a friendly way. The interviews we will be talking about are those which Vincentians have with families or individuals -- our clients.

THE PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

- (1) to *seek* information about the family or individual so that you can help,
- (2) to *give* information which will help,
- (3) to *provide* a service.

B. Understanding Your Feelings

It is important that we understand our own prejudices. We all have them. Some people are tolerant of alcoholics but become very intolerant of people who don't keep their houses clean. It is easy to like and agree with the person who is similar to us and lives like we do. It is much harder to understand the person who does not do things as we do.

At times you may be angry with the person whom you are visiting. While you're trying to help, she does not cooperate; she does not seem to want your help. Try to understand your own feelings about the client. Ask yourself if they are standing in the way of your helping her.

Perhaps your own feelings of anger or disgust are coming across and, as a result, she is resisting help from you.

Sometimes people will make you feel very good or very bad depending upon how they react to you. Often their reaction to you is not always based on you as a person but on what you represent. You may be blamed because the many welfare programs have not cured all their problems. On the other hand, you may be seen as a magician who can cure all the problems the person has. Being considered a magician may make you feel so good that you make promises that you will not be able to keep. Try not to make promises unless you know you can and will keep them.

C. Understanding the Behavior of the Person Interviewed

Some behavior can be taken at face value. For example, if a client acts angry because he had to wait in an outpatient clinic for five hours, it is understandable. We must recognize what is really going on inside a person and not get fooled by what he only seems to be feeling.

An example of this is the client who lies to a landlord at the point of renting an apartment. She tells the landlord she is not on welfare when she really is. From this you might decide that this woman is a liar and does not have good character. However, if we take the time to understand why she lied, it probably is because she knew that she would not get the apartment if the landlord knew she was on welfare. She is desperate to find a place for her children, so she lied to get a roof over their heads.

It is, therefore, important not to act immediately on what the surface behavior seems to be. Try to understand whether there is something going on within the client that makes her act the way she does. Another example might be the woman who does not keep her house clean. We could preach to her that it is bad to be sloppy (unhealthful, a poor example for her children, risks her landlord's anger, etc.) and she should change. But unless she understands the reasons why she is this way, preaching and giving advice will not help.

Sometimes a woman neglects her home because she has given up - because she sees little hope of things ever getting better. However, if we can help her with her problems and show that we care, very often this will help the person to feel less lonely and disgusted. She may begin to believe there is some hope and that, if the house were more organized, the world would look brighter.

D. Do's and Don't's of Interviewing

How to start an interview

It is usually best to begin your interview in a very straight-forward manner. Explain to the person that you are a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul from the local parish, and that you are interested in talking with him about the concerns and needs he has personally and for his family. You are there for him. You are interested in helping.

Do not offer help too quickly

Before rushing in to offer solutions, you must understand the problems. What seems to be causing them? Get a good understanding of the client and his past situation. What kind of person is he? Encourage him to talk about his history and values.

Do not make promises you cannot keep

One promise you can make to a client is that you will try to do everything you can to help her. You should not give false hope that everything will be all right. You may not be able to cure her problems, but you can guarantee you will try to do everything you can.

Know what you can and cannot do

A skillful interviewer knows what she can and what she can't do. Knowing the social service agencies can be of immense help to clients. Learn how to make referrals to these agencies. Know what you and your conference can do for the client and when you must go to another agency for help. IT IS NO DISGRACE TO GET HELP IN ASSISTING SOMEONE. That is the sign of a good worker. Do not feel you have to do everything for the client yourself.

TECHNIQUES TO HELP IN INTERVIEWING

*First: **Be a good observer.*** Notice the condition of the client's home. Is the house neat or not? Are the children dressed? What are their clothes like? How many children are there? What's the general feeling that comes across from the person toward you? Is it friendly, not friendly, suspicious, etc.?

*Second: **Be a good listener.*** Show that you understand what she is saying by nodding your head, by sometimes repeating a part of what she said so that she knows you have been listening. It is also important to express that you know how difficult it is for the client because of the trouble she is having.

*Third: **Do not succumb to the temptation to talk about yourself.*** Some people have a tendency to want to say "I've been in the same situation" and give the details. This is often taken as "one-upmanship" by the client. Focus your time and attention on the client's problems, not yours.

*Fourth: **It is usually helpful to let the person talk first.*** Some people need to let off steam, especially if a recent experience has upset them. In this way you will see the problems from the client's viewpoint. Let her tell you what her problems are and then you can ask questions to get more necessary information.

*Fifth: **Asking good questions in a friendly and not a suspicious way*** will cut down on the client's fears and suspicions. Your words are often less important than the way in which you ask a question -- **the tone of your voice and your general manner.** For example, the question, "Are you looking for work?" can sound accusing and suspicious or it can sound friendly and helpful depending on your tone of voice (which often can reflect how you feel about the client).

*Sixth: **Know what not to discuss in your interview.*** Try to be careful about going too far in opening up discussions that you will not be able to fully handle. For example, if the client wants to talk about her very difficult marriage problem, it will not help for you to get a lot of details about her problem. You can, however, talk about how you can help her get to a good social worker at a family agency who has experience in helping people with marital problems. This is a very valuable service. Very often the client feels hopeless -- that there is no way to get help for her problem. Getting the woman to the right agency may be the first step she needs to turn her life around.

Guiding an interview.

The purpose of asking questions is to get information. It is also to "focus" the interview -- guide it in such a way that you will be able to help the person. It is usually a good idea to allow the client to talk about whatever problem she would like to work on first. Then move in the direction of what needs to be done in order to help her with that problem. At the end of an interview, briefly repeat what the problems are, as you understand them. Then outline what you

are going to do for the client and when. Always be definite about when you will call her or see her the next time.

E. Helping a Person Help Her/Himself

Often you will see a course of action that is necessary to help someone. You want to move quickly to take care of the problem. Be careful not to move too quickly or to do things that the client can do herself. Sometimes it is necessary to go with the client to an employment agency or to the hospital. At other times, it will make the client feel better if she goes herself. You can help by giving her careful directions on how to get there or make a phone call ahead of time to let the agency know that she is coming.

People need to have a major part in making any decision about what course of action is best for them. (The old axiom: *People support what they help create.*) People are more likely to cooperate in a plan of action if they had a part in making the decisions about the plan. Some people need a great deal of help and guidance and are not able to decide for themselves. Here you will need to give more direction, but again, the critical thing is the way you do it -- a calm tone of voice, non-aggressive body language, etc. It should be a helping way and not one of pushing or dictating.

Often you will have to decide whether to leave decisions up to the client or whether to be more direct and encourage a certain course of action. Usually a combination of these two approaches works best. This is what makes your ministry difficult, but at the same time challenging and interesting.

KEEP IT CONFIDENTIAL

Whatever a client tells you is to be kept between your team and him. The exception to this, of course, is when you discuss the situation with your conference members or when you have the client's permission to talk about him and his problems with another agency or with his utility, landlord, etc.

We keep information confidential because we respect the dignity of the client and his life as private. We do not share information with other clients, with friends or family, or with landlords or employers. You may *inquire* about a client's record, history or situation from employers, landlords or utilities, but you should not *share* with those people what you know about the client's difficulties other than that you are working with him (unless you have his permission).

It is extremely important not to break the trust a client has in you. If the person finds that you have told someone about him or his problems, that will likely end your "helping relationship." He may -- justifiably -- feel he is no longer able to trust or to confide in you.

Many Vincentians live in the same neighborhood as the people they serve, and here it is even more important that you keep information confidential.

Part III. THE "WHY" - EMPOWERMENT

INTRODUCTION: Vincentians strive to empower people. It is the "why" of home visits -- helping a person find and unleash the interior motivation to take control over their own life. We do not solve anyone's problems. We help empowered people find the ways to solve their own problems.

A. Helping People Without Enabling Them

Vincentians, while compassionate and wanting to help people, sometimes wonder “*why are there so many people who need help?*” and “*isn’t there some better way to help people help themselves and move toward self-sufficiency?*”

One way of explaining empowerment is with the old saying -- “*give a person a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a person to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.*” Empowerment is helping a family or an individual become self-sufficient. ‘Empowerment’ has different levels:

1. *Changing government systems (Macro level.)* It can mean advocacy is needed to change systems that affect the lives of the poor -- the availability of health care or insurance; a compassionate welfare system that encourages work, not dependency; job training; access to affordable, decent housing; and so forth.

2. *Changing individual lives (Micro level).* This can be very personal and means one person individually touching another person’s life, as Jesus did, through one-on-one example, friendship, suggestion, support or encouragement. It can be a referral to a program or course that might help them, such as life skills, parenting, counseling, budgeting, cooking and job training.

We help a person by sharing our time and listening. While we must prioritize, we should take care not to “meter out” our help. Sometimes, real help takes real time.

Vincentians help with the “presented need” -- food, rent or shelter, utility bills, furniture, clothing, medical care and transportation. But we also need to think about what are the underlying, root causes of the person’s problems -- language problems, lack of job skills, low self-esteem, limited knowledge of how to run a household, lack of skills in caring for children, drug or alcohol addiction.

Most people in poverty *do* want to improve themselves but may not know how. Others are simply afraid to try. With a little support, encouragement and hope from us, they may begin to feel that things *can* be different, and they may take the steps needed to change.

God calls us to be His instruments of healing to others, to be His presence, to share His love and compassion, and to help others reach their full potential as human beings. He calls us to love one another.

Some of the questions Vincentians need to ask:

1. How can we best help this family or individual for the long term ... not just for the next few days but for the rest of their lives? After discovering what the underlying causes of their problems are, what are the steps needed to help them make necessary changes?

2. Does this family/individual appear ready to meet the challenges and long process of becoming economically self-sufficient? Nothing is accomplished overnight.

3. How do we nourish, encourage, assist, support, stimulate, and unleash within them the realization that things can be different so that they will have the hope and courage to begin?

4. What federal/state/local government assistance and support programs might be best for them during this period of recovery?

Conferences should strive to do what is necessary to help people help themselves, to empower themselves, using as examples Jesus, St. Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam.

B. The Challenge of Empowerment

The challenge to all helping programs is *does our work contribute to people's ultimate freedom and independence?* A fundamental principle of community organizing (or of parenting or of teaching, for that matter) puts it this way:

DO NOT DO FOR ANOTHER WHAT THAT PERSON CAN DO FOR HER/HIMSELF.

Motivation to help empower people to help themselves.

Some believe that works of charity or public assistance are not empowering. This is a simplistic and inadequate assessment. Charity and social service programs can help set a person on a path toward real independence and self-sufficiency - *but only if they do not encourage dependency or divert a person from acknowledging responsibility for her own life, conduct and self-discipline.*

Perhaps the best model of empowerment is Jesus himself. Scripture is full of examples in which Jesus insists that people take responsibility for themselves, while at the same time alleviating their *immediate* need. Jesus does not allow people to remain victims. He forgives and heals the very worst sinners, but always admonishes them, *"Go and sin no more."*

May we be guided by Jesus' example to offer others both healing love and the challenge to stand up like children of God.

A client's own strengths are central to the helping relationship. Yet often those in the helping professions only talk about 'dysfunction,' 'client as the problem,' and 'obstacles'. We must focus on the strengths of clients and empowerment.

Individual strengths

Human beings possess the strengths and potential to resolve their own difficult life situations. They also contribute to society by doing so. The role of the Vincentian is to nourish, encourage, assist, support, stimulate, and unleash the strengths within people. Those strengths may come from religious beliefs, from a moral code, from personal pride, from concern for one's children, or the example they see in others -- *you*, perhaps. Besides the example you set, the Vincentian's role is to help clients articulate the nature of their situations, identify what they need, explore alternatives for achieving those needs, and help them down the road towards their goal.

The role of the Vincentian is not to change people, to treat people, to help people cope, or to counsel people. Our role is not to empower people. People can only empower themselves.

Clients own the only power that can bring significant change. We are ordinary people -- Christians with empathy, temporary material assistance, and some knowledge about available resources. We are committed to "people empowerment" and willing to share our knowledge in a manner that helps people realize their own power, take control of their lives, solve their own problems.

C. Making a Difference in Others

What a gift it is to leave something behind -- a gift that lives on after we are gone, giving us a certain kind of immortality. Not a building or monument but human lives that have been

touched for the better. We have that if we have children or if we have helped change a life, made a difference somewhere along the line.

Perhaps we've opened some doors for people, changed some lives, and helped give some people a few more choices in their lives. Even if only **one** family or individual is empowered or helped to help themselves, it's one more than if you hadn't acted at all -- and it likely will have an effect on later generations too!

Counting our blessings.

We have all been touched by God's love - the family we were born into, the education and training we received, the opportunities for employment we found, the friends and neighbors we met, the teachers, nuns and priests who had a positive influence on us.

If you think about these many blessings, you realize that others have not received the same blessings and opportunities. Prosperity is distributed unevenly, and results as much from luck and chance of birth as from merit and hard work. Vincentians are good people who want to help others. We not only share resources, we share ourselves with those we serve. It is very frustrating to work with people who don't appear to want to help themselves. The problems can be immense and beyond what we feel is possible to change, but Frederic Ozanam felt that the Society could improve many lives, *one life at a time*.

The Vincentian ministry in the abstract.

Our ministry can appear easy when it's new and untested; we love the romantic concept of "helping the poor" (in the abstract). But when it comes to the "nitty gritty," we find the going more difficult. Only a few Vincentians initially feel they have the kinds of skills needed to undertake this ministry, but experience shows that all can develop them through prayer and patience.

Sometimes, if no change is occurring with a client, the problem could be with them ... or it could be with us. Perhaps one or more of the following might apply:

- We do not yet have the faith dimension needed to see people as Jesus did;
- We do not yet have the long-term view and the patience to work with the poor;
- We give in to the temptation to give bread alone, ignoring the deeper needs of those seeking help from us -- of not showing the love and compassion that should go with our 'bread';
- We do not understand where the family or individual is coming from, culturally, and what is important to them;
- We fail to understand diversity. Understanding diversity means saying "*I don't understand why you don't do it my enlightened way, but I humbly acknowledge that no one person, including me, has all the answers.*" In short, I do not understand it but I accept your way anyway;
- We do not have an adequate knowledge of resources in the community that might help people help themselves;
- We develop bad attitudes that the poor are lazy or unwilling to help themselves. We seek a justice system where we are treated as "*innocent until proven guilty.*" So too, we should treat our clients as well (or, even better, like Jesus would -- to love and help them despite their situation);
- We have not considered what our Lord Jesus would have thought and done if He were in our place.

D. Support from Our Faith

We need to know and believe that God supplies our lack. United with the Lord, all things are possible. We will succeed if we are rooted in Jesus.

While we are all Christians, there are all types of Christians. So too there are all types of needy. Some are loud, others shy, most are in between. Some lack tact and others are the epitome of graciousness. Some are clean and some smell very bad. Being a Christian means learning to deal with all types of God's people but with Jesus' uniform and impartial love and charity.

Each Vincentian joined the Society because he or she cared. In addition to the time and money you give, you share yourself. You took the gospel message to heart and want to help others to the best of your ability, to live out Jesus' message as best you can.

Your Vincentian ministry awakens the Church, your parish community, and your local neighborhood to what is around us in the way of human needs, and helps encourage a worthy response.

E. Conclusion

In Jesus, we are all brothers and sisters on the same healing journey. With Jesus, we are instruments of God's peace, love and compassion. Through Jesus, we strive to help people we serve to empower themselves.

Part IV. WHEN TO SAY "NO"

INTRODUCTION: The "home visit" is the basic, most fundamental activity of our Vincentian ministry -- going to the poor to provide assistance. But eventually every Vincentian will experience the recurrent client or someone of questionable need. We must learn when and how to say "no" while still communicating the love and charity of Christ.

A. Facing the Difficult Cases

Many Vincentians come across individuals or families who, while not deliberately or consciously trying to "swindle" the conference, do not seem to be making any effort to help themselves out of their current problems. We need to shed some light on when and how to say "no" while still bringing Christ's love to the people we visit.

In other situations, some individuals have so few marketable skills, are so limited in education or emotional maturity, or suffer from physical or mental problems that they are probably those of whom Jesus said, "*The poor you will always have with you.*" These individuals, no matter what kind of agency or conference help is given, may not achieve independence, and periodic help may have to be given. The challenge to Vincentians is to pray for wisdom to be able to discern which individuals can be helped (nudged, pushed, etc.) To help themselves and to have the courage and perseverance to follow through.

THE WISDOM IN SAYING "NO"

Helping people is not a science with clear rules, easy definitions and provable facts. God has called us to be artists, rather than scientists, in meeting the needs of people skillfully. The Holy Spirit will provide us with the gift of wisdom through our experiences in this St. Vincent de Paul ministry. We should realize that a "no" that flows from true love and concern is a greater "yes". Our "no" as Vincentians is never an absolute "no" but it is a "no" to indiscriminate

assistance -- throwing money at a person to make them go away so we do not have to explore and help with their more basic needs.

Understanding this is very important for both poor and affluent conferences. For whatever the neighborhood, at some time every conference encounters a situation in helping where the circumstances are so doubtful that the home visit team sincerely wonders whether financial assistance is the answer. This is especially true when a family repeatedly returns for help and seems to rely on regular supplementation from the conference rather than on their own resources.

The old axiom, "*when in doubt, it is better to err on the side of charity*" is still true in times of genuine doubt. But we should not use this principle to perpetuate doubt, as an excuse for repeatedly failing to take actions to correct and improve a situation. Let us use a new principle in all our aid: "***Help them until you can see it is hurting them.***"

B. Home Visits are Essential (and Follow-ups, Too)

We can hurt a family or individual by making them dependent upon us. We are obligated to be good stewards of the funds donated to the Society. We misuse these funds when we fail to probe repeaters for the cause of their problems or to lead them to sources of independence such as food cooperatives and government assistance to which they are entitled. Nor is it truly being Vincentian to simply refuse to help repeaters without at least trying to work with them for a time.

Conferences do an equal injustice by encouraging individuals to come in for handouts. The conference should make a commitment to undertake home visits with enough follow-up to probe a person's real needs and causes. The collection of factual information during these visits is absolutely necessary to help someone. A danger on the opposite end is to be so miserly that the help given is not enough to provide any real assistance in getting someone out of their current problem (unless what is given is all the conference can afford).

Despite the deep sense of generosity needed to become a devoted servant of the poor, Vincentians have to make judgments on how conference funds can best be used to accomplish good. This is a most critical question in needy conferences where funds frequently do not stretch until the end of the month; but it also applies to more affluent conferences. Giving help unwisely on the grounds that "*we've got the money*" is not a good principle of operation. Through twinning, you can put that money into the hands of needy conferences where a small amount of money can help make a big difference.

The traditional principles make much more sense:

- Refer people to the conference in their neighborhood;
- Support those conferences more needy than your own;
- Keep records of contacts (family information cards) on all you help;
- If a family moves and it has been an on-going case, send a note to the District Council or to the conference where the family is moving.

Even when forced to deny financial help, Vincentians must never be harsh. Even if it is determined that people must be given strong counsel, home visit teams must make it clear that they are interested in the welfare of the family and not just judging them "*unworthy.*"

Vincentians should always have alternative suggestions for solutions. They should teach through encouragement, not through harshness. They must convey empathetic understanding and a willingness to help, even when further *financial* help is not possible.

One conference begins its "Statement of Policies" with: "***First, we provide prayers, understanding, information and caring.***"

This simple policy expresses the basic fundamental of our Vincentian ministry -- and that we should never sell ourselves short by looking upon “*helping*” only in terms of **financial** or **material** assistance.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HELPING

1. We have to pray to receive God’s wisdom and Christ’s love in performing our Vincentian work. Mass, the Sacraments and reading the Scriptures are all essential.
2. We have to spend more time with people and make follow-up visits.
3. We have to listen better. We must be sensitive enough to identifying problems that may be hidden just under the surface, and their root causes.
4. We have to keep abreast of the many services available in our community for people with problems. This was the hallmark of the Society of Frederic Ozanam. This must be our Society in the Twenty-First Century.

CARING EVEN WHEN SAYING “NO”

What a beautiful impression you can have on a family when you leave them with the feeling that you care for them, even though you may not give them the material or financial help they requested. Follow-up visits reinforce this feeling. Your presence in a home can give hope and heal wounds that they never tell you about. But you have to *care* to really leave this impression.

Our contacts with the poor should set in motion a series of activities, much like ripples formed by dropping a stone into the water. These activities all aim at bringing stability into the lives of the family, and focus on acquiring the things needed for a sustainable, decent human existence -- a job, housing, medical care, schooling, etc.

C. Special Situations

Every Vincentian doing home visits comes to realize that there are many *Mary and John*’s in their conference area. (Maybe we would have a slightly better attitude towards them if we called them *Mary and Joseph*.) Hardly a week goes by without SVdP getting a call to solve the financial problems of such couples.

Mary and John aren’t married, but live together with her three children from a prior marriage. Both feel they are “victims” -- Mary of government budget cuts, John of “corporate downsizing” (he cannot find full-time work). Her W-2 grant was eliminated, and she found she just could not make it on the income of her part-time job alone.

After spending time to identify their outstanding bills and obligations, and to review spending patterns, the home visit team concludes Mary and John consistently run short at least \$150 each month. So something does not get paid, unless the church or some relative steps in.

We have the obligation to help Mary and John explore their options, none of which seem very pleasant or immediately acceptable: move to a less expensive apartment, or one with utilities included; give up their automobile (but bus service is poor in the area); cut down on food; find a full-time job (and hire a babysitter) or two part time jobs. Mary and John must realize that neither the church nor relatives can be counted on to continue making up their monthly shortage.

The home visit team serves Mary and John correctly in identifying their bad budgeting pattern. In reviewing their request, it recognizes the mistake of continuing to make up the difference without Mary and John confronting their problem. The team rightly uses their aid as a lever to move Mary and John towards a solution. Since there are children, the first suggestion is likely to be for John to accept full-time employment -- even if it is not the same work he used

to do, or is at a lower pay rate. He can continue to look for the “right” job while he works on his new job.

As they face the hard choices needed to adjust to changes in their lifestyle caused by loss of income sources, Mary and John should find the conference still cooperative and occasionally helpful. However, they must move towards their goal and responsibility for their life. The conference can continue to gently prod Mary and John in this direction through occasional assistance - food boxes, perhaps a rent or utility deposit at their new apartment.

There are many cases of Mary and John who face painful options as they are laid off or otherwise lose income sources. Some people need temporary or emergency help while they adjust to those realities. The Society, in its concern for the poor of all neighborhoods, is responsive. This is our role. But adjusting to reality must occur, and, since we do not provide continuing or long-term assistance, our role cannot frustrate or short-circuit that goal.

Another situation is the person(s) who is found literally on the doorsteps of the Rectory seeking assistance. Some people yearly migrate south to escape the bitter cold winter months in the north, then migrate back in the summer to escape the harsh southern heat. They stop along the main highways which stretch across our nation to ask for some form of material assistance to continue their journey.

In some cases their needs are genuine: mechanical failures with their vehicle, promised employment which didn't pan out, unexpected illness, sudden strikes, or simply running out of money. Most of all, they need someone who cares about them and their problems. Because they are non-residents, area social services often refuse to assist them. These agencies are already overwhelmed with local clients and are unable to help due to budget limitations. Transients in need have no where else to turn. SVdP is often their last hope; and we are there with food and other services.

However, some individuals along this route survive throughout the year on the compassion of any and all charitable organizations. This makes the Vincentian's task more difficult as they may feel manipulated by 'colorful' stories. This diverts time, resources and money from those individuals and families in real need.

When in doubt, take heart in this prayer by Thomas Merton that you may know you did right!

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself. The fact that I think that I am following You will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope to have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust You always. Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for You are ever with me and You will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

Part V. THE MECHANICS - WALKING THE TALK

INTRODUCTION: We have discussed the philosophy and objectives of a home visit, but there are also important mechanical things we must learn -- some to do and others to avoid. Further, we all have contact with hundreds of other clients outside of home visits - primarily over the telephone. These people deserve to be treated with the same dignity and respect. Whether in their home or over the phone, we serve all clients with prayer, caring, understanding, and information.

A. Points to Remember

- ❖ *Always **home visit**.* Except in very unusual circumstances, we always make home visits. This is the Vincentian way and the Vincentian difference.
- ❖ *Always visit in **pairs**.* All home visits should be made by two Vincentians. This (1) provides additional safety in bad neighborhoods, although problems have historically been almost non-existent. *Remember: Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs.* More importantly, this (2) provides two sets of eyes to observe, two pairs of ears to listen. It encourages varying viewpoints in reviewing the case, and support of the eventual decision as to the type and amount of help to be given. It also (3) protects team members from unfounded charges. Without a witness, it is difficult to defend yourself against a charge of inappropriate conduct. And even a successful *legal* defense may not restore your reputation.
- ❖ *Always **pray** for guidance before and after each call.* Try to picture the face of Christ in those we visit.
- ❖ *Remember you are responsible for effort, not success.*

B. At and Inside the Door

- ❖ *Just be yourself.* The Lord will stand beside you.
- ❖ *Identify yourself and explain your role.* Tell the client at the door that you are from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul from the local parish.
- ❖ *Eliminate noise and interference* where possible.
- ❖ *Get to the point.* They called for help. They know why you are there.
- ❖ You may find conditions and facts which are different from what was stated over the phone. *Ask lots of appropriate questions* with interest and caring; avoid the red tape look. Be pleasant and carry the happiness of our ministry in your heart.
- ❖ *Always maintain respect for and the dignity of a client.*
- ❖ If you can't help directly, point out other possible paths. *Referrals are important.* And, don't hesitate to call back with other information.

TIPS ON MAKING A POSITIVE CONNECTION

As Vincentian helpers we must often ask a lot of questions before we can truly help others. Before the questioning starts, proper groundwork should be laid for the family as to why we need to ask these questions.

- ❖ We need to convey a caring and understanding attitude so that the family perceives we are there to help and not sit in judgment.

- ❖ We need to make it clear that all information received will be treated in a confidential manner.
- ❖ We need to explain that to really help the family, we need to know the details and circumstances of the problem.
- ❖ We need to stress that we don't have all the answers, but that we are willing to work with the family in finding them.

When we first come into a family's home, at times it is difficult to know where to begin. Once the above groundwork has been laid, you may want to use some of the following as starter questions. Each situation will be unique, but some basic questions still apply in each case. These questions are very helpful in problem solving with the family. They can be repeated with each specific problem the family is experiencing.

- ✓ What is the immediate problem?
- ✓ How does the family view or feel about the problem?
- ✓ What does the family feel caused the problem?
- ✓ What has the family done about the problem?
- ✓ What does the family feel can be done about the problem?
- ✓ Is this a recurring problem or a one-time occurrence?

Once you have obtained a clear picture of the problem situation, you can then begin to explore possible alternatives with the family. Based on the obtained information, you and your conference members can develop a practical service plan which will hopefully meet the need as well as the situation which caused the need.

C. Before Leaving

- ❖ *Always leave on a positive, helpful note.*
- ❖ *Leave something behind.* It helps to leave some written material with the client. One conference leaves every client with an envelope which includes a letter ...
 - that identifies their parish, SVdP's function, and role;
 - -that suggests *"in difficult times, many people turn to God to find solace and peace. You may discover that, by attending church, your life takes on new meaning and direction;"*
 - that extends a warm invitation to attend their church, enclosing a card listing the daily and weekend Masses; and
 - that includes a basic prayer (the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi) and the promise that *"We will also include you in our prayers. Please pray for us too. We are ordinary people like you."* This helps communicate the value we place on prayer.
- ❖ *Consider praying with the client,* if appropriate. Many Vincentians are uncomfortable doing this at first, but find that, the more they do it, the easier it becomes and the more "right" it seems. A simple prayer (the *Our Father* is well known) can be helpful. Ask the

client if she would like to pray with you, or if she would like to say a prayer. However, NEVER impose yourself on them.

At the end of the visit, the individual or family should: (1) feel that we were compassionate and listened to them, (2) know if they can be helped or how long it will take to hear the decision about getting help, (3) know more about how SVdP works.

D. After Leaving

After a short prayer, *always discuss the case with your partner* before making any decisions. Many times, the visiting pair needs to discuss the visit at the next conference meeting and get input from other conference members. This helps in making a decision on whether assistance can be given or not.

Your **Resourceful Vincentian** resource book contains a wealth of information you can and should share with those in need. You should become familiar with what is in it so you can quickly locate any information the client may need. Copies of this book can be obtained online at www.svdpmilw.org or by calling the Central Office at (414)462-7837.

Another great resource is the 211 line. This is a 24 hour information and referral number that can provide callers with information regarding social service needs, such as food, shelter, health care, parenting and family concerns, substance abuse and other basic needs. Trained community resource specialists assess a caller's situation and provide them with information or directly connect them to community agencies. Callers dial 211 or 773-0211.

In summary, Vincentian helping implies:

- **Relieve immediate need.** Any immediate emergency situation has first been addressed.
- **Establish a trusting relationship.** A relationship of trust and confidence has been established with the individual or family in need.
- **Identify the problem accurately.** The problem underlying the crisis has been identified.
- **Locate appropriate resources.** A resource responsive to the need of the family has been found and contacted.
- **Offer on-going support.** On-going support and encouragement is offered by the Vincentians so that the family continues to make use of the resource.

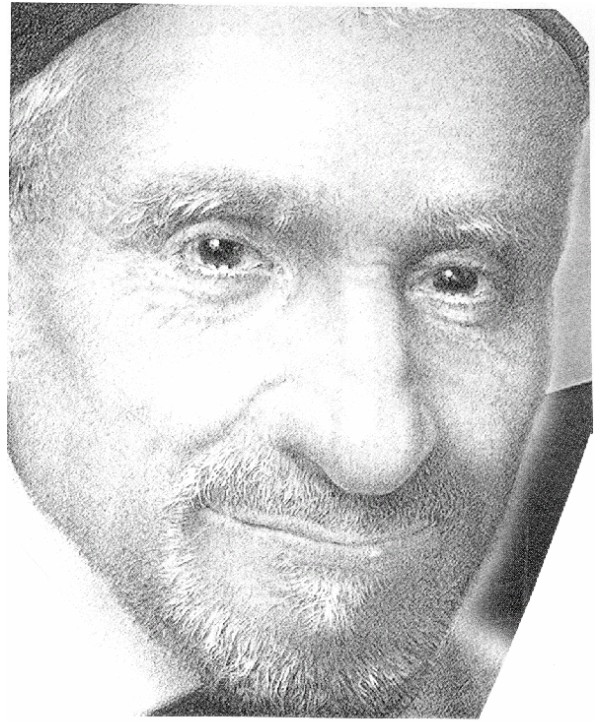
The Poor Are Your Masters

"You will soon learn that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the kettle of soup and the basket of bread you carry; but you must remember to keep your gentleness and your smile.

"It's not enough to give soup and bread - that the rich can do. You are the little servant of the poor, always smiling and in good humor. They are your masters, terribly sensitive and exacting, as you will see. But the uglier and the dirtier they are, the more unjust and bitter, the more you must give them of your love.

"It's only because of your love, only your love, that the poor will forgive you the bread you give them."

St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660)



ESSENTIALS OF A GOOD HOME VISIT

- 1. I am invited into the home as a FRIEND.***
- 2. I must remain NON-JUDGMENTAL.***
- 3. I must remember that the persons visited are ultimately responsible for their own lives. I must allow them to make their OWN DECISIONS.***
- 4. I must keep in mind that I will not always be thanked, and I should be able to face REJECTION.***
- 5. I should always leave the door open for FOLLOW-UP VISITS.***
- 6. I must remember that progress is often made in small steps, and that the improvement made might not be visible. I should look for SMALL PROGRESS.***

A Prayer before Visits

Lord,

*Make me an instrument of your PEACE.
Where there is hatred, let me sow your LOVE;
Where there is d injury, PARDON;
Where there is doubt, FAITH;
Where there is despair, HOPE;
Where there is darkness, LIGHT;
And where there is sadness, JOY.*

Master,

*Grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled, as to CONSOLE;
to be understood, as to UNDERSTAND;
to be loved, as to LOVE.*

*For it is in GIVING that we receive;
It is in PARDONING that we are pardoned;
And it is in DYING that we are brought
to eternal life.*



St. Vincent de Paul Society
At the Heart of Giving

**Society of St. Vincent de Paul
9601 W. Silver Spring Dr.
Milwaukee WI 53225-3301**

This booklet is based on material on home visits prepared by Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Conference in Tempe, Arizona. Permission to reprint is granted and encouraged. Milwaukee SVDP has edited the original version considerably and has included additional material in Part V

Additional copies are available for \$2.00 from the Milwaukee Council Office, or they can be downloaded from the webpage www.svdpmilw.org.