



JUST.NOW

March – April 2009 Justice Briefing

Working for Systemic Change – A Vincentian Approach



Fr. Myles Rearden C.M.
1939 – 2009

On the 25th of February, 2009 the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice lost a highly valued and deeply committed member of its Board of Management. Fr. Myles Rearden C.M. died suddenly on the morning of Ash Wednesday. Fr. Rearden had been in poor health for a number of months but the news of his death came as a painful shock. In spite of increasing breathlessness Fr. Myles had attended the February Meeting of the Board of Management, just six days prior to his death, and on the day before he died he sent some 'follow-up' emails to the Chairperson – Mr. Larry Tuomey of the S.V.P.

Fr. Myles made a significant contribution to the work of the Partnership particularly in the area of Vincentian spirituality and justice. Myles' vision and the legacy of his written work will continue to shape the work of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. He brought a living spirituality and great intellectual gifts to the work of the Board of Management. We will miss him profoundly.

May Fr. Myles rest in peace and may the seeds of justice which he sowed bear much fruit. We send our deepest sympathy to Fr. Myles' Family and to his Vincentian Confreres.

This edition of Just.Now, in an attempt to honour Fr. Myles' deep commitment to working for a more just and inclusive society, presents a brief summary of a small booklet he prepared for the Board of Management of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice in January of this year.

The booklet, which was an abridged version of the book 'Seeds of Hope – Stories of Systemic Change' (2008), was part of Fr. Myles' contribution to the project of the Vincentian partnership for Social Justice – the provision of material for reflection on Spirituality and Justice. It is intended in mid - May to publish the complete version of Fr. Myles' booklet on our website www.vpsj.ie

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice consists of The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, The Vincentian Congregation, The Daughters of Charity and The Sisters of the Holy Faith. Working for social and economic change – tackling poverty and exclusion.

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The Background to the Conversation on Spirituality and Justice

The members of the wider Vincentian Partnership at its last bi-annual meeting requested that the Partnership provide some reflections on Spirituality and Justice. Because of a heavy work schedule progress was slow. However eight points for reflection have been provided by the members of the Board of Management and it is planned to put them on the website before the end of May. In 2006 the international Vincentian Family set up a commission to promote systemic change with a view to help bring about systemic change through the works of the members of the Vincentian Family especially through projects engaging people experiencing poverty and oppression.

Fr. Myles agreed to make a study of the work produced to-date by the commission and to present it in a form which would be readily accessible to busy people. Just a month before his death Fr. Myles provided a draft of his review of the book 'Seeds of Change -Stories of Systemic Change' 2008. The complete version of his work will be available on the website from mid-May 2009. This edition of Just.Now presents the strategies for systemic change as outlined by Fr. Myles. (the book 'Seeds of Change -Stories of Systemic Change', consists of 15 chapters, 4 of which deal with the notion of systemic change. The remaining chapters focus on projects which promote systemic change in a number of different countries).

Strategies for Systemic Change

These Strategies are inspired by sensitivity towards people in distress and an understanding of the structural reasons that cause poverty. They flow from Gospel values, and from Vincentian values and mission. The strategies identified by the commission are grouped into four categories.

1. Mission-oriented strategies (focusing on direction and motivation)
2. People-oriented strategies (focusing on the people in poverty as the persons who are most capable of changing their own situations)
3. Task oriented strategies (focusing on organisation)
4. And strategies directed towards co-responsibility, networking and political action (focusing on participation and solidarity).

Systemic change is seen to grow from a certain quality of mind and heart as well as from social thinking and social practice.

Mission-Oriented Strategies

A basic principle for the mission-oriented strategies is the realisation that poverty is not to be regarded as just the inevitable result of circumstances. People experiencing poverty remain poor largely because of changeable circumstances. To quote, Nelson Mandela, 'like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural'; and for Frederick Ozanam before him, "Charity is not sufficient It treats the wounds but not the blows that cause them... Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is Justice's role to prevent the attacks".

A second principle for the mission-oriented strategy is to 'design projects, create strategies, policies and guidelines that flow from our Christian and Vincentian values and mission'.

Vincentian motivation combines prayer and action, and is essentially spiritual.

A third and final principle at the level of mission orientation is 'to evangelize, while maintaining a profound respect for the local culture, thus inculturating our Christian and Vincentian charism within that culture'.

Person-oriented Strategies

Under this heading, our attention is directed to the people experiencing poverty as the persons who are most capable of changing their own situation.

Members of the Vincentian Family attempt to live and work in solidarity with people experiencing poverty rather than merely encourage others to share their superfluous wealth with them. A vital way of showing solidarity with people in poverty is to have a deep concern for the education of the young, which is deeply rooted in the Vincentian tradition. Equally vital is the development of servant-leaders, inspired by the example of St. Vincent de Paul.



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'How to acquire the skills of a servant leader? The initial answer is that these skills cannot be acquired only through training, but must be accompanied by the leader's true desire to serve'. Eduardo Marques.

Empowering others for leadership was not only something St. Vincent himself excelled, it has shown itself clearly in the AIC systemic-change type projects in Madagascar. 'Searching for the means to emerge from poverty is a risky experience. Servant leadership encourages the community to take such risks'. Concelar N.

Task-oriented Strategies

The very first organisation established by Vincent de Paul, was that of the Charity, at Chatillon-les Dombes in 1617. St. Vincent's approach illustrated the strategic principle of 'starting with a serious analysis of the local reality, flowing from concrete data, and tailoring all projects to that reality'

At Chatillon Vincent discovered a rich vein of generosity among the local people, and a plentiful supply of volunteers to deliver that generosity to those in need, along with a willingness of those volunteers to organise in such a way as to allow the most efficient distribution of assistance.

People only escape from poverty when they have stable means for satisfying their basic human needs. This demands quality service and financial transparency.

Co-responsibility, network and political action strategies

Vincent frequently intervened in political issues in order to help people experiencing poverty. He involved royalty, the nobility, the legal profession and church authorities in projects for the sake of the people experiencing poverty, at a time when these people themselves were virtually powerless. The empowerment of the large numbers of people in many contemporary societies is something he could only have dreamed of, but even today 'it is necessary to construct a shared vision with diverse stake-holders; communities which are disadvantaged, interested individuals, donors, churches, governments, unions, the media, international organizations and networks, etc'

'The fundamental model for the Vincentian mission is collaborative, involving teamwork, networking and shared goals'.

The soul of systemic change

If there is a single idea that gives meaning to 'systemic change' at all its four levels, it must certainly be that which determined the course of Vincent's own life from his early thirties on: that of consecrating his entire self and all he possessed to God for the service of people oppressed by poverty. This idea determined the generosity with which he made particular donations, and it was what he used to motivate the Ladies of Charity to part with their jewellery for the work of the foundlings.

But it also determined the spirit of brotherhood with which he spoke to the galley-slaves. It equally controlled the spirit of servant-leadership in which he established the Charity at Chatillon-les Dombes, and saw to the creation of networks of charity thought war-torn France. Vincent involved everyone he could influence. Importantly, it is precisely this fundamental attitude of mind, heart and will, that is most amenable to prayer and the sacramental life; it is why Vincent is not just an organisational genius but a saint. In a certain sense, the still centre of systemic change does not change at all, rather it is the living heart of a human being alive with the love of God.



Stations of The Cross

1. Jesus is condemned to death

Jesus is trapped by the same system that brings us the death penalty, the harshness of life in prison, political prisoners, torture, white collar crime, racial profiling, the criminalization of the poor, the detention of immigrants, and all the inequities of our world's "criminal justice systems."

2. Jesus is made to carry his cross

Jesus carries his burden as do all those who work the land, labour for low wages, struggle to find work, care for their children and family, lose their homes through foreclosure, worry over their debts, strive for their children, attend poor schools, are abused by their bosses, or in any way struggle to make it in this world.

3. Jesus falls the first time

The burden that crushes Jesus can be compared to the burdens of today - the burden of debt that crushes the poor economies of the world - the unequal distribution of resources which stifles development for many people and nations.

4. Jesus meets his mother

Jesus looks on his mother with love and sees all the pain and possibility of relationship, deep family love and fidelity, abuse and violence, mutual loving care, separation and divorce, loneliness and community. Jesus sees all the mothers who are struggling to care for their children.

5. Simon helps Jesus carry his cross

Jesus' story becomes Simon's story as well. We are all connected with one another. Globalization can be both a burden and a relief, a freedom and a limit. Jesus and Simon are both victims and helpers. Good and evil play out as their lives are connected.

6. Jesus falls the second time

The burden that crushes Jesus is unfair - as are the economic and political inequalities of our day - wages, resources, schools, rights, beauty, power, savings, and taxes. Our systems are not always fair.

7. Veronica wipes the faces of Jesus

This "small" act of charity is a wonderful action of great compassion. It seems to be all that Veronica can do at the moment. The injustice remains. She cannot stop the suffering and death of Jesus. The compassion of Veronica reminds us to do more, to work for social change, for an end to injustice, and for a new way of living together.

8. Jesus comforts the women of Jerusalem

Women seem to bear the burdens of the world in a special way. Women feel deeply the pain and injustice of our systems. The experience of women throughout the ages calls us to end the injustice. It calls us to a new heaven and a new earth, to a new way of being sisters and brothers.

9. Jesus falls the third time

The burden that crushes Jesus is like the burden of materialism. Every time the world worships things before people, power before justice, and consumption before the spirit, we lose what it means to be human and alive.

10. Jesus is stripped of his garments

This radical loss of everything continues to be felt in the lives of all the poor - those without enough food, clothing, shelter, education, employment, respect, dignity, human rights, and community.

11. Jesus is nailed to the cross

Jesus is a person of active nonviolence, yet here he comes to know violence against his person - the same violence that is seen in all our wars and preparation for war, in all the violence on our streets and in our homes, in the hurt inflicted on people in all our weapons of mass destruction, in ethnic cleansing, in genocide, in all the countless examples of violence.

12. Jesus dies on the cross

Power and control seem to be dominating values in our world, yet Jesus seems to lose all of these things that the world considers important. Yet at the same time, in Jesus nailed to a cross, we see a person of great freedom, compassionate love and a special awesome power - the power of the suffering God crying out for justice.

13. Jesus is taken down from the cross

Jesus is radically stripped of everything. He is a human person whose rights and dignity and been taken away. In Jesus, we see all the women and men of our world who still seek their basic human rights - rights to the basics like food, water, clothing, shelter, education, political freedom, development and justice.

14. Jesus is placed in the tomb

Jesus is carefully placed into the earth - an earth that is the divine creation - a planet that we so often abuse as we waste resources, seek profit before all else, and consume without awareness.

Lectionary Reflection by Fr. John Bucki, S.J.