

# On the Practical Applications of Catholic Social Teaching

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**T**he Society of St. Vincent de Paul is the face of the Catholic Church as it relates to helping the poor. The Society is deeply rooted in Vincentian spirituality. Vincentians, as members of the Society are called, achieve their individual holiness by assisting the poor. We are inspired to seek and find the forgotten, the suffering, and the deprived. The following are practical applications of Catholic Social Teaching as practiced by the Los Angeles Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

## Supporting Family and Community

Maria, a mother of three, also provided for her mother. Because she was abused by her husband, she relocated from Portland, Oregon,

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to Los Angeles. Maria was initially living in a motel. She was able to get a job at a local fast food establishment. A motel can quickly turn into an expensive proposition when you are being paid the minimum wage, so she went to the local Catholic Church. Fortunately, this parish had a Society of St. Vincent de Paul Conference of Charity, a community-based group of volunteers that assists the needy in the local parish community. As is customary, two of the Conference members visited Marie in her motel room, a home visit that distinguishes the Society of St. Vincent de Paul from other nonprofits. A mother of one of the members owned an apartment complex that had an available unit. The Conference paid for the security deposit and the first month's rent. Maria was allowed to visit the local St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Store to seek support from its Free Distribution Program. She was able to get bedding, kitchenware, clothing, and furniture free of charge. Within a year, Maria was able to stabilize her life, move into a larger apartment, and get a better job. She sends us a Christmas card every year.

## Creating Options for the Poor and Vulnerable

James was a veteran who had lost his job in New York. He decided to move to Los Angeles, hoping he would fare better there. Unable to get a job, he fell into a state of increasing financial crisis. His only recourse was living on Skid Row in Los Angeles, the homeless capital of the United States. James lived on the streets for over ten years in a state of despair, with dependencies on alcohol and drugs. One day, he wandered into our Cardinal Manning Center on Skid Row, which is run by the Society, and enrolled in a program there for single men. This allowed James to conquer his addictions and turn his life around. Part of the program included the center's procuring for him a job and a Section 8 voucher for

housing. He is now living in an affordable housing unit. He considers himself very blessed to have the care and determination of his association with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

### **Protecting the Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

The following is a personal experience I had with a lady in downtown Los Angeles. I was walking in the business district, which is only a ten-minute walk from Skid Row. Standing on the corner of 6th and Flower, I could feel on me the eyes of what appeared to be a homeless lady. Understand that I am the executive director of the Los Angeles Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. At the time, I had been a member of the Society for close to twenty years. Although I should have known better and should have drawn on my spiritual roots, I was trying to avoid eye contact with this lady. I was dressed in the standard businessman outfit: blue blazer, white shirt, blue/grey tie, and grey slacks. Apparently, I looked like I might be part of the local business security team. When she asked me if I was security, my training took hold. I relented and looked into her face. At that moment I saw in this woman the face of Christ, as Vincentians are taught to do. As I came to my Vincentian senses, I explained that I was not security. She proceeded to share with me that she had been homeless and had just been placed in housing through a program very similar to the one we offer at the Cardinal Manning Center on Skid Row. I explained what my organization does and wished her the best. She was obviously very happy with our exchange. I would enlist all to see the face of Christ not just in the poor but in everyone. If you are Buddhist, see the face of Buddha. If you are Muslim, see the face of Mohammad. It is all an extension of the Golden Rule: Love God, Love Yourself, and Love Your Neighbor.

### **Protecting Human Rights**

Just north of downtown the Los Angeles Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul runs a massive Thrift Store. It is the largest thrift store in Southern California. Our corporate offices are co-located with the thrift store. One of our local Conferences of Charity referred a mother and seven children to our offices for assistance. From my office, I could hear the commotion of this family in our lobby, pretty much mass family confusion. I approached the mother. She explained that she was three days from getting a Section 8 voucher, but in the meantime she and her children had nowhere to stay. We moved the family into our employee lounge, which is set up like a living room with a TV, and dining room. We brought in lunch while our Vincentian services team attempted to find a motel for the family. Finding a motel for a family this large is not easy, but our staff, guided by their strong Vincentian commitment, finally found a place that would accommodate them. We provided transportation to the motel, where they could stay until the voucher was made available. This act of charity provided the family with their basic human right to have a roof over their heads.

### **Seeking the Dignity and Rights of Workers**

The Los Angeles Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul employs anywhere between 130 to 160 employees. One of the guiding principles of being a Vincentian is to treat people with dignity and respect, a goal we strive to achieve in the treatment of our employees. We start with a chapel that is available to all employees who are so inclined. We will take a chance on people who might not find employment anywhere else. We have employees with master's degrees and employees with no formal education.

We are ahead of the timetable set by the City of Los Angeles to reach a minimum wage of \$15 an hour. Additionally, we pay ninety percent of our employees' medical benefits. This situation is the result of the many blessings that have been bestowed on the Los Angeles Council. We have a computer lab where employees can learn basic computer skills. We offer GED and ESL classes, in addition to Toast Masters International for our more advanced employees. Our annual employee appreciation lunch was created to recognize outstanding employees. We run a system that is firm, fair, and consistent, the perfect workplace for those who want to truly make a difference in the lives of others.

### Creating the Care for God's Creation

Pope Francis is to be lauded for his recent encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*, which is highly consistent with the following principle of Catholic Social Teaching: Humankind has an obligation to protect God's creation. The very nature of our thrift store is to preserve a green environment. If you have not worn it in a year, donate it to St. Vincent de Paul and give someone else the opportunity to wear it. We recycle our clothing through a price reduction process that ends with the clothing being baled and sent overseas. Our Thrift Store is zero landfill. Everything is recycled. We recycle all plastic containers and paper used in our offices. Our new family housing project includes solar panels. Besides being environmentally conscious, this also saves us money.

### Working to Achieve Solidarity via Fraternity

Again, Pope Francis is to be recognized for providing the platform of this Buddhist-Catholic dialogue. The beauty of this experience was the seeking of fraternity and solidarity between the two

religions. By focusing on our similarities and not our differences, we are working to achieve common goals. I am a great believer in the Golden Rule, which dictates that we love God, love ourselves, and love our neighbors. What we discovered during the dialogue is that both traditions seek to respect and love our follow men and women. I have found that religions and other entities like to exist in their own silos. We let our territorial human nature get in the way of collaboration. The fact is that we can achieve more by getting out of our silos and working together. Pope Francis stated that he wished we would plant the seeds of peace by our collaboration in Rome. He has achieved this objective. We should all emulate his intent and spirit.

*Mr. David R. Fields is Executive Director, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Los Angeles Council. For twenty years, he has served the Vincentian works in Los Angeles in a number of positions such as the Los Angeles Council's Board of Directors and Executive Committee. His Council of Los Angeles has 140 programs, homeless centers on skid row and elsewhere, a resettlement program for paroled inmates, thrift stores, a family housing program, and summer camps serving at-risk youth.*