

Dreaming as a Single Human Family

Initial Reflections
on Catholic Social
Teaching for the
St Vincent de Paul
Society National
Council of Australia

John Honner



St Vincent de Paul Society

NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc.

good works



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This logo represents the hand of Christ that blesses the cup, the hand of love that offers the cup, and the hand of suffering that receives the cup.

The Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia wishes to acknowledge that we are on Aboriginal land. We pay respects to all traditional custodians.

Warning: This publication may contain the names and images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people now deceased.

About the author

Dr John Honner, alongside his teaching and writing in theology, has been active in community services governance and planning. He has been Rector of Jesuit Theological College in Melbourne, Director of Practice and Policy at MacKillop Family Services, a director of the Victorian Council of Social Service, a member of the Board of Catholic Social Services Victoria, Director of Edmund Rice Community Services, and a member of the Council of Edmund Rice Education Australia.

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria commissioned Dr John Honner to write a book on Frederic Ozanam (*Love and Politics*, 2007) and subsequently the National Council commissioned a book on Louise de Marillac (*Holy Humanity*, 2010).

National Council Office

PO BOX 243

Deakin West, ACT 2600

Phone: 02 6202 1200

Fax: 02 6285 0159

Email: admin@svdp.org.au

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Introduction: From the National President

The work of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia is firmly grounded in Gospel values, reflected and articulated by the church since the late 1800s in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

Those enduring values and principles are as relevant now as they ever were.

As Vincentians the dignity of every human being is at the core of our work. We oppose individualism as we commit to the common good. And we encourage the empowerment of people through participation at whatever level might be possible. We stand with others who share these values and above all we defend the preferential option for people living with the structural causes of poverty and disadvantage. In addition, we share the care of our common home.

These principles guide us through economic, political, personal and spiritual encounters. They attract people, including many who may have little or no other connection to Church, to contribute their time, their talents and their love to our work.

For all of us involved in the life and work of the Society, we can be continuously renewed, affirmed and inspired by reflecting on the example set by those who came before us.

I commend this document to you in the hope that it might inspire a deeper understanding of the Gospel values that underpin our work – those basic values and simple truths that can ground us and inspire us.

Claire Victory

National President
St Vincent de Paul Society

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Introduction: Catholic Social Teaching and the St Vincent de Paul Society

The title of this document, *Dreaming as a Single Human Family*, is drawn from Pope Francis' recent and explicit contribution to Catholic Social Teaching and from the ancient and abiding notion of *Altyerre*, sometimes translated as 'the Dreaming', a contribution from the Arrente people of Central Australia.¹

The interconnectedness of the human family is a theme that runs through both Catholic Social Teaching and Vincentian spirituality. Pius XI would write in 1931 that 'only will true cooperation be possible for a single common good when the constituent parts of society deeply feel themselves members of one great family', and Frederic Ozanam would propose that members of the St Vincent de Paul Society could heal social and political divisions if they were to 'travel from one side to the other...getting them used to looking upon one another as brothers, infusing them with a bit of mutual charity'².

For many today, and often among the poor and afflicted, childhood experiences of home and family have been dysfunctional and debilitating. Their needs to find a home and a place to belong, however, remain strong. A broader image of home and family is required, as well as a more inclusive society. Jesus tells us that his mother and sisters and brothers are not only his immediate biological family, but the entire human family: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'. Jesus also extends the idea of home. He is rejected in his hometown and he describes himself as homeless, but he makes his home on our planet, promising to make a home with us and inviting us into his home.³ In the Christian worldview, the human family is interconnected with itself and with holy mystery at the heart of creation.

When Jesus proclaims sight to the blind, freedom to slaves, healing to lepers, and shelter for widows and strangers, he is not only promising salvation to individuals but also inaugurating a new society that he called the 'Kingdom of God'. Catholic Social Teaching has thus evolved from Jesus's social teaching.

Catholic Social Teaching, also called Catholic Social Doctrine, is the collective name given to the Roman Catholic Church's formal pronouncements on matters of social structures and social justice since 1891. These statements, prepared by a commission of experts to address pressing social issues, are authorised as Papal Encyclical Letters for wider circulation. The name 'encyclical' comes from the Latin *encyclis*, meaning 'circular'.

The Catholic Church's relationship with political powers has gone through several stages: persecution under the Roman Empire, then supreme authority as the established Church of the Holy Roman Empire, and subsequently increasing antagonism after the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

Upon witnessing the exploitation and destitution of workers in the industrial revolution, the Church found a new voice and a new relationship to political power. Pope Leo XIII produced *Rerum Novarum* (meaning literally 'Of new things' but figuratively 'On revolutions'). He argued that capital should not dominate labour, but that capital and labour are complementary. He defended the rights of workers to form unions and to receive a just wage. The Church then continued to speak out on social reform at particularly critical periods in the life of the global community.

Catholic Social Teaching does not offer an ideology, nor does it offer a political program. While the Church's teaching is essentially theological in nature, it is grounded in the critical social questions of the day and draws on contemporary economics, and social and political sciences. The dreaming is not wishful thinking. In 1991, celebrating the centenary of *Rerum Novarum*, John Paul II thus wrote of Catholic Social Teaching:

This teaching...is to be found at the crossroads where Christian life and conscience come into contact with the real world. [It] is seen in the efforts of individuals, families, people involved in cultural and social life, as well as politicians and statesmen, to give it a concrete form and application in history. (Centesimus Annus, §59)

The St Vincent de Paul Society has a uniquely close connection with Catholic Social Teaching for two reasons. First, as will be shown below, the key founder of the Society, Frederic Ozanam, was a pioneer in articulating a Catholic response to capitalism and communism and instrumental in shaping what was known in France as ‘social Catholicism’. Secondly, in helping to shape a charitable organisation that was independent of clerical control, yet both profoundly Christian and absolutely lay, Ozanam not only gave the Vincentian spirit a new dimension but also anticipated the renewal of the Church conceived at the Second Vatican Council.

St Pope John Paul II recognised the voice of Frederic Ozanam in *Rerum Novarum* during the latter’s beatification: ‘He observed the real situation of the poor and sought to be more and more effective in helping them in their human development. He understood that charity must lead to efforts to remedy injustice. Charity and justice go together. He had the clear-sighted courage to seek a front-line social and political commitment in a troubled time in the life of his country, for no society can accept indigence as if it were a simple fatality without damaging its honour. So, it is that we can see in him a precursor of the social doctrine of the Church which Pope Leo XXIII would develop some years later in the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.’

This document has been commissioned by the National Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia to inform on the one hand the Society’s continuing commitment to accompanying and serving disadvantaged people and, on the other hand, its engagement in the social, economic, and political discourse that shapes our society. The document consists of three major parts:

1. Frederic Ozanam and Social Catholicism
2. Timelines: Catholic Social Teaching Then and Now
3. The Principles of Catholic Social Teaching through a Vincentian Lens

These are followed by a conclusion on the heart of the mission of Christ and a short bibliography of key readings.

1. Frederic Ozanam and Social Catholicism

Paris 1848. Frederic Ozanam, key founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society, is a Professor at the University of Paris. France is in crisis. Government is bankrupt. Workers are mired in poverty. Victor Hugo, an acquaintance of Ozanam during his student days, is writing *Les Misérables*. Karl Marx has published his *Communist Manifesto* in London and returned to Paris to support the socialist struggle. The Archbishop of Paris is shot dead in the middle of the barricades between the revolutionaries and government forces.

France is divided. Many are challenging the entrenched privilege of the aristocracy and talking about “socialism”—by which they mean a fair and just society. Catholic leaders are slow to change and tend to support the old systems of government, the *Ancien Régime*.

Catholic Social Teaching had not yet been formulated. Ozanam charted a centrist course. He drew on his knowledge of economics and history—he had been a professor of commercial law and then a professor of European literature—but was primarily driven by his experience of finding Christ among the impoverished citizens of Paris. He inspired what would become known in France as ‘social Catholicism’. He urged a conservative Church to become more engaged with social concerns.

There are three key features of Ozanam’s social Catholicism that remain relevant today:

- a) the personal comes before the political,
- b) equality comes before economy, and
- c) the sacred can be found in the secular.

Let us look at each of these in turn prior to considering the significance of Catholic Social Teaching for the St Vincent de Paul Society today.

PERSONAL BEFORE POLITICAL: WE TAKE CARE OF THE PEOPLE

Though Ozanam was increasingly engaged in politics, and while he accepted that being involved in society entailed joining in political struggles, he found politics divisive and unsatisfactory. For example, in 1834 Ozanam declared ‘I would like to see the abasement of the political spirit for the good of the social spirit’. Or again in 1837, ‘We see each day the schism started... they are less opinions than interests, here the camp of riches, there the camp of the poor’.⁵

Ozanam sought social reform, but not through a Catholic political party. He encouraged dialogue between parties. He proposed that members of the St Vincent de Paul Society could ‘travel from one side to the other...getting them used to looking upon one another as brothers, infusing them with a bit of mutual charity’⁶. Thus the Rules of the Society call members to ‘bring Christian values to political matters’ but also state that ‘Those members who hold political offices will be asked...not to hold any mission of representation of the Society during their term of political office’. When political divisions did occur in the Society, Ozanam remained awkwardly in the middle ground. In 1838 he observed, ‘We have a right wing which would like to live in the shadow of the biretta [the more conservative side of the Church], and a left wing which is still living according to the [progressive Catholicism of Lamennais]. Outside both is your servant who...is rather centrist, finds himself greatly embarrassed, and calls on the help of your prayers’.⁷

France continued to collapse. The misery of the poor increased. Ozanam then chose to support one side of the political debate. He regarded the Catholic upper classes as ‘lost’ and urged his companions to support ‘the proletariat’, to ‘go over to the barbarians’. He reluctantly accepted nomination to stand in the election of 1848. Even so, this move was not so much concerned with politics as it was with persons. He declared, ‘instead of espousing the interests of a doctrinaire ministry...or of an egotistical bourgeoisie, we take

care of the people who have too many needs and not enough rights⁸. Ozanam insisted that social reform be driven not so much by social theories as by first-hand experience of the conditions of the poor. In a sensitive and poignant passage, during the struggles of 1848, he wrote:

The knowledge of social well-being is learned, not from books, nor from public debate, 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 we know first-hand the conditions of the poor in school, at work, in hospital, in the city, in the country, everywhere that God has placed them, then and only then can we begin to grasp the elements of poverty and hope we may resolve it.⁹

Ozanam's views on governance and economics remained centrist. He was more concerned with addressing the scandal of human misery than supporting one political system or another. As Sickinger put it, 'According to Ozanam, regeneration of society or 'social change' occurs not simply by rehabilitating the needy, but rather by rehabilitating the society that has become unresponsive to the needs of its people¹⁰.

EQUALITY BEFORE ECONOMY: THE MOST INSATIABLE OF MASTERS

Ozanam helped found a journal called *L'Ere Nouvelle* (The New Era) to make a Catholic contribution to the social struggles of 1848. He worked tirelessly on this project, writing five seminal articles in ten days, arguing for democracy, protection of children, the rights of workers, the reduction of working hours, a graduated tax, and a fair distribution of wealth.

He rejected free-market liberal theories because of their bias towards wealthy individuals and their exploitation of workers. After visiting a factory in Saint-Etienne, for example, he was greatly saddened on seeing 'to what horrible toil millions of men must apply themselves to put bread between their teeth, and procure well-being for a small number of the fortunate'. He saw 'the ignominious doctrines' of liberal thinkers like Bentham and Malthus as reducing 'the entire economy of human life to a calculus of interest' on investment. He showed liberal economics to be individualist, uninterested in poverty, and to follow no law other than self-interest, 'the most insatiable of masters'.¹¹

Ozanam also rejected extreme socialism, which he called 'utopian socialism', because of its proposed abolition of private property and its attacks on family and individual freedoms. Anticipating the failure of communism, he argued that extreme socialism would be 'suppressing competition... urging people to exchange their liberty for the certainty of bread and the promise of pleasure'¹².

Ozanam regarded both liberal capitalism and extreme socialism as 'two different ways into the same materialism'. Being a centrist, he argued for the reconciliation of employers and employees while at the same time insisting that workers had the right to form voluntary associations and to receive a just wage.¹³

SECULAR AND SACRED: PROFOUNDLY CHRISTIAN AND ABSOLUTELY LAY

Frederic Ozanam broke the mould for pious young men in the France of his day. Though he thought about becoming a monk or a priest, he chose to become an active lay Catholic. While he always respected Church authorities, he insisted on the independence of the St Vincent de Paul Society from clerical control. The rules of the Society thus declare it to be 'independent of the hierarchy'. In 1838 Ozanam wrote that the Society, 'should neither be a political party, nor a school, nor a brotherhood...but profoundly Catholic at the same time as being secular'. It should 'avoid the inconvenience of meeting in a sacristy'. Its work should be 'at once profoundly Christian and absolutely lay'¹⁴.

Ozanam is not trying to create a split between lay and clerical so much as to insist on their complementarity. The laity are not second-class Christians. They too are called to follow the way of the prophets, the way of Jesus, and the way of the saints, finding the sacred in the loving service of their suffering neighbour.

Ozanam's spirituality was shaped by Blessed Rosalie Rendu, the Daughter of Charity who had guided the young members of the Society of St Vincent de Paul in their first encounters with the destitute people of the Mouffetard district of Paris. She had imbibed the spirituality of St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac, that God would be found whenever one visited the poor, because 'Our Lord hides behind those rags'¹⁵. Ozanam, in a letter of 1838, put it this way:

we see the poor with our human eyes; they are there before us and we can put our fingers and hands on their wounds and the scars of the crown of thorns are visible on their foreheads... they are our masters and we are their servants. They are the sacred images of God whom we do not see and not knowing how to love God we love Him in the person of the poor.

Further, as St Vincent de Paul had insisted, charity went beyond individual acts of service. 'To be fully effective,' he remarked, 'charity must be organised.' This organised love at a social level produced many social reforms in St Vincent de Paul's time, including government funded relief for the poor and the establishment of general hospitals in every town and city in France.¹⁶

Two centuries later, however, the French revolutionaries were violently opposed to the established Catholic Church, scattering its clergy and desecrating its buildings. They saw their revolutionary values—Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity—as entirely secular. Ozanam, however, demonstrated that these values had evolved out of European Christendom and out of the Gospel. He could find complementarity in the secular and the sacred. It is similar today with our values of compassion, commitment, respect, integrity, empathy, advocacy and courage, as grassroots gospel values held warmly in secular hands.

Ozanam's vision directly shaped French 'social Catholicism' and indirectly influenced the formulation of Catholic Social Teaching in the decades after his death in 1853. Further, in his recognition of the sacred in the secular, he anticipated

the Second Vatican Council's declarations on the role of the laity in society and the place of Church in the modern world. As Pope Benedict XVI would put it, a century and a half after Ozanam's death:

it is necessary to improve pastoral structures in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is gradually promoted... This demands a change in mindset, particularly concerning lay people. They must no longer be viewed as 'collaborators' of the clergy but truly recognized as 'co-responsible', for the Church's being and action...¹⁷

The St Vincent de Paul Society plays a leading role in developing this co-responsibility.



2. Timelines: Catholic Social Teaching Then and Now

Catholic Social Teaching began as a response to specific social concerns in particularly critical times. As noted in the introduction above, it is ‘found at the crossroads where Christian life and conscience come into contact with the real world’. Consequently, Catholic Social Teaching reflects distinct circumstances in the histories of both politics and the Church. An awareness of these contexts is important if the principles of Catholic Social Teaching are to be properly understood and appropriately applied. To assist in developing such an awareness, this chapter provides a summary of key steps in Catholic Social Teaching, their contexts, and their major concerns.

The survey reveals two important markers. First, Catholic Social Teaching is often a response to a particular need, and hence it is not a blunt instrument to be applied uncritically in other contexts. Rather, and this is the second marker, while the same key principles are continuously invoked, particularly in relation to the conditions of the poor, Catholic Social Teaching can be seen to evolve as social circumstances change.

While reading this survey, two questions should be kept in mind. First, what are the critical social issues that should engage the Church and, in particular, the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia today? And secondly, in the light of past Catholic Social Teaching, how should the St Vincent de Paul Society respond?

1891: ON INDUSTRY, LABOUR, AND THE MISERY OF THE POOR

The 1880s marked a high point of industrial progress, introducing telephones, motor cars, sewing machines, electric lights, cardboard boxes, espresso coffee, coca cola, and the first skyscraper. They were also a low point in the devastation of the working classes. For all the material progress made, the Church was concerned that ‘some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of

the working class’. In 1891, drawing on the work of many scholars and influenced by French social Catholicism, Pope Leo XIII presented *Rerum Novarum*, an encyclical letter ‘On Capital and Labor’.¹⁸ It stipulated that the Church’s role in society is not to be a political force so much as a guide to social morality and the fostering of ‘the common good... all citizens, without exception, can and ought to contribute to that common good’. (§§32, 34)

Rerum Novarum was primarily concerned with the lives of the workers and their place in society, but it also criticised both selfish capitalism and illusory socialism. It avoided supporting any specific form of government, but it urged all governments to uphold the dignity of every human person, the dignity of work, and the priority of the common good. The Church took a definite stance, however, on the side of the poor:

when there is question of defending the rights of individuals, the poor and badly off have a claim to especial consideration. The richer class have many ways of shielding themselves, and stand less in need of help from the State; whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon, and must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State. (§37)

1931: DEPRESSION AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOCIAL ORDER

In 1931, during the great depression, Pius XI issued *Quadragesimo Anno* (meaning ‘Forty Years’) to mark the 40th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* and a withering judgement on the Church’s continuing indifference towards social issues:

the teaching of Leo XIII, so noble and lofty and so utterly new to worldly ears, was held suspect by some, even among Catholics, and to certain ones it even gave offense. For it boldly attacked and overturned the idols of Liberalism, ignored long-standing prejudices, and was in advance of its time beyond all expectation, so

that the slow of heart disdained to study this new social philosophy... (§14)

Quadragesimo Anno reiterated the key themes of *Rerum Novarum* and, drawing on contemporary philosophy and social sciences, introduced the principle of ‘subsidiary function’ which lets ‘subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance’. (§80) This would later be called the principle of subsidiarity, which on the one hand moderates the power of the State while on the other hand affirming the initiative, freedom, and responsibility of smaller and less powerful elements of society.

Quadragesimo Anno also argued for what would become known as the principle of solidarity, declaring that justice alone can never bring about unity. Rather, ‘only will true cooperation be possible for a single common good when the constituent parts of society deeply feel themselves members of one great family’. (§137)

There is a firm rejection of communist socialism because it places the State above the human person (§113), and a grudging acknowledgment that ‘more moderate socialism’ does not differ greatly from ‘the desires and demands of those who are striving to remould human society on the basis of Christian principles’. (§114) Ultimately, however, it is deemed that a socialism which is only concerned with ‘material advantage alone’ is ‘utterly foreign to Christian faith’. (§§117-118)

There is an equally strong critique of the ‘so-called Manchester liberals’ and the accumulation of property and wealth. (§50) The ‘capitalist economic system’ is castigated as ‘an accumulation of might and power’ because ‘economic dictatorship has supplanted the free market; unbridled ambition for power has likewise succeeded greed for gain; all economic life has become tragically hard, inexorable, and cruel’. (§109) The contemporary economic system is thus found to be ‘laboring under the gravest of evils’. (§128)

Given these judgements on both socialism and capitalism, the Pope can find only one way to respond to the social reform, and that is to train the laity, particularly workers, ‘to subdue firmly but gently the hearts and wills of men to the laws of justice and equity’. (§142) This may seem a Quixotic program, yet, against all expectations, it was triumphant in Poland with the Solidarity movement. It was certainly antagonistic to the worldly powers of the time. As will be shown below, the Second Vatican Council, in its document on the Church in the Modern World, proposed a much more positive engagement with the modern society, because the world, despite its failings, is also the theatre of God’s activity.

1963: COLD WAR AND UNIVERSAL PEACE

In 1963, after the Cuban missile crisis and when the cold war nuclear arms race was at its most dangerous, John XXIII issued *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), which added a new dimension to Catholic Social Teaching. Here the focus is not only on the workings within a State, with critiques of totalitarian governments and disproportionate spending on armaments, but also on the workings between States: ‘Just as individuals may not pursue their own private interests in

a way that is unfair and detrimental to others, so too it would be criminal in a State to aim at improving itself by the use of methods which involve other nations in injury and unjust oppression’. (§92) Exemplifying the evolution of Catholic Social Teaching, the principles of human dignity and the common good are now applied not just to individual nations but to the whole global community.

1965: VATICAN II AND THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD

There is no higher teaching authority in the Church than an Ecumenical Council of Bishops in communion with the Pope.¹⁹ The Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) is therefore a particularly important document in the development of Catholic Social Teaching. It draws on Biblical theology as well as moral philosophy. It stresses the particular concern of the Church for ‘those who are in any way poor and afflicted’. (§1) The world, ‘the theatre of human history,’ is ‘created and sustained by its maker’s love’. (§2) Acknowledging God’s action in the world, ‘the Church herself knows how richly she has profited by the history and development of humanity’. (§44) The Church therefore ‘labours to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires’ among the peoples of the world. (§11) In this document the Church aligns itself with the struggles of the world, rather than against the worldly powers as it did in Quadragesimo Anno.

While attention is first given to core tenets of Catholic Social Teaching, namely the dignity of the human person and the principle of the common good, much is also made of the role of the Church in the modern world. The laity ‘are not only bound to penetrate the world with a Christian spirit, but are also called to be witnesses to Christ in all things in the midst of human society’. (§43) The Council furthers this argument in its ‘Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity’:

The laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation... they must act directly and in a definite way in the temporal sphere... Preeminent among the works of this type of apostolate is that of Christian social action which the sacred synod desires to see extended to the whole temporal sphere... (§7)

1967: FAMINE IN BIAFRA AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Vatican II transformed the Church: it was to be lay as well as clerical; concerned with the world as well as with worship; working for justice as well as offering mercy. The signs of the times were also tumultuous. In postcolonial times many newly emerging nations found themselves caught in wars both with one another and within their own borders. Nigeria had suffered a series of coups and its Biafran tribes were seeking independence. Retribution was harsh and starvation became a weapon of war. In 1967 Pope Paul VI addressed these concerns, presenting *Populorum Progressio*, on the Progress of Peoples. It begins:

The progressive development of peoples is an object

of deep interest and concern to the Church. This is particularly true in the case of those peoples who are trying to escape the ravages of hunger, poverty, endemic disease and ignorance; of those who are seeking a larger share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are consciously striving for fuller growth... the Church judges it her duty to help all people to explore this serious problem in all its dimensions, and to impress upon them the need for concerted action at this critical juncture. (§1)

Pope Paul VI noted the many signs of social unrest (§9) and proposed ‘a new humanism’. (§20) He reiterated the principles of human dignity and the common good, castigated ‘unbridled liberalism’ (§26), and warned of ‘The Obstacles of Nationalism’. (§62) He noted the need for equity in trade relations (§56), the value of international collaboration (§§51-54, 66), the importance of education and development (§56), and called for urgent action.

In particular, the economy is to serve the good of the human person: ‘Genuine progress does not consist in wealth sought for personal comfort or for its own sake; rather it consists in an economic order designed for the welfare of the human person’. (§86) He also dreams of a united human family:

It is also quite natural for nations with a long-standing cultural tradition to be proud of their traditional heritage. But this commendable attitude should be further ennobled by love, a love for the whole family of man. (§62)

1971: LIBERATION, JUSTICE AND TRANSFORMATION

Following the social upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, themes of liberation and justice appeared in Catholic Social Teaching. In May 1971 Pope Paul VI promulgated Octogesima Adveniens to mark the eightieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. He re-iterated the social teachings of his predecessors and accepted the freedom of peoples to choose any form of government ‘provided that proper regard is had for the requirements of justice and of the common good’. (§86) He showed sympathy for some forms of socialism (§§113ff) and urges the laity to participate in the transformation of society:

Christian organizations ... have to express, in their own way and rising above their particular nature, the concrete demands of the Christian faith for a just, and consequently necessary, transformation of society. (§51)

Pope Paul VI notes the special place of the poor in Catholic Social Teaching, because ‘the Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due to the poor’. (§23) This would lead to the enunciation of a further principle of Catholic Social Teaching, the preferential option for the poor.

Later in 1971, between September and November, bishops from all around the world met in Rome as a Synod to reflect on two seemingly divergent topics: the ministerial priesthood and justice in the world. The Synod’s statement on ‘Justice in the World’ marked a watershed in Catholic Social Teaching by moving the focus from teaching to direct action. ‘Scrutinizing

the ‘signs of the times’ and seeking to detect the meaning of emerging history’, (§2) the Synod famously declared that:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation. (§6)²⁰

Further, ‘members of the Church, as members of society, have the same right and duty to promote the common good as do other citizens’. (§38) Developing the teachings of Vatican II, the Church was to deepen its engagement with the world and its struggles.

1981-1991: DEEP LOVE AND CARE FOR HUMAN SOCIETY

Pope John Paul II was elected as Bishop of Rome in 1978. Coming from communist controlled Poland, being a humanist philosopher and the first non-Italian Pope for many centuries, he himself was a sign of the times. He issued three major documents on Catholic Social Teaching: *Laborem Exercens*, ‘On Human Work’ (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, ‘On Social Concerns’ (1987); and *Centesimus Annus*, on the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* and Catholic Social Teaching’ (1991). While he reiterated the principles of the dignity of the human person, the priority of the common good, and the dangers of both socialism and capitalism, in his writings the human person became more alive, and the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity were given greater attention.

In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, reflecting on the Church’s deep love and care for human society, Pope John Paul II declared that solidarity is ‘not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far... it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good’. (§38) He also brought a phrase that had been circulating for several years in Latin American theology – ‘the option or love of preference for the poor’ – into the heart of Catholic Social Teaching.²¹

this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities. To ignore them would mean becoming like the ‘rich man’ who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate (cf. Lk 16:19-31). (§42)

In *Centesimus Annus* Pope John Paul II describes ‘the so-called “preferential option for the poor” ... as a “special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity”’. (§11)

2000-2013: LOVE AND ACTION: PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

In 2005 Pope Benedict XVI presented a meditation on divine love, *Deus Caritas Est*, perhaps to bring the activist's emphasis on justice back to its foundations in Divine love. He argues that 'In addition to justice, humans need, and will always need, love'. (§29) Nonetheless, while the Church's role is primarily to teach 'respect for the rights and needs of everyone, especially the poor, the lowly and the defenceless', (§30) 'it still remains true that charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity... The Church can never be exempted from practising charity as an organized activity of believers'. (§29)

Pope Francis, elected as Bishop of Rome in 2013, presented a more grounded, existential view of God's love as directly entailing action in the world. In 2013, in *Evangelii Gaudium*: 'The Joy of the Gospel', he writes:

From the heart of the Gospel we see the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement... the first proclamation, which invites us to receive God's love and to love him in return with the very love which is his gift, brings forth in our lives and actions a primary and fundamental response: to desire, seek and protect the good of others. (§178)

Francis also notes that Benedict had spoken positively about the option for the poor in an address to South American Bishops in 2007. Both agree that the Church takes the option for the poor only because God has first taken this option for the poor. Francis then develops this theme further, offering a new image of the Church:

This option – as Benedict XVI has taught – 'is implicit in our Christian faith in a God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty'. This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor... this is what makes the authentic option for the poor differ from any other ideology, from any attempt to exploit the poor for one's own personal or political interest. (§§198, 199)

Very much in the spirit of St Vincent de Paul, Pope Francis would later tell his Cardinals: 'The Gospel of the marginalised is where our credibility is at stake...and is revealed... We will not find the Lord unless we truly accept the marginalised!'²² He went on to directly link Vincentian spirituality with a preferential love for the poor and 'the new poor of our time':

Saint Vincent...encourages us to make time and space for the poor, for the new poor of our time, of which there are so many, and to make their worries and troubles our own. A Christianity without contact with those who suffer becomes disembodied, incapable of touching the flesh of Christ. We need instead to encounter the poor, to show preferential love for them, to let their voices be heard, lest their presence be ignored by a frivolous throw-away culture.²³

2015: THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS AND CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME

In 2015 Francis presented his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* on care for our common home, Mother Earth. He notes the teachings of his predecessors linking the 'dysfunctions of the world economy' with a lack of 'respect for the environment'. (§6) He appeals 'for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet' (§14) and notes that his letter has 'added to the body of the Church's social teaching'. (§15) He explores the 'intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected, the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress...'. (§16)

Francis again expresses a particular concern for those 'mired in desperate and degrading poverty' and 'calls into question the unjust habits of a part of humanity'. (§90, 93) He calls for action: 'Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world'. (§231)

2020: SOCIAL FRIENDSHIP AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

Pope Francis' most recent encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) adds a new dimension to Catholic Social Teaching. His focus includes not only social action but also 'social friendship'. He calls not just for teaching, but for transformation, not just for justice, but for solidarity and inclusive community:

Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all. (§8)

He explicitly takes one key principle of Catholic Social Teaching to a new level:

Solidarity...means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money... Solidarity, understood in its most profound meaning, is a way of making history, and this is what popular movements are doing. (§116)

Solidarity is another word for the interconnectedness of the human family, children of the same earth. The Dreaming.

3. The Principles of Catholic Social Teaching Through a Vincentian Lens

Catholic Social Teaching reflects God's view of the world. Just as God's love for the world led to the incarnation of the divine in our world, so also Catholic Social Teaching guides a loving engagement with God's creation. It continues the work of Jesus. It strives to heal divisions and create a whole community. It is driven by, and it unfolds, God's loving compassion.

A comprehensive summary of Catholic Social Teaching can be found in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church.²⁴ It offers an explicit contribution to public policy discussions. Like much public policy, it is in part shaped by social sciences. One way of summarising these contributions is to highlight specific topics:

- a) **On work:** the Church defends the dignity of work and the rights of workers, and asserts the priority of work over capital.
- b) **On private property:** while defending the right to private property, the Church also declares that this right is subordinate to the 'universal destination of goods', meaning that all things in creation are ultimately for the service of all people.
- c) **On economics:** the Church declares that wealth exists to be shared, that economic institutions are to be at the service of humanity, and that economic life should be shaped by moral principles and ethical norms.
- d) **On politics:** political authority must be accountable to the people and must protect both the common good and the rights of individuals and groups.
- e) **On globalisation and development:** national sovereignty is not absolute, and the ordering of the international community must aim at guaranteeing the universal common good.
- f) **On peace:** the Church condemns the savagery of war and proposes that peace is not merely the absence of war, but a universal duty founded on justice and charity.

- g) **On the environment:** care for the environment is a common and universal duty, and ecological problems call for a change of mentality and the adoption of new ways of living.

The foundations of Catholic Social Teaching rest on principles and vision. It may differ from public policy because it is always based on the fundamental values and practices of the Gospel, rather than on a particular ideology or political expediency.

We read in the Gospels that Jesus is moved with loving compassion for the multitudes of people around him (e.g. Mark 6:34, 8:2; Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32). The Greek word used here, *splagchnizomai*, literally means to be moved in one's bowels, in one's guts, in one's womb. It connotes profound compassion.

The guts of Catholic Social Teaching is the guts of the Gospel: an unconditional compassionate love for the afflicted and marginalised in our society; a love that extends to accompaniment; a love that heals and unites. When Jesus heals people, he also returns them into their family or restores them to their place in society. This ministry of Jesus of inclusion, restoration and accompaniment hold guiding principles for our Vincentian service to those we serve.

Compassionate love embraces the individual person and, at the same time, transforms division into unity. As Frederic Ozanam had put it, in a letter of 1834, 'I believe in authority as a means, and liberty as a means, and in love as the end'. It is only in this mystical context of God's compassionate love that the principles of Catholic Social Teaching can be fully comprehended:

- a) The dignity of the human person: 'the social order...must invariably work to the benefit of the human person...and not the other way around' (*Gaudium et Spes*, §26)
- b) The common good: 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily'

(*Gaudium et Spes*, §26). It includes the ‘universal right to use the goods of the earth’ and ‘care for our common home’ (Compendium, §187).

- c) Subsidiarity: ‘protects people from abuses by higher-level social authority and calls on these same authorities to help individuals and intermediate groups to fulfil their duties...because every person, family and intermediate group has something original to offer to the community’ (Compendium, §172, *Laudato Si’*, §15).
- d) Solidarity: ‘highlights...the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights...and the interdependence between individuals and peoples... The acceleration of interdependence between persons and peoples needs to be accompanied by...intense effort on the ethical-social plane’ (Compendium, §192).
- e) The Preferential Option for the Poor: ‘the poor, the marginalised and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern’ (Compendium, §182).
- f) Care for our Common Home: ‘The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development... a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet’ (*Laudato Si’*, §§13, 14).

Related to these principles, finally, is Pope Francis’s prescription for a way of proceeding which, rather than being antagonistic, chooses to create dialogue: ‘each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all’ (*Fratelli Tutti*, §8).

These six principles will be explored below through the lens of Vincentian spirituality and with an eye on their possible applications in today’s social context.

THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON: FREEDOM TO BE

The inviolable dignity of the human person, independent of race, creed, gender, sexuality, age or ability, is the foundation of Catholic Social Teaching. ‘The social order...must invariably work to the benefit of the human person...and not the other way around’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, §26). No human being can be ‘used’ in such a way that their own dignity and freedom are compromised.

To counter the exploitation of workers and the destitution of the poor, the Church argued for the intrinsic dignity and worth of every human person on both theological and philosophical grounds.

Theologically, every person has dignity because every person is created in the image of God. Further, every person is precious to, and saved by, Jesus. Every person, no matter how wounded, is therefore to be revered as a sacrament of God’s love. God is ecstatically in love with every person, no matter how flawed, no matter how rich or how poor. Especially in the destitute poor, we find the sacred presence of God.

Philosophically, the human person is not seen as a two-piece assemblage, not half body and half soul, but as a single entity, an embodied spirit. The human person is seen as being of unique and irreplaceable value because she or he is infinitely open to infinite love, open to the transcendent. The human person is primarily a ‘subject’ open to the transcendent rather than a limited material ‘object’. In other words, the person is more an ‘I’ who can love and be loved rather than an ‘it’ that can be exploited or discarded. A person is important because of who she or he is rather than because of what she or he produces. Relationships are more important than material possessions. Spiritual well-being is ultimately more important than physical well-being, though both go together

The principle of the dignity of the human person also stands for freedom. Persons should have the freedom to ‘be’ and to ‘become’ and society is the place in which human beings come to fulfilment. Persons therefore have equal dignity and equal rights. From the outset, and following the way of Jesus, Catholic Social Teaching insists on what might be called the ‘radical equality’ of all human persons before God.

Although human rights are not identified as a fundamental principle of Catholic Social Teaching, the language of rights has been prominent in the assertion of the rights of workers to a just wage and the defence of the right of every person to life. In 2008 Pope Benedict XVI thus addressed the United Nations: ‘The promotion of human rights remains the most effective strategy for eliminating inequalities between countries and social groups, and for increasing security’. Whereas some individuals may be primarily concerned with their own rights, the Church is primarily concerned with the rights of others.

The Church does not see rights as absolutes, however, and insists on the complementarity of rights and duties, seeing them as indissolubly linked in the human person who possesses them. For this reason, the Church’s primary focus is on the human person and the common good, rather than on human rights. The rights and freedoms of persons are related to, and moderated by, the principle of the common good.

How is this principle of the dignity of the human person to be applied today?

As in any age, the dignity of the human person first demands actively accompanying people who have been pushed to the margins of society and relating to them as subjects rather than treating them as objects of compassion. It does not encourage individualism, but it means celebrating every individual person because God is ecstatically in love with every individual person.

Secondly, and particularly in our time, it may mean caring for both spiritual and material needs. It may mean challenging the consumerism and individualism of our society with its focus on possessions, self-image, and self-worth. It will certainly mean advocating for changes in public conversations and policy debates so that we can provide greater care for and appreciation of our neighbour, particularly the destitute, discarded, difficult, estranged, awkward, alienated and abandoned.

This principle is foundational in all that the Society does. Inspired by the example of St Vincent de Paul, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, Sr Rosalie Rendu and St Louise de Marillac, we see the face of Christ in the people that we serve. This value also recognises that in serving others there is mutuality and that we receive much from our companions. Vincentians put this principle into action everyday as we serve people in need through our conferences, special works and youth programs.

THE COMMON GOOD: WE ARE MORE CONNECTED THAN SEPARATE

The principle of the common good means that every person and all peoples should have sufficient access to the goods and resources of society so that they can reach their fulfilment more completely and more easily. These ‘goods’ include not only material goods like property and possessions, but also social resources like education and health care. The common good is: ‘the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily’ (Gaudium et Spes, §26) and includes the universal right to use the goods of the earth.

The principle of human dignity and the principle of the common good complement each other. One protects the individuality of every person, the other insists on the equality and interdependence of persons. Human dignity only has meaning within the relationships of human community, and everyone in society has a responsibility to contribute to the common good.

The principle of the common good rests on both anthropological and theological arguments. Anthropologically, human beings are social beings, and society flourishes when goods are shared among all. People achieve fulfilment in relationship to each other and to their environment. Theologically, in Christian faith, we are called to love our neighbour as ourselves so that our community might reflect and share in the divine community of the Holy Trinity. It stands for interdependence and the realisation that we are more connected with one another than we are separate from one another.

The principle of the common good determines how we arrange our society in culture, law, and economy, and is closely aligned with action for social justice. Catholic Social Teaching is radical in its insistence that people are more important than material goods. The principle of the common good that sees the disadvantaged and dispossessed as having particular claims on community resources while at the same time, unlike radical socialism, recognising rights to private property and possessions.

The Church’s teaching on the common good both anticipates and supports current public policy discussions for the improvement of economic and political institutions. For example, Michael Sandel, long time Professor of Government at Harvard University, argues: ‘the better kind of politics we need is a politics oriented less to the pursuit of individual self-interest and more to the pursuit of the common good’.²⁵

How is this principle of the common good to be applied today?

In any age, the principle of the common good means accompanying people and relating to them as subjects, rather than treating them as objects of pity. It does not encourage individualism, but it means celebrating every individual person because God is ecstatically in love with every individual person. Secondly, in our time it may mean caring for both spiritual and material needs.

This principle recognises that the good of all is dependent on the good of each one. In our work to help our companions in need we are working to build up a good society for all of us. Our work for justice and advocacy is underpinned by this value as we not only care for people who are experiencing poverty and disadvantage but we speak up to try and change the situations which have caused this disadvantage. A strength of our conference system is that local people work to help people in their own local area and thus to build a better society for all.

SUBSIDIARITY: PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Subsidiarity ‘protects people from abuses by higher-level social authority and calls on these same authorities to help individuals and intermediate groups to fulfil their duties... because every person, family and intermediate group has something original to offer to the community’ (Compendium, §172, *Laudato Si’*, §15). The family is seen as the natural community in which human social nature is experienced. It makes an irreplaceable contribution to the good of society, because within the family the person is always at the centre as an ‘end’ and never as a ‘means’.

The family is also a microcosm of society. In *Centesimus Annus* Pope John Paul II reminds us that ‘the family and society are prior to the State, and inasmuch as the State exists in order to protect their rights and not stifle them’. (§11)

The principle of subsidiarity protects the dignity of the human person. It recognises that civil society consists of a network of institutions and associations, and it respects the appropriate autonomy and authority of such bodies. In today’s terminology, it stands for plurality, participation, and empowerment. Participation in community life is seen as one

of the greatest aspirations of the citizen, called to exercise freely and responsibly their civic role with and for others (see *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §§44-45). All people, therefore, have the right and responsibility to participate in political processes.

States should therefore promote and develop the social groups and networks that make up society. Likewise, States should neither interfere in nor restrict the initiative and responsibilities of smaller elements of society. At the same time, the principle of the common good moderates the rights of any sub-elements of society that might harm the good order of the wider community.

While the principle of subsidiarity opposes totalitarian and centralised governments and encourages the delegation of authority and resources to appropriate levels in society, it also recognises that in some circumstances it is appropriate for the State to step in to supply certain functions. When needs cannot be met at a lower level, it is appropriate that higher levels of government have the capacity to respond.

How is this principle of subsidiarity to be applied today?

Internally, the National Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society might consider how it will continue to promote and develop its local conferences, continue to listen to its members, and continue to provide leadership and moderation for the good of all its members and the peoples it serves.

Externally, the Society might focus its advocacy on supporting those elements of society in communities that have been disempowered, or whose voices have been silenced. It is to rejoice not in uniformity, but in the manifold variety and beauty of all God's people and all God's creation.

Subsidiarity is at work in the Conference structure which says that the conference is closest to the person in need and is best placed to make the decision about how to help. The structure of councils, from regional councils up to national council, is also putting this principle into practice. The Rule tells us that 'Councils exist to serve all the Conferences they coordinate'. The principles of participation and empowerment are also put into practice each day as we work with people to help them find solutions to their problems.

SOLIDARITY: INTENSE EFFORT ON THE ETHICAL-SOCIAL PLANE

Just as the principle of the common good complements the principle of the dignity of the human person, so also the principle of solidarity complements the principle of subsidiarity. The human person should neither be 'independent' of society nor 'dependent' on society. Rather, society should reflect and strengthen the interdependence of all persons, the dream of being one human family. The principle of solidarity is therefore concerned with our social and economic arrangements, particularly the poor and afflicted.

Solidarity, as Pope John Paul II writes *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, is 'not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far'. Instead, 'it is a firm and persevering determination to commit

oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all'. It is an authentic 'commitment to the good of one's neighbour with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to "lose oneself" for the sake of the other'. (§38) The principle of solidarity calls for 'intense effort on the ethical-social plane'. (Compendium, §192)

Theologically, the principle of solidarity is traced back to the Gospel of Jesus and the command to love our neighbour as our self. Solidarity recognises not only the growing interdependence between individuals and nations, and not only that every member of society is a human person, but also calls for love and action in the care of our neighbour. In accompanying the poor, it entails embracing our own poverty and becoming poor.

Philosophically, while the principle of solidarity reflects the social nature of the human person, it takes this reality to a further level. It explores the idea that as members of society we are indebted to society: we owe something back to the society that has nurtured us and surrounded us with culture, education, health care, infrastructure, and other goods. Ultimately, solidarity takes us into the mysticism of the profound unity of all beings, the many being one, and hence calling for a self-sacrificing love for one another, whether friend or stranger.

Solidarity means more than being nice to one another, it means going beyond the safe small worlds of tribalism and sectarianism. Echoing Vincentian spirituality, Charles Taylor remarks that the Gospel 'creates links across boundaries, on the basis of a mutual fittingness which is not based on kinship but on the kind of love which God has for us' so that we find something 'of the communion...which is at the heart of the Eucharist'.²⁶ As St Vincent de Paul taught, we find the real presence of Christ among the poor. Frank Brassil explains, 'We see Christ present in the poor and, because Christ present in the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith, we see the poor in a eucharistic way. To see Christ, we visit the poor. To serve Christ, we serve the poor. To love Christ, we love the poor.'²⁷

How is this principle of solidarity to be applied today?

To begin with, the principle of solidarity means accompanying and standing with the poor and afflicted even across national, religious, racial, and ideological boundaries. It means that wealth in a society belongs more to the whole of society than it does to individuals. Further, it means identifying and addressing social and economic factors that cause or continue their marginalisation from national and global society. Finally, it means restoring the dignity of the poor and empowering them to participate in society through cultural, economic, and political processes.

THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR: TO TOUCH THE FLESH OF CHRIST

The four founding principles of Catholic Social Teaching – the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity – have been sharpened by the development of the principle of the preferential option for the poor. Some sharpen it even further, and make the principle even more Vincentian, by speaking of the ‘primacy of charity’ and hence of preferential love for the poor. The Compendium of Catholic Social Doctrine thus says of the option for the poor, ‘This is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church appears witness. It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ...’. (§182)

This statement then continues with a declaration about our consequent social responsibilities and offers an answer to the question ‘who are the poor?’:

[the option for the poor] applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logistical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods. Today, furthermore, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this level of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope for a better future. (§182)

The option for the poor is therefore an act of love which includes all forms of poverty that undermine human flourishing and deny human dignity. It particularly embraces ‘the hungry, the needy, the homeless’. In this context, we should include forms of human poverty such as spiritual poverty, whilst at the same time never losing focus on the way that material poverty often presents as the most serious threat to human dignity.

Philosophically, a case for the preferential option for the poor can be developed out of John Rawls’ Theory of Justice. Rawls argues that if we did not know where we were to stand in our society, we would choose for an equal and fair distribution of goods. It follows that where there are inequalities in economic or social structures, then those who are disadvantaged should be given special support and, secondly, social structures should be reconfigured so that the goods of society are equally available to all.²⁸

Theologically, the option for the poor is not one option among many that hold equal weight: it is the option that we must take if we seek to both imitate the life of Christ and respond to the face of Christ in those we serve. The service of the poor ultimately entails joining the poor in solidarity. Pope Francis, again endorsing Vincentian spirituality, sums up the costs and rewards of choosing to serve the poor:

We are called to be poor, to strip us of ourselves, and to do this we must learn how to be with the poor, to share with those who lack basic necessities, to touch the flesh of Christ! The Christian is not one who speaks about the poor. No! [The Christian] is one who encounters them, who looks them in the eye, who touches them...²⁹

How is this principle of the preferential option for the poor to be applied today?

It is said that the moral measure of a society is how it treats its most marginalised members, and so the poor should have pole position in the consciousness of the nation. An unjust society favours individualism and competition rather than community and fairness. Creating a healthy society calls for witness, accompaniment, advocacy, and action. The greater the inequality, the more a society should place its goods at the service of the poor. The most disadvantaged people in our community may sometimes be the most distressed and confronting, but they should always be a priority, not only for the health of society, but also because they are also the beloved poor of Christ. We should make a special effort to accompany them and change the social structures that have marginalised them.

This principle underpins the whole reason the Society exists. It drives our work for the people who are most vulnerable in our society. As the Rule says ‘No work of charity is foreign to the Society. It includes any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation and promotes human dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions’. (The Rule, p.16)

CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME: DREAMING AS A SINGLE HUMAN FAMILY

Laudato Si' is a game changer. Pope Francis explicitly states that his encyclical letter is 'now added to the Church's social teaching'. (§15) He places concern for the poor in a global context. Francis's focus is on disadvantaged individuals and peoples, but it is also and equally on the plight of the global community and the whole planet. He understands that these concerns are interlocked. They are not several concerns but a single concern. We thus need to 'acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face'. (§15)

While Francis advocates for those 'mired in desperate and degrading poverty' and 'calls into question the unjust habits of a part of humanity', (§§90, 93) he also declares that 'The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development... a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet'. (§§13, 14) He advances 'some broader proposals for dialogue and action' (§15) and calls for 'other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology...'. (§16)

Scientifically and ethically, there is a consensus that as individuals and communities we need to change our ways in order to save the future of life on our planet. Politically, there is a failure of bipartisan leadership and a fear of offending the rich and powerful. As Charles Taylor has argued, in contemporary secular society individuals focus more on their own material possessions and security than they do on spiritual or communal values. They prefer the actualities of a limited, buffered safe individual life to the dream of a richer, connected, and integrated social life.³⁰

Theologically, Francis develops God's vision for creation and the value of the flora and fauna and hills and rivers that make up our planet. These are for humans to care for and delight in, but they are not for exploitation. This is because, and here he extends Vincentian spirituality:

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things. (§233)

In *Fratelli Tutti* Francis continues this theme of God's presence in all things, and then presents a vision for a single human family in which divisions and illusions are done away with, and we learn to dream together:

Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together. Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all. (§8)

In the Australian context, dreaming has a profound mystical meaning. For the Arrernte speaking people of Central Australia, the word *Altyerre* (which has been translated as 'The Dreaming') has layer after layer of connected meaning: the living creation infused with spirit, the circular pattern of relationships, the sacredness of the entire world. As Michael Bowden put it, 'Altyerre binds Arrente irrevocably to each other and to the very stuff of the universe, all sacred'.³¹ This kind of dreaming is not being out of touch with reality. It is being united with the heart of reality. We are part of a single human family with a common home that unfolds in God.

How is this principle of care for our common home to be applied today?

Practically, this principle of care for our common home applies to hopes and dreams and ways of working together. It equally applies to services and advocacy. It is a vision that inspires action: to cross borders, to build friendships, to value difference, to identify deeper communion, to celebrate rather than possess, to nurture rather than exploit, to be centred on our sister and brother rather than on our self. It also holds us accountable, because of 'the urgency of the challenge'.



Conclusion: The Heart of the Mission of Christ

The Church exists to continue the work and mission of Jesus Christ. The heart of this work is neither temple nor palace, neither ritual nor regulation. The heart of the mission is Jesus, who is to be found in loving accompaniment of the poor. As Pope Francis put it, ‘The Gospel of the marginalised is where our credibility is at stake...and is revealed. We will not find the Lord unless we truly accept the marginalised!’³² This Vincentian insistence also shapes a vision for the future of the Church. Pope Francis again:

What should the Church [and her ministries] strip herself of? She must strip away every kind of worldly spirit... strip away every action that is not for God, that is not from God; strip away the fear of opening the doors and going out to encounter all, especially the poorest of the poor, the needy, the isolated, without waiting... To strip away what is not essential, because our reference is Christ; the Church [and her ministries] is Christ’s!³³

In the formal canonical structures of the Catholic Church, the St Vincent de Paul Society has an uncertain marginal status.³⁴ In the ministry of the Church, however, it is at the heart of the mission of Christ. In the renewal of the Church, it both anticipates and exemplifies the vision of Vatican II for the Church’s engagement with the world, action for justice, active laity, and becoming a poor Church for the poor.

Today Pope Francis is calling the Church to become a synodal Church in communion, participation, and mission.³⁵ In the Gospel, when Jesus gets lost in Jerusalem and the family is travelling with kinfolk in a caravan, the Greek word translated as ‘caravan’ is *synodia* (Luke 2:44). A synodal church is somewhat messy, but the people stick together and travel together. Their shared purpose and destination guide them. The word ‘synod’ is related to the word ‘method’ but has a different focus. Method is focussed on efficiency and order. Everything is prescribed in writing, like a recipe. Synod, on the other hand, is guided by something much deeper, a shared Spirit. Synodality does not mean being disorganised, but it respects unity in difference and the voice of every person. Synodality is another word for solidarity and subsidiarity.

The St Vincent de Paul Society, in continuing Ozanam’s thought and embodying Catholic Social Teaching, reflects subsidiarity in the way Conferences are empowered to respond to the needs in their local community in ways that are most appropriate for their circumstances. It practices solidarity not only in accompanying and serving the poor, but also in doing this as companions with one another.

Just as the lay members of the St Vincent de Paul Society draw nourishment and sustenance from the sacraments and teachings of the Church, so also the ordained leaders of the Church should draw on the experience of the Society in ‘opening the doors and going out to encounter all, especially the poorest of the poor’, as Pope Francis demands.

Without authenticity, the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church loses its authority. Without vision, the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church loses inspiration and energy. For the St Vincent de Paul Society, authority and vision must ultimately be drawn from Jesus Christ. Authenticity and energy come from committed and loving accompaniment of the poor and afflicted, our neighbour and our planet.

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It includes a detailed Table of Contents and a comprehensive index, both cross linked to the actual text. Since the *Compendium* was published further key documents on Catholic Social Teaching have been promulgated, notably:

Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love, 2005) and *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), 2009. He echoes the Vincentian dictum that, to be effective, love needs to be organised, “an ordered service to the community” (*Deus Caritas Est*, §20).

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Endnotes

- 1 See Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Rome: 2020), §8, and Michael Bowden, *Unbreakable Rock: Exploring the Mystery of Altyerre* (Churchill Victoria: Alella Books, 2020).
- 2 Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, §137, Frederic Ozanam, from a letter to Léonce Curnier written in 1837.
- 3 See Mark 3:31, John 14:23, 15:4.
- 4 Homily of St Pope John Paul II during the Beatification of Frederic Ozanam, Notre-Dame de Paris, Friday, 22 August 1997.
- 5 See John Honner, *Love and Politics: The Revolutionary Frederic Ozanam* (David Lovell: Melbourne, 2007), pp.75ff.
- 6 For further details on Ozanam's attitude to politics, see Raymond L. Sickinger, *Antoine Frédéric Ozanam* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), pp.143-174. The quotes are from a letter to Léonce Curnier.
- 7 Letter to François Lallier, 1838. See Honner, *Love and Politics*, pp.27-29.
- 8 These quotes are from an article Ozanam wrote in February 1848, a few weeks before the collapse of the monarchy and first of the 1848 revolutions. His stance had political ramifications. Ozanam was accused of socialism and communism, and 1852 the St Vincent de Paul Society was banned in Tuscany for its progressive tendencies.
- 9 Louis Baunard, *Ozanam in his Correspondence*. (Australia: Society of St Vincent de Paul, 1925), p.269.
- 10 Sickinger, *Ozanam*, p.275.
- 11 See Honner, *Love and Politics*, pp.63-80.
- 12 See Sickinger, *Ozanam*, p.212.
- 13 See Sickinger, *Ozanam*, pp.212-213.
- 14 See Honner, *Love and Politics*, pp.29-30.
- 15 See John Honner, *Holy Humanity: The Legacy of Louise de Marillac* (Melbourne: David Lovell, 2010).
- 16 See Tim McHugh, *Hospital Politics in Seventeenth-Century France* (London: Ashgate, 2007).
- 17 Benedict XVI, "Church Membership and Pastoral Co-Responsibility" (Rome: 2009).
- 18 "*Rerum Novarum*" means literally "on New Things" but figuratively it means something like "On revolutionary change". The quotes are from *Rerum Novarum*, §§1, 3. Read the full text on-line at http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html The opening paragraphs are as relevant today as they were in 1891. "*Rerum Novarum*" means something like "On revolutionary change".
- 19 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §891.
- 20 The text of this document, perhaps because it was seen to support liberation theology, is not easy to find on the Vatican website. It can be read at <https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Justicia-in-Mundo.pdf>
- 21 This translation of the Latin (*optionem pauperum et amorem potioem erga eos*) has been modified to "preferential option for the poor". It directs us, in our choices of policies and actions, to place love for the poor ahead of all other options. The phrase "option for the poor" was perhaps first made prominent by Fr Pedro Arrupe, Superior General of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1968.
- 22 Pope Francis, address to Cardinals, 14 February 2015.
- 23 Message to the Vincentian Family, Rome, 2017. See https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170927_messaggio-famiglia-vincenziana.html
- 24 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Rome: 2004).
- 25 Michael Sandel, 2009 Reith Lectures, "A New Citizenship: The Prospect of a New Politics for the Common Good", available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/boolb6bt>. Sandel wants "to think about whether we need to foster deeper moral and spiritual values in our public life."
- 26 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Harvard, 2007), p.739.
- 27 Frank Brassil, "Being Vincentian", *The Record* (July 2019).
- 28 See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice (Revised Edition)*. (Cambridge MA: Belknap Harvard, 1999).
- 29 Pope Francis, *Meeting of the poor assisted by Caritas, Assisi, October 4, 2013*, in *The Works of Mercy*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017), pp.51-53. [Parenthesis added].
- 30 See Taylor, *A Secular Age*.
- 31 Michael Bowden, *Unbreakable Rock: Exploring the Mystery of Altyerre* (Churchill Victoria: Alella Books, 2020), p.79.
- 32 Pope Francis, address to Cardinals, 14 February 2015. See also Pope Francis' encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium*, and his statement of the Church's special concern for the "excluded and marginalised" in society. §§53, 60.
- 33 Pope Francis, Meeting of the poor assisted by Caritas, Assisi, 4 October 2013, in *The Works of Mercy*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017), pp. 51-53. [Parenthesis added].
- 34 See Alberto Vernaschi, "Vincentian Family Associations: Juridical and Canonical Dimensions" (2002) at https://famvin.org/wiki/Vincentian_Family_Associations:_Juridical_and_Canonical_Dimensions
- 35 Pope Francis, Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 7 September 2021, §1.



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NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc.

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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA, PO BOX 243, DEAKIN WEST, ACT 2600.
WWW.VINNIES.ORG.AU