

St Vincent de Paul and Parish Ministry

Introduction

A word of warning

- Unfortunately I have not had a great deal of time to prepare this
 - o And I heard this morning that I have even changed to topic from Vincent and his Parish Ministry to Vincent and Parish Ministry
 - o So I apologise for any difficulties you might experience
 - Hopefully you may gain something from what we do and from your contribution to the conversation about Parish Ministry
- This is not a talk but a workshop

A Starting point

I am very aware that here in this room we have a vast collection of knowledge and experience as Vincentians and as Ministers of the Gospel

- It is imperative that we draw on this wealth of knowledge and experience in order to gain a clearer understanding of what it is we are on about

To begin our reflection we need to identify Parish ministry and what it actually is

- So I pose a couple of questions to have a few minutes reflection
 - o What do you do in Parish ministry?
 - You may make a list of things or you might just like to stick to categories
 - o Now, what focus do you work out of when you are engaged in this ministry?
 - This is the thing that is the deep underlying thing you try to do or be as you go about ministry in the Parish

Understanding Vincent

Now, using your own reflections

- name what you think Vincent de Paul did in Parish Ministry in the 17th Century?
 - o A list would be good
- And his focus?
 - o Ministry or self

If we are honest, we can see two trends emerging

- Vincent's expected ministry...Mass/Sacraments. Sermons, Visiting, organising things/people, and all the usual stuff that happens in the Parish
 - o This is the ministry element of his experience
 - Written about in all the biographies...Mezzadri, Roman, Abelly etc
- We also see Vincent getting into financing, accumulating wealth and generally ignoring ministry stuff that needed to be done
 - o This is the self part of his experience

- Therefore, conflict happened!
 - His early tendency of securing benefices was an indication of his time that a good many clerics were not interested in anything other than the minimum in order to get paid or getting a lot without doing anything!
 - this was a long established cultural reality for the Church in Europe, especially in 17th century France.

No let's jump forward several years in Vincent's life

- His early experiences at Clichy and Chatillon began a change in Vincent
 - These parish assignments were transformative experiences for Vincent
 - Clichy...a positive experience of ordinary ministry
 - Probably doing all the things that we listed above
 - Chatillon...another positive experience but this time of being a minister of the Gospel
 - Not a great deal is known, some reflections by Vincent himself, except that his ordinary ministry did not receive a positive response from the people in the beginning
 - Confronted with the apathy of the "parishioners" to the poor and the diseased, he was spurred into action
 - The results were
 - He, himself, got more involved in the ordinary lives of people
 - He conscripted others to assist...the Ladies of Charity
 - Now he became a minister of the Gospel in the Parish
 - Empowering others to realise their ministry to evangelise and build up the Body of Christ
 - I would suggest that Vincent experienced a change in his life here as, in the words of Fr Franz, Vincent began to understand the "Parish as a life-giving community, which engages and evangelizes the whole person"

Question Time

Grounding Vincent's experience in Scripture

We need to take the statement "Parish as a life-giving community, which engages and evangelizes the whole person," and place it in its origins

- From our Gospel studies, we know that Jesus gave his disciples TWO clear commandments
 - Which were.....
 - prior to the Passion/Death/Resurrection
 - The commandment of love (Mt 22:37-39)
 - After the Resurrection, he added:-
 - Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19)

- We might like to call these commandments the Mission statement of the Church
 - Live in love with God and others!
 - Make disciples! Evangelize!

“For Jesus, evangelization was his commitment to bring the Good News of God’s Kingdom to everyone” (Rebuilt p 39)

- Including some unlikely people...the poor, the outcast, the hookers, the sinners
 - For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost (Lk19:10)
 - “evangelization is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.” Evangelii Nuntiandi

Parish Ministry is defined by Paul in his writings to the early Church as:

- To build up the Body of Christ and to proclaim the Gospel
 - Building up the Body of Christ
 - = looking after the disciples...spiritually and communally nourishing them to get them to the point where they can fulfil the second aspect
 - Proclaiming the Gospel
 - = the disciples GOING OUT to those who are lost

In today’s world, that means....

- the consumer (the Sunday) Catholic...those who use the Church according to what they want and without any concern to grow to the point where they can proclaim the Gospel
- the person for whom God is not relevant or needed
- the ones whom the Church is not ministering or reluctant to minister
- the ones who have never heard of God or Christ

this mirrors the Vincentian Missionary Parish model!

- the HOW TO DO THIS is by spiritually and communally nourishing the lost to the point where they can become disciples who then move out to evangelize
 - and so the never ending circle continues

The Vincentian Parish

However, we are confronted with a somewhat confused situation in modern Parish ministry:

- as ministers we tend to focus on who comes to the Parish – for Mass, the Sacraments, prayer/spirituality – and we address the needs of those people RATHER than enabling the people of the Parish, through nourishment, to move out to proclaim the Gospel to the lost

this was a confusion felt by Vincent de Paul and his experience at Gannes, and consequently at Folleville, was a turning point in his understanding of Parish ministry

- the missionaries were to draw people back into the Church, to provide for their growth and disciples, to reconnect people with God
- the Missioner was to seek the lost and reconnect them with God and the Church

- many a time Vincent referred to the Missioner as being a avenue to experiencing God anew
 - “Our Lord is asking of us not only to seek first of all the Kingdom of God and his justice but in addition we should desire and see that the Kingdom of God is brought and extended everywhere, that God reigns in all souls” SV XII, 116

In the modern Vincentian Parish, we might experience confusion as to whether we:-

- a) Address the needs of the people before us, sustaining what is there OR
- b) Go out to seek the Lost...The Zaccheus story, we heard yesterday at Mass

- I do not think these are mutually exclusive unless we neglect one in favour of the other

As good Vincentians, we would always say, wouldn't we, that we always seek the lost.

- In reality, that might be so
 - But we need to identify the reality – what each of us actually does in ministry to and with others

Reflection time

Let's take a few minutes to identify the elements of ministry that are sustaining to the community in which we work and those that are evangelizing of the community we minister in

Vincent's reality

Even though he eventually accepted at least seven parishes in France and one in Warsaw...he did not want parishes to become the Congregation's main ministry (The Vincentians Vol 1, p217)

Over the course of history, Vincentian Parishes usually were associated with other works

- Seminaries: to assist in the formation of clerics
- Chaplaincies: to allow missioners to focus on specific populations, i.e. galleys slaves and the Huguenots

Criteria for accepting Parishes (Vincentians Vol 1, p230f)

We must remember that parishes were part of the CM right from the beginning

- CM parishes existed in France and Poland but not in Italy (the diocesan clergy had parishes)

Here are the criteria for accepting Parishes

1. CM only accepted parishes that were united with seminaries
2. There had to be enough missioners to staff the parish
3. Location was to be in a small, not large, city
4. Prospective parishes must have an “evangelizing” function

Now if we look at the succeeding Superior General's attitude, then Parish ministry is seen in context of

- a) requests to take over the Royal Parishes and/or
- b) to accept the parish only when there is an opportunity to evangelize specific groups of people

A further development occurred under the leadership of Almeras and Jolly that popular missions, confessions, et al took on a more permanent nature in a parish ministry

- But that is another stage of the development of ministry for another time and place.