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Dennis H. Holtschneider CM.

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The Heart of Vincentian Higher Education

Author:

Dennis H. Holtschneider, CM.

St. John's University Annual Vincentian Convocation, September 22, 2016

Thank you for your great kindness. It means a great deal to me to be here at St. John's University, where I began my university service twenty-seven years ago. Yes, twenty-seven years ago! I'll say more about St. John's in a moment. First, though, permit me to tell you about a small moment in the life of St. Vincent de Paul.

In 1656, St. Vincent held one of his periodic meetings with the leadership of the Daughters of Charity. St. Louise was there of course and so were "three or four" other sisters, presumably her Council.¹ Such meetings typically had several agenda items – often particularly complex matters that required Vincent's knowledge, connections or simply his advice to sort through. The agenda for these meetings was generally brought by St. Louise and her sisters, to which Vincent reacted, sometimes confirming the sisters' own thoughts and decisions on the matter, but sometimes disagreeing and recommending harder decisions than the sisters were at first inclined to take – particularly when it came to dismissing certain Daughters from membership in the Company. Time and time again, Vincent would recommend removal of sisters from the Company, when the sisters were inclined to keep giving their sisters more chances to change. This day, however, those roles would reverse.

At this particular meeting of August 13th, there was only one item and it appears that St. Vincent himself had called the meeting. They gathered in the parlor of Saint Lazare, the great Vincentian headquarters, and he looked squarely at the Sister in charge of the Foundlings and asked "if she would soon be able to present some of the older girls from that house to become Daughters of Charity." It was a shocking question, for these were "foundlings," that is, children who had once been abandoned as infants and often "found" on the church steps, assumed to have been born out of wedlock – no small matter in 17th century France. They were the

"wages of sin," the walking embodiment of their parents' scandal, carrying for the rest of their lives a social stigma beyond our own century's understanding.

The sister to whom Vincent posed the question admitted that the girls were of sufficient age, but warned that permitting them to enter the Daughters of Charity "might cause pain to our Sisters, and could lead people to conclude that all the Daughters of Charity were foundlings."

Vincent was roughly seventy-six years old the day of this meeting and that Daughter's response was a reaction he had faced all his life. The earliest Ladies of Charity could not bear their charity being used for these infants. Vincent repeatedly had to encourage and teach his Daughters to see these infants as the very children of God.² But this meeting on August 13th, 1656 pushed the question to a level that even the sister in charge of the work with the foundlings found disconcerting.

In such meetings, it was Vincent's general practice to linger over each matter-at-hand, drawing out the pros and cons of each decision before settling on a course of action. Not infrequently, he might defer the matter to another day altogether, hoping that prayer and time would bring more insight. But not this day. Vincent's response to the sister was so startlingly brief and immediate as to signal the conversation's end. He simply recalled Saint Peter's vision recorded in the Book of Acts, Chapter 10, where St. Peter saw all sorts of culturally forbidden meats presented to him, and heard the Lord's voice to say "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." Peter, of course, understood that vision to signal God's love and unconditional acceptance of those outside the Jewish tradition. For Vincent, the story also settled this matter. "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Author Information

Dennis H. Holtschneider, CM. is the president of DePaul University in Chicago, United States. He was chosen by the Board of Trustees as the university's president in spring 2004 and took office in July 2004.

¹ *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Marie Poole, DC and Evelyne Franc, DC, et al, "Council of August 13, 1656," (New York: New City Press, 1985) 13b:353. [Hereafter cited as CCD] cf. CCD, "Conference of February 2, 1653," 9:463. Thanks to Rev. John Rybolt, CM for drawing my attention to the minutes of the Daughters of Charity's councils and to Sisters Evelyne Franc, DC and Marie Poole DC, as

well as Revs. Patrick Griffin, CM, Robert Maloney, CM, and Edward Udovic, CM for their insights on St. Vincent's work with the foundlings.

² e.g., CCD, "Conference of December 7, 1643," 9:104-115.

No one else is recorded to have spoken at that meeting, and it appears that the meeting was concluded in short order. Vincent merely gave them permission to implement this quietly and confidentially, and the minutes end there. And so does the historical record. We don't actually know if foundlings became Daughters of Charity thereafter. What we do know for certain is Saint Vincent's mind on the matter. And it's that mind that forms a key part of the work that all of us have done in his name ever since.

I've been asked on various occasions what St. Vincent would think if he were to come back today and see universities run by his priests and brothers. My answer is that I think he would be quite surprised. It's not that Vincent was anti-intellectual or thought ill of universities. He personally sought extensive higher education and held multiple degrees. No, St. Vincent's surprise would come from the vastly changed role of universities in society since his time. In his day, universities were not required or even able to achieve his ends for the poor. What Vincent *would* recognize, I think, is the continuation of the insight he had that day for his precious foundlings.

As those abandoned children grew from infants toward adulthood, St. Vincent saw stifled possibility, but possibility all the same. He saw a future for them beyond their present circumstances and socially-imposed limitations. That day, August 13th, he opened one more career path for the young women among them – the possibility of joining the Daughters of Charity – but he had been doing that all his life. With the Daughters and Ladies of Charity's assistance, he trained foundlings to read. He trained them in job skills. He arranged for them to be apprenticed or to be placed as servants. He didn't just find nurses for infant foundlings, he saw that they were raised and educated and that a path was created for them. It's no accident that so many statues picture St. Vincent surrounded by children. These weren't just any children. These were children with possibility but no futures, and he sought pathways to give them a future.

That is, of course, exactly what Vincentian universities attempt as well. Pathways. Our time might even call it "mainstreaming." It's more, of course. Universities in our age are powerful platforms for the intellectual life,

and able to play a strong social role in shaping social policy, in moving a populace's social commitments through the arts, humanities or social sciences; in improving the living conditions of so many through scientific and applied engineering advances; or in creating a student and alumnus deeply imbued with the religious and social values that care for the poor, in a world that too quickly ignores the poor in favor of their own well-being.

And that is perhaps what I most admire about St. John's University.

- 44% of your students are students of color underrepresented in American higher education. That's stunning.
- 43% of last year's freshmen are considered "Pell-eligible/Very High Need." That too is stunning.
- (Incidentally, you exceed DePaul University's statistics in this regard, where 40% of our freshmen are the first in their families to attend college, 37% are students of color, and 25% are Pell-eligible.)

On top of that, you shape an education that is rigorous, that prepares students for the worlds they will enter, and that prepares them for life's larger questions through theology, philosophy, the humanities, social sciences and sciences, in short, the Liberal Arts. There are far too many postsecondary institutions that give the poor a second rate education, taking their money, and worrying far too little on what happens to them afterwards. You work them, and you assist them with numerous support programs, good teaching, a solid curriculum, and old-fashioned one-on-one relationships – and because of all of that, you successfully launch them.

On top of that, you create an extraordinary stream of educational moments to show the students a larger world of great need, just waiting for their assistance.

- Academic Service Learning
- Study abroad service learning
- Ozanam and Catholic Scholars
- Your chapter of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul
- Students for Global Justice

- Students for Life
- Service immersion experiences
- Nick's Shelter
- St John's Bread and Life
- Vaccination program for the Poor
- Law clinics where faculty and law students serve those most in need, including refugees, immigrants, the elderly, those in dire financial straits, domestic violence victims, and child advocacy.
- You even began the freshmen's education this year by drawing their attention to life's inequities, by having them read Wes Moore's eponymous book, spurring the Vincentian question "What Must be Done?"

You're educating these young people to have good hearts. Every university may have some version of service, but at St. John's, it's a pervasive, defining characteristic. It flows from your very identity and willingness to call yourselves Catholic and Vincentian.

On top of that, you've created an infrastructure to encourage research on topics that matter to people without resources in this world.

- Vincentian Research Fellows
- Vincentian Chair of Social Justice
- Institute on Poverty Studies
- Vincentian Institute for Social Action
- The Journal you publish on these topics, with its research on key areas of poverty and practical bent toward enlightened public policy
- Your last Poverty Conference in which you studied the effects of the abuse of the environment upon the poor
- Your regular workshops on Aids, Hunger, and Human Trafficking
- Your support of the Catholic School System through the "Institute for Catholic Schools" in your School of Education
- Even your upcoming colloquy on Walter Kasper's (and Pope Francis') concepts of Mercy as the center of a society's functioning and life

In truth, St. John's faculty always worked on these topics. I thought highly of Fr. Brian O'Connell's work in economics. I respected the work of my faculty colleagues in Education who worked on the nettlesome issues of urban education. But that work has clearly broadened, and is being supported and encouraged. A number of you invite students to collaborate with you on matters of research and action on the issues which influence the neediest in our society, and that too is a lovely thing to say about your university.

All of these are but examples of something far grander, namely your commitment to put the resources of a great university to the service of the poor. This is the stuff of a "Vincentian higher education:" (1) The provision of an excellent education to those whom society is not inclined to assist; (2) the direction of your considerable intellectual resources to the great social problems and challenges of our day, especially on behalf of those at our societies' margins; and (3) the creation of a vast alumni who themselves leave our institutions with a Vincentian heart, wanting to make a real difference in their communities.

It has been my own great joy to spend my life in Vincentian education. Working in Vincentian Universities combines my love for the intellectual life with a desire to serve the poor that I myself received because I attended a Vincentian university in my youth. My life took a direction I never could have imagined because I went to a Vincentian university, and I'll forever be grateful for those who saw something I didn't at the time.

That's ultimately the heart of a university, isn't it? To see possibility in the young. And it's the great heart of a Vincentian university to see possibility in ALL the young, especially in those whom society is all too willing to leave to their own devices. But not just the possibility that they might become fully contributing members of this society, but that they too might be "Vincentians;" that all who walk through our doors, our collaborators and students, can be brought into the great project that Vincent saw and to which Vincent invited everyone.

Everyone should have an opportunity. Everyone should be brought into the great work. That's the heart of it.

Notice that St. Vincent's startling question in 1656 did not ask WHETHER foundlings should be admitted; he merely asked how soon it would happen. He saw possibility in the young people of his time. And so must we who continue his great work.

You have built an institution of great heart. I know there are great financial challenges in running an institution that welcomes – indeed recruits – those of limited means. There is nothing romantic in figuring out what budgets to cut, or how to teach many students in a single classroom, much less grade all their papers. But I do know that people leave here with their lives changed forever, and I know that 43% of them come from the very highest category of family need. That's what you do. You wake up each morning caring about these young people. You wake up, anxious to work on research problems critical to the good of humanity.

God bless you for it. I doubt that Bishop Loughlin, whose idea that there should be a university for immigrants led to St. John's, could possibly have imagined what you accomplish each year. I know St. Vincent would be amazed and thrilled. In the midst of higher education's many challenges, I pray that you'll always see and be amazed by the sheer extent of the good you do.

Thank you for this lovely honor tonight. St. John's has a special place in my heart and always will. May God richly bless all of you who are St. John's University. May future generations follow yours – generation-upon-generation – so that the young will always find their possibility recognized and welcomed here, their intellects well taught and formed, that they themselves may be a blessing to a waiting world.

God bless you and God bless St. John's University.