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Charism that Lives: Translating the Message of St. Vincent de Paul for Today's Teacher Education

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2017 marks the 400th anniversary of the founding of St. Vincent de Paul's Confraternity of Charity that focused on serving the needs of the poor. The work of the Confraternity is rooted in St. Vincent's own works of charity to the poor, sick, and disadvantaged in France in the 17th century. However, as Dosen (2005) has noted, "The greatness of Vincent's charity lay not solely in his compassion, but in his ability to organize others so that his compassionate mission would expand beyond himself" (p. 49). One way that St. Vincent's mission of compassion has expanded in modern times is through the work of Catholic Vincentian universities such as St. John's University in Queens, New York. Consistent with Vincentian charism, the university's mission statement proclaims, "Wherever possible, we devote our intellectual and physical resources to search out the causes of poverty and social injustice and to encourage solutions that are adaptable, effective, and concrete."

Here we explore how our College combats poverty and social injustice through its preparation of educators. First, we provide a short biography of St. Vincent de Paul's life, selecting parts of the saint's life that capture the essence of his ministry and legacy. After this biography, we discuss how the work and life of St. Vincent de Paul is reflected in our own work.

About St. Vincent de Paul

St. Vincent lived from 1581 to 1660. Born into a farming family, Vincent spent his childhood

in rural southern France. Since Vincent's father wanted him to pursue a career in the Church, Vincent attended a Franciscan secondary school in Dax, a nearby town in southern France (Poole, 1992). Research disputes exactly when Vincent left to attend the secondary school. Poole (1992), for instance, stated that Pierre Coste, an early 20th century researcher on St. Vincent, believed the future saint began attending the school in 1595 when he was 15 years old. "On the other hand, Louis Abelly, the saint's first biographer, wrote that he began his studies in Dax 'about the year 1588'" (p. 82). Poole (1992), though, asserted

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"The best that can be said is that Vincent probably entered the Franciscan school at Dax in 1594 or 1595..." (p. 82). Regardless, Vincent's school experience was formative and it laid a foundation for his later education in theology during his preparation for the priesthood.

Vincent was ordained a Catholic priest at 19 years old, and soon after his ordination, he moved to Paris and secured "a job in the household of a rich and politically influential family" (McKenna, 1997, p. 4). This job proved to have a strong influence on the direction of Vincent's charitable works later in life. While working for the family, Vincent "began to encounter many poor people as he ministered on his employer's vast properties and also in the prison ships this nobleman commanded" (p. 4). In combination with his continued spiritual development, Vincent's work with these people inspired him to devote his life in service to the poor and disadvantaged. Over time, Vincent realized that to serve the many and diverse

needs of the poor, he needed help from others who shared his, his drive for service, and his quest for social justice. Throughout the next several decades, Vincent became a “founder and director of major organizational enterprises...” and “...carried on a vast correspondence of some 30,000 letters, chaired or participated in countless meetings, spent hours dealing with personnel issues, and managed a complex financial conglomerate supporting the work of the Vincentian organizational family” (Fuechtmann, 2005, p. 46). Much of St. Vincent’s legacy was demonstrated by his ability to mobilize groups of people to fulfill a common mission of service to the poor.

Many of the organizations St. Vincent founded were confraternities, or charities, that assisted the needy in France. These charities were based at parishes across the country. Women had an especially important role in the success of these charities through financial and pastoral support (McNeil, 2005). St. Louise de Marillac’s work was particularly vital. Louise and Vincent formed a close relationship for many years and they supported each other in their service to the needy. As McNeil (2005) stated, “Most significantly, Vincent worked with Louise as a peer. Their influence was mutual, one on the other” (p. 146).

St. Vincent de Paul maintained his mission-driven focus on service to the needy to the end of his life. He also viewed spiritual development as an important component of this service. Poole (1992) referenced a 1642 statement by St. Vincent to the Daughters of Charity, a religious group led by St. Louise de Marillac, to support this view: “We should not, indeed, be doing enough for God and our neighbor if we supplied the sick poor only with nourishment and medicine and if we did not assist them, according to God’s designs, with the spiritual services we owe them” (p. 112). Today, the mission of St. Vincent lives on in the work of service organizations and universities throughout the world, including St. John’s University. In particular, the Department of Curriculum and Instruction (DCI) at St. John’s University has placed a strong focus on its Vincentian heritage through its work in the preparation of future educators.

How the Work of St. Vincent de Paul is Reflected in a School of Education

The School of Education at St John’s University is located in Queens, New York, one of the most diverse communities in the United States. The School is committed to preparing educators with the necessary knowledge, skills, and compassion to teach children from different backgrounds in urban communities, including children living in poverty. In fact, research has shown that New York City is home to many children from impoverished backgrounds. It is particularly troubling that a 2016 report by Austensen, Been, O’Regan, Rosoff, and Yager from the Furman Center at New York University stated that between 2011 and 2015, approximately 30% of children in New York City lived in poverty. The report noted, “Higher poverty neighborhoods have schools in which many fewer children were performing at grade level in English language arts (ELA) and math on fourth grade standardized tests” (p. 10).

With this connection between poverty and academic achievement in mind, a primary goal of the School of Education is to prepare committed and social-justice oriented educators who aim to combat social and economic inequalities, such as child poverty, and provide high-quality instruction to increase the life opportunities of young people, especially in New York City. We seek to support pre- and in-service teachers in becoming educational change agents to counter the inequities of schooling in the US so that all children can from school with equal opportunities and access to lifelong learning that will enable them to follow a life pathway of opportunity and success.

In recent years, the Vincentian Congregation for the Mission has demonstrated a commitment to address the problem of poverty more generally. As Maloney (1995) stated, the Congregation’s aim to understand the causes of poverty is part of the group’s “new evangelization” which is rooted in Pope John Paul II’s 1986 message to the Vincentians “to promote long- and short-term solutions, which are concrete, flexible and efficacious” (p. 6). Our goals for teacher education,

therefore, align with the goals of the Congregation of the Mission regarding poverty. We provide three examples of these goals that reflect the work of St. Vincent de Paul.

Resident Internship for St. John's Educators

The Resident Internship for St. John's Educators (R.I.S.E.) is a two-semester, student-teacher program for undergraduate childhood and adolescent education majors at St. John's University. Established in 2014, the program combines academic coursework with fieldwork at local schools in the Greater New York City area. The program also provides student teachers, all seniors at SJU, with the chance to apply theory to practice, learn from (and with) experienced practitioners, and develop unique and innovative methods and styles for teaching. As a clinically based teacher education program, the resident internship provides seniors with the opportunity to obtain constructive feedback on their teaching from cooperating teachers and professors. The professors, also called resident faculty members, are embedded in the elementary and secondary schools themselves; the professors conduct classroom observations of student teachers, lead university courses at the schools, and establish collaborative relationships with teachers and administrators who work with the student teachers. The program aims to form and foster partnerships between the St. John's School of Education and local schools to build community, strengthen communication, and enhance the preparation of future teachers.

The work of St. Vincent is reflected in the resident internship in two significant ways. First, as a teacher education program, R.I.S.E. is committed to preparing pre-service teachers who are engaged in community service and who work for the common good. Working for the common good requires that teachers, in part,

build inclusive classroom communities that accept and value all students. This sense of belonging is particularly important for students who come from impoverished backgrounds—children who frequently are excluded and marginalized in schools and in society. Working for the common good, however, also requires teachers to accomplish another important task: to put the needs of others, namely students' needs, before their own. The teaching profession demands that teachers be selfless, generous stewards. It also demands that teachers demonstrate skills of

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empathy and seek to understand others' perspectives. St. Vincent de Paul understood these demands of service, and he put them into practice throughout his ministry. St. Vincent devoted his life to the pursuit of the common good through his service to the needy in France. Today, R.I.S.E. aims to reflect the work of St. Vincent in its efforts to prepare future teachers who are committed to community service in schools, and it strives to instill

St. Vincent's spirit of care and concern in pre-service teachers in order to meet the diverse needs of young learners.

Second, the program reflects the work of St. Vincent in its core belief that teachers are learners. This simple, yet profound, statement assumes there is always room for growth in the teaching profession. Teachers can, and should, reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as practitioners, seek opportunities for professional development, deliberate with professional colleagues to share ideas and resources, increase knowledge about (and for) teaching by studying research and best practice, develop new strategies to meet the needs of learners, and many others. Being a learner also assumes that teachers are open-minded and curious. Rather than avoid puzzling questions, teachers embrace uncertainty. The program aims to prepare teachers to be master learners who are eager to seek answers. The resident internship faculty members meet regularly to assess these

aims through discussions and analysis of weekly reflection data written by the student resident interns.

St. Vincent demonstrated a similar curiosity, open-mindedness, and drive in his own life. As a student and a seminarian, Vincent explored new ideas. As a newly ordained priest, St. Vincent showed openness by moving to Paris and, over time, discovering his passion for service to the poor and disenfranchised through his interactions with the needy. As the founder and director of service organizations throughout France, Vincent had to learn various skills to keep the organizations running successfully (including communication strategies to collaborate with others effectively). Perhaps most important of all, St. Vincent possessed a strong desire and drive to deepen his own faith. Vincent's faith grounded his ministry, focused his service, and inspired him to keep learning. St. Vincent's motivation to learn (and his strong faith and selfless spirit) are, today, reflected in the work of R.I.S.E. in the program's efforts to form and shape pre-service teachers' curiosity, open-mindedness, and willingness to keep learning and growing as educators.

In Addition After School Math Project

The 2017 In Addition After School Math Program takes place in an urban neighborhood Catholic elementary school. An anonymous donor has funded the project so there is no charge for children and families.

This is the fifteenth year that the In Addition program has been offered. The driving philosophy of the program is that all children can learn mathematics and have their questions and curiosities respected. Furthermore, families play an important role in their children's learning which not only echoes the Vincentian mission of the University, but also the recommendations of the National Research Council (1989; 2001), the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (2000), and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2000) which are the leading voices in mathematics education today.

The Project also resonates the charism of St Vincent as well as the current, prevailing ideas about teaching and learning in which children's and parents' ideas are honored and valued (Meier, 2002), where social justice is the direction for learning (Nieto, 2003), where teachers create classrooms in which all students have ownership (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005), and where questions drive learning and become the outcome of the learning process (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011). These ideas are significant in the after-school work.

Each year, the program serves approximately twenty-four students in the third, fourth, and fifth grades, as well as their parents. Since its introduction 15 years ago, In Addition has been offered in eight different schools. When deciding on a school to house the In Addition program, the first condition is that the school must be located in a neighborhood that serves first-generation, immigrant, and working-class families.

Once selected, students may remain in the program for three years, which most do. The students are selected by random lottery due to the high demand for participation. The program is limited to serving only 24 children and their families due to a lack of financial and human resources (which would be needed to expand the program). The sole criterion for acceptance is a commitment from students to attend sessions that are two and a half hours a day, three days a week, from September to May, as well as two weekend retreats with their parents (one in October and one in May).

Most of the parent participants are non-native English speakers. Translation services are provided when needed. One purpose of the program is to help shape parents' new or expanded understandings of mathematical thinking either at school or at home in order that they, in turn, may help build mathematical competencies and confidence in their own children. The In Addition team consists of a classroom teacher, an administrative assistant, a theater arts instructor, four undergraduate teacher education students, two School of Education professors, a photographer/videographer, and a Spanish

language interpreter. Teaching responsibilities are shared among team members.

The In Addition after-school program facilitates the teaching and learning of mathematics without regular classroom constraints such as high-stakes testing and grades. Math skills are developed by empowering children to depend on their own curiosity, form new ideas, collaborate with others, and work independently. Everyone from children, teachers, parents, and community members is involved in a variety of ways.

Students' investigations, based on their needs and impetus, are often linked to their neighborhoods and homes. Parent participation, through monthly parent meetings and two weekend retreats, provides both a support system for students and links among home, school, and community. Children learn to turn everyday questions into child-powered inquiries and to value persistence, revision, and challenge in learning.

Much of the after-school program is spent on long-term projects based on student interest. Some of these projects have included a recycling "green school" project, a community photography unit, and the mapping of the neighborhood project. After-school activities also include daily problem-solving activities that require critical thinking, respectful dialogue, and cooperation to find solutions.

An illustration of St Vincent's teachings at work in the In Addition Project can be found in a neighborhood study of restaurants that occurred in 2016-17. These young students learned and practiced interviewing techniques and then interviewed owners and workers at local restaurants. Discussions focused on ordering supplies, serving guests, and worker patterns and roles. Students conducted a study of food costs in their neighborhood with particular emphasis on costs for large numbers of people. After multiple visits to restaurants, the children decided to create their own Italian restaurant.

...students felt empowered with their accomplishments. Several students said they wanted to be chefs and restaurant workers. "I learned I can do anything!"

The next few months were spent planning the restaurant. Students decided to use the upcoming May weekend retreat to have a restaurant evening where they would serve parents, team staff, St John's students, and camp staff. The young learners studied Italian culture, food, music, and geography. Local Italian restaurants provided menus for the children to study. Students enthusiastically decided on menu offerings for their soon-to-open restaurant. These decisions took several days of discussion, but in the end, the children learned how to honor the ideas of others, even when these ideas were different from

their own. The menu was set until one child asked, "On one of the menus we studied, it said no tipping was allowed. Are we going to have tips?" This initiated a larger discussion about tips including the following questions: Who gets the tips? How much do people tip? Is that the only pay waiters get? The result was a group decision to have a "no

tipping" note on their menu with the additional sentence, "If you want to make a donation to a local food kitchen, please leave your donation in the basket at our hostess station."

Students were serious about creating a "real" restaurant. They made designs using blocks for the way tables would be laid out, made signs, and collected large posters of Italy to hang around the room. They chose red-checkered tablecloths because one of the restaurants they visited had them. This decision led to measuring material and sewing hems to make tablecloths for eight round tables. The students practiced the different roles of hostess, wait staff, bus people, and kitchen chefs.

The restaurant evening was a huge success. At the close of the weekend retreat, everyone was asked to write a reflection on what they learned. In Addition students felt empowered with their accomplishments. Several students said they wanted to be chefs and restaurant workers. "*I learned I can do anything!*"

Parents learned that their children were capable

of more than they imagined. In fact, many parents sensed that their expectations for the children weren't high enough. *"I learned that education outside the classroom for me was the most effective way of learning. Children have so much more potential than we think. They managed a whole restaurant."*

The In Addition team learned that seeing the true potential of young children come to fruition was enough to encourage and decide to continue their work with In Addition for another year. *"This was an amazing group of kids and they interacted so well together. They figured so much out on their own. They are so smart and hardworking and are amazing problem solvers. It was worth all the work and frustration."*

Our undergraduate students found the experience inspiring and unforgettable, and they wrote of a new understanding for how much parents care for their children. *"I learned how involved the parents were. They didn't just tag along, they were involved and cared about their children's accomplishments."*

Creating a Ph.D. program

In 2012, we identified the need for a Ph.D. program where graduate students worked with and in communities to meet needs, examine and study underlying causes of poverty, and work alongside community members to create sustainable solutions for problems in today's society. A main objective was to create a program in which members of the faculty used their talents and research interests to work with a cadre of motivated students to identify needs in neighboring communities and work with these communities in respectful, collaborative ways.

The development process took on a life of its own. Faculty discussions were often invigorating and at other times downright arduous and difficult. The faculty considered (and debated) long and hard about what it valued as a department as well as its broader vision for Ph.D. studies. The group persisted, knowing that if it did not come to a consensus, the Ph.D. program would become

a traditional roster of courses culminating in a dissertation that may not grasp the Vincentian mission. These struggles resulted in a formidable faculty culture and commitment to work on behalf of the poor in nearby communities, both individually and collectively. The faculty group understood that community-based education was a teaching and learning process by, in, about, and for the community. As the Ph.D. program's mission states,

The program's mission is to prepare teacher educators for a variety of educational roles that embrace areas of curriculum development, educational innovation, and the study of classroom and community life. This program will engage students in exploring critical issues via collaborative immersion in sustainable educational community projects. Candidates will employ multiple research and disciplinary lenses to better understand and address local needs in relation to teaching and learning. Particular attention will be given to research experiences with vulnerable populations in local and global contexts.

The St. John's University Mission Statement insists, "Wherever possible, we devote our intellectual and physical resources to search out the causes of poverty and social injustice and to encourage solutions which are adaptable, effective, sustainable and concrete." The Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction is explicitly committed to addressing issues of poverty and disenfranchisement of the marginalized populations of the Greater New York City area by using teaching and learning as a means for change (*from the PhD Program Proposal draft, 2017*).

Conclusion

Though we have made progress in addressing society's (and St. Vincent's) calls for equity, inclusion, and justice, we recognize there is much more work to do. The world suffers from economic disparities, excruciating wars, and varieties of prejudice based on race, sexual

orientation, gender, and others. In the U.S. alone, many inequalities have yet to be addressed adequately (including in schools). Even for some pre-service teachers, teaching has become distant from its intent to bring joy, self-direction, and meaning. By working with and supporting pre-service teachers, we can meet St. Vincent's call to serve those in need.

Mother Teresa once said, "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples." We take heart in knowing that our work with pre-service teachers, doctoral students, and elementary and secondary students (and their parents) to alleviate the plight of the poor and those in need can contribute to righting the educational injustices faced by many families to create opportunities and make a positive impact on society.

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