



HOME VISITS IN THE VINCENTIAN TRADITION

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FAMVIN HOMELESS ALLIANCE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 FREDERIC OZANAM AND THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL3

2 HOME VISITS IN THE GOSPELS4

2.1 SETTING OUT EAGERLY5

2.2 BEING WITH.....5

2.3 OFFERING PRACTICAL HELP5

2.4 JOY, PRAISE, GRATITUDE6

3 THE ROOT MEANING OF THE WORD “VISIT”6

4 KEY ELEMENTS IN MAKING THE HOME VISIT8

4.1 LISTENING8

4.2 BEFRIENDING9

4.3 WORKING TOWARD EMPOWERMENT9

4.4 BEING TRUE TO OUR WORD10

4.5 ALWAYS LEAVING SOMETHING BEHIND.....10

From the very beginning, home visits have played a key role in the Vincentian Family's service to those in need. But they were to be no ordinary visits; they were to be a faith-filled encounter. Vincent de Paul insisted:

When you go to visit them, rejoice, and say to yourself, "I am going to these poor people to honor in their person the person of Our Lord. I am going to see in them the Incarnate Wisdom of God."¹

In 1617, when he founded the first Confraternities of Charity, Vincent directed the members to go two by two to the homes of the sick and disadvantaged. As he set up confraternities throughout France, he made this an explicit mandate. A typical Rule stated: "The Ladies of the Company will take their turns, two by two, to serve the sick poor."²

When describing the Congregation of the Mission, founded in 1625, he wrote that "we ... always go out two by two" during missions to visit the homes of the marginalized.³ Whenever Vincent evaluated the missions given by his confreres and others, home visits were among the things he carefully assessed.

In 1633, he and Louise de Marillac founded the Daughters of Charity. It was a revolutionary undertaking, since up until that time almost all sisters had been required to live in cloistered convents. Vincent succeeded in getting ecclesiastical approval for the Daughters to serve on the street, in schools and in hospitals. He told them that their convent was to be the home of the sick. He placed huge emphasis on visits to the sick poor.⁴ Such visits were among the most striking characteristics of this new community of sisters.

Interestingly, while these three groups were founded juridically over a period of sixteen years, Vincent, looking back later, saw them all as beginning with home visits in 1617. He told two foundational stories, both of which highlighted visits that took place that year: the first, in January 1617, to a dying peasant in Gannes, not far from Paris; the second, that summer, to a sick family in Châtillon-les-Dombes, in the vicinity of Lyons.⁵

¹ CCD:X:103.

² Regulations for the Charity of Women, Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, Paris, 1630; CCD:XIIIb:100.

³ Letter to St. Jane Frances de Chantal, written on July 14, 1639; CCD:I:555.

⁴ Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity, paragraph 12; CCD:XIIIb:151.

⁵ Today we recognize some mythological elements in these stories. Cf. Daniel Steinke, "Folleville 1617 – Gründungsmythos der Kongregation der Mission," *MEGVIS* (2017), 4-22.

Not only did Vincent urge all the members of his Family – lay women and men, priests, brothers, and sisters – to make home visits; he also wrote detailed instructions about how to make the visits well. On the bottom line, the members of Vincent’s Family were to regard those whom they visited as their “Lords and Masters”.⁶ Vincent urged his followers to reverence those visited as they revered Christ.

In the rule which he wrote in 1617 for the first Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon, Vincent speaks of the “white tablecloth,” a charming detail that accents the respect that he wanted shown to those being visited:

Then, after preparing their dinner, they will take them, at nine o’clock, some soup, and meat in a pot, some bread in a white cloth, and some wine in a bottle. They will do the same for supper around four o’clock in the afternoon. When they enter the patient’s room, they will greet him or her in a friendly way; then, drawing near to the bed with a cheerful expression, they will encourage him to eat, raising the head of the bed, arranging the cover, setting up the little tray, the white tablecloth, plate, and spoon, rinsing out the glass, pouring some soup on the bread, putting the meat on a small plate, saying grace with him and feeding him the soup. They will cut up the meat and help him to eat it, while saying some little light-hearted, consoling word in an effort to cheer him up. They will also pour him something to drink, inviting him once again to eat. Lastly, when he has finished eating and the dishes have been washed, the tablecloth folded, and the tray removed, they will say grace with the patient, and leave him right away in order to go serve someone else.⁷

1 FREDERIC OZANAM AND THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

When a group of young university students formed the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in 1833, they apprenticed themselves to Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity. Sr. Rosalie was already renowned for her visits to the homes of the poor in the Mouffetard neighborhood of Paris. From her, they learned this tool.

⁶ CCD:II:140;X:215;X:268;XI:297;XI:349;XII:4;XIIIb:196.

⁷ CCD:XIIIb:40; also CCD:XIIIb:12 and 13. Cf. a brief video on the topic: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CgJVAC7Na8>.

Ozanam wrote often about home visits. He stated that the home visit to the poor was “our principal work”.⁸ He reported regularly on the number of visits that various conferences had made. He saw the visitor and the visited as intimately united. In 1836, he wrote, “We rejoice that the number of families that we are going to visit is growing, because it seems to us that they form, with the members who visit them, two parts of the same society. Those who are helped provoke and revive the charity of those who help them; in this way, they assist each other, they live in the same spirit, and all find shelter under the mantle of St. Vincent de Paul”.⁹

Today, the Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul puts it this way:

*From the Society’s beginning, the central and most basic activity of Conferences has been the visitation of the needy in their homes. This is the clearest symbol of our Vincentian charism, which dictates the highest respect for the dignity of the poor. It symbolizes our Vincentian commitment to reach out to the needy, rather than require them to report to an outside service site. In the home, needy persons feel most free to confide their stories of struggle. In that family setting, Vincentians are asked to listen, offer humble advice, and render assistance.*¹⁰

2 HOME VISITS IN THE GOSPELS

The blessings of a visit are a recurrent scriptural theme. Here, for brevity’s sake, I list only some of the significant New Testament visits, though readers will immediately recall important visits in other parts of the New Testament, particularly in Acts and Paul,¹¹ as well as in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹²

- **Mark 1:29-31:** Jesus visits Peter’s mother-in-law and heals her.
- **Matthew 2:1-12:** Wise men visit Jesus at his birth, bringing him gifts. The account repeats three times that they come “to do him homage”.

⁸ *Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam*, publiées avec le concours des descendants d’Ozanam par Léonce Celier, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, et Didier Ozanam (Bloud et Gay, 1960) I:430.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I:359.

¹⁰ Cf. Rule, Part I, Articles 1,2 and 1.7 – 1.12; Part III, Section 8.

¹¹ Cf. Acts 9:32f.; Acts 15:36-41; Phil 2:25; James 5:14.

¹² Prominent among these is the story of Elijah’s visit to the widow at Zarephath in Sidon (1 Kings 17:7-16).

- **Matthew 25:36:** Jesus declares that visits to the sick and those in prison will be one of the standards by which we are judged.
- **Matthew 26:6:** Jesus visits the home of Simon the Leper, where a woman anoints him in preparation for his death and burial. He states that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, what this woman has done during his visit will be remembered.
- **Luke 1:39-45:** Mary visits Elizabeth to assist her. They stay together for three months.
- **Luke 10:38-42:** Jesus visits the home of Martha and Mary, where he teaches them about the “one thing necessary”.
- **Luke 19:1-10:** Jesus visits the home of Zacchaeus, who is converted and gives half of his goods to the poor.
- **John 11:1-45:** Jesus visits Martha, Mary, and Lazarus and raises Lazarus from the dead.

Particularly notable among the texts above is Luke’s account of the Visitation. In his infancy narrative, Luke weaves together several rich scriptural themes as he depicts the Virgin Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth.¹³ Let me mention just four:

2.1 SETTING OUT EAGERLY

Luke states that, having heard the news of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Mary decided immediately to visit her. She “set out in haste” on a difficult journey of about 90 miles. The trip, on foot, would have taken her four to five days.

2.2 BEING WITH

Mary, who was pregnant herself, stayed with Elizabeth for three months (a long visit!). One can only imagine how Mary’s stay solidified the bonds between these two cousins.

2.3 OFFERING PRACTICAL HELP

Mary assisted Elizabeth, whom the account portrays as elderly. Readers will also recall that Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, had been stuck mute and remained so during this period.

¹³ Luke 1:39-56.

2.4 JOY, PRAISE, GRATITUDE

Luke's account of the visit is filled with joyful prayer. Elizabeth and Mary both sing songs (often called "canticles"). Commentators on the text describe them as being like two sopranos standing on the stage in an opera by Verdi, proclaiming God's praises and singing God's love for the poor.

3 THE ROOT MEANING OF THE WORD "VISIT"

Etymologically, the English word *visit* stems from a Latin root meaning *to see*. The French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese words for *visit* come from the same root. The German word for *visit* (*Besuch*), while it comes from a different root, is also related to seeing (*suchen*).

So, in its root sense, visiting involves going to see others, looking into their eyes, gazing at their face. St. Vincent would say that a visit, made with the eyes of faith, involves *seeing* the face of Christ in the face of the poor person.¹⁴

In the gospels, Jesus warns about "seeing but not seeing". Human experience tells us, in fact, that the failure to see is a frequent occurrence. In frustration, we might sometimes say to someone whose sight is technically quite good, "Are you blind! Don't you see what's happening!"

In addition to those who are metaphorically blind, we also know people who are metaphorically near-sighted (lack long-range vision), far-sighted (fail to see important closeup details), or who have tunnel vision (bargue straight ahead without seeing the effect on those to the right and the left).

How important it is really to see!

In the gospels, a loving gaze is often life changing. In his daily homily on May 22, 2015, Pope Francis focused on Jesus' gaze.¹⁵ He pointed out that when Jesus first met Peter, "He fixed his gaze upon him and said, 'You are Simon, son of John; you will be called Peter.'" Francis added, "That was the first gaze, the gaze of mission", and Peter responded enthusiastically. Then, after Peter had denied Jesus three times, he felt the gaze of Jesus again and "wept bitterly". Continuing his commentary, Francis stated, "The enthusiasm of following the Lord was turned into tears because Peter had sinned, he had denied Jesus". The pope then added, "That gaze changed Peter's heart more than the first did. The first changed his name and vocation, but the second was a gaze

¹⁴ CCD:X:103;IX:54.

¹⁵ Cf. National Catholic Reporter, May 22, 2015.

that changed his heart; it was a conversion to love." The pope, finally, spoke of a third gaze in which, after his resurrection, Jesus looked at Peter, asked him if he loved him, and told him to feed his sheep. This third gaze confirmed Peter's mission while also confirming his love.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter's gaze is transforming. The account of the healing of the man who was lame from birth reads:

As they approached the Temple, a man lame from birth was being carried in. Each day he was put beside the Temple gate, the one called the Beautiful Gate, so he could beg from the people going into the Temple. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for some money. Peter and John looked at him intently, and Peter said, "Look at us!" The lame man looked at them eagerly, expecting some money. But Peter said, "I don't have any silver or gold for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, get up and walk!" Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man's feet and ankles were instantly healed and strengthened.¹⁶

Philosophers describe many elements in an encounter between two people: physical position (closeness or distance), facial expression (changes in the eyes, the brow, and the mouth), gestures, touch, speech, the tone of the voice. In two instances, simultaneous reciprocal interaction takes place: when two people look into each other's eyes and when they touch each other. In mutual gazing just as mutual touching, each person both gives and receives at the same time.

The interaction in speaking and listening, while not as immediately reciprocal as touching and eye-contact, also moves quickly toward intimacy if the speaker feels listened to and the listener feels understood.

When eye contact, touch, and genuine verbal communication (speaking/listening) combine, respect and intimacy flourish.¹⁷ Once, after receiving a home visit from a member of AIC, a troubled young woman said to me: "She made me feel human again". Similarly, an African-American man struggling with multiple addictions told me, at the funeral of a Vincentian Family member who had visited him regularly, "After a while, I realized that he was completely 'color-blind.' Racial distinctions meant nothing to him."

¹⁶ Acts 3:2-7.

¹⁷ Cf. John Heron, "The Phenomenology of Social Encounter: the Gaze" at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2105742.pdf>

4 KEY ELEMENTS IN MAKING THE HOME VISIT

The websites of the Vincentian Family throughout the world offer some wonderful instructions on how to make the home visit well.¹⁸ Here, I mention just five key elements.

4.1 LISTENING

Listening is the foundation of all spirituality. The first service that we owe to God and to our brothers and sisters is to listen to them with empathy. If we do not listen, we are lost.

Listening is the primary disposition of a disciple. The disciple, having listened, then goes out as a missionary to spread the news of God's love for everyone, especially for the poor and marginalized.

No other image is more deeply imbedded in Pope Francis' consciousness than the Church as a community of missionary disciples. It was *the* key theme at the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, held in *Aparecida*, Brazil, on May 13-31, 2007,¹⁹ where the then Cardinal Bergoglio served as chairperson of the editorial committee for the final document.

As pope, Francis states, "I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here."²⁰ He emphasizes that the Church is missionary by its very nature.²¹

Disciples listen to the Master, so our first priority in entering homes will be to listen to the pain and the needs²² of the poor, whom St. Vincent calls "our Lords and Masters."²³ Missionaries bring good news, so our second priority will be to bring hope, encouragement, and effective help to those whom we visit.

Francis calls us to bring a Marian style to our activities as missionary disciples. He is convinced that we cannot fully understand the mystery of the Church without understanding Mary's role in the New Testament and her place in the development of Christian doctrine. In describing Mary's style as a missionary disciple, he reflects on the song that she sang during the

¹⁸ Cf. <http://www.svdpmilw.org/images/Home%20Visit.pdf>

¹⁹ Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, *Aparecida*, Brazil, May 13-31, 2007.

²⁰ EG 273.

²¹ EG 179.

²² Pope Francis, "A Big Heart Open to God," *America*, Sept. 30, 2013.

²³ CCD:II:140;X:215;X:268;XI:297;XI:349;XII:4;XIIIb:196.

Visitation, the *Magnificat*, and states, *The interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others, is what makes the ecclesial community look to Mary as a model of evangelization.*²⁴

Few groups in the world have as much concrete experience in visiting the poor as the Vincentian Family has. The basic question that I pose here is this: how can we best be missionary disciples during our home visits?

4.2 BEFRIENDING

One of the principal gifts we can give those we visit is friendship. It is integral to the spirituality of mercy that Jesus outlines in the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46. Friendship lies at the heart of Jesus' relationship with his followers. He says to them, "I no longer call you servants. I call you friends."²⁵ The relationship of friendship is characterized by warmth, conversation, sharing, service, and sacrifice.

As visitors who come as friends, we offer the marginalized emotional, moral, spiritual and material support. We also maintain the confidentiality that exists in family relationships.

Pope Francis has treated this theme frequently too. He is urging contemporary society to create a "culture of encounter" and a "culture of dialogue", in which we are prepared not only to give, but also to receive from others.²⁶ He warns against the "globalization of indifference".²⁷

If we are to serve the poor with a love that is "affective and effective," as St. Vincent puts it,²⁸ we must gain their trust during visits, offering our friendship and showing them the respect that we hope others will show us.

4.3 WORKING TOWARD EMPOWERMENT

Everyone who works among the poor comes to recognize that immediate assistance, while sometimes quite necessary, is not enough. We do not want others to become permanently dependent on us. So, in our Family today, we emphasize systemic change and empowerment. For that reason, we encourage self-help, education, job-training, budgeting, and life-skills like parenting. This often requires us to make referrals to deal with family and marriage problems or with addictions to alcohol and drugs.

²⁴ EG 288; cf. Walter Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love* (New York; Paulist Press, 2015).

²⁵ John 15:15.

²⁶ Address to Migrants, Sept. 12, 2015.

²⁷ Cf. Message for World Food Day, 16 October 2013, 2.

²⁸ CCD:IX:467.

Systemic change also involves advocacy, so that we stand side by side with the poor before governments and other institutions that can help address the systemic problems that keep the poor *poor*. Today, as Pope Francis frequently points out in *Laudato Si'*, we are increasingly conscious that everything is connected to everything else.²⁹ When any single element in a system breaks down, everything else is affected. Consequently, holistic service is fundamental to systemic change.

Can the home visit become an instrument for systemic change? Does the Vincentian Family's work, visiting thousands and thousands of poor people, lead us to an analysis of the root causes of poverty in each of the countries where we live and help us to formulate concrete steps for dealing with those causes?

Vincent was convinced that home visits played an important role in discerning which needs should be prioritized. He told Brother Jean Parre, "To discern correctly, the poor should be observed in their own homes, so that you can see for yourself who are the neediest".³⁰

4.4 BEING TRUE TO OUR WORD

Simplicity is one of the virtues which St. Vincent called all the branches of his Family to cultivate. Our *yes* should mean *yes* and our *no* should mean *no*.³¹ Vincent would say to us today: do what you say you will do and explain what you cannot do.

We have all experienced how deep the wounds of those we visit are. Poverty affects the whole person: physically, psychologically, emotionally, and relationally. Many find themselves isolated and lonely. Some struggle with psychological or drug or alcohol problems. Some, who are immigrants or refugees, do not speak the local language well. Many have legal or medical problems. Many suffer from depression and have lost joy in life.³²

Can we, by the simplicity of our words and actions, help restore their trust in humanity? Can we help make them feel human and whole again?

4.5 ALWAYS LEAVING SOMETHING BEHIND

In home visits, it is important to leave on a positive note. The sisters who lived with Rosalie Rendu stated that she worked efficiently, writing little notes to remind herself of the requests she received. Witnesses in the cause for her beatification testified that she always sought to give some

²⁹ *Laudato Si'*, 16, 97, 240.

³⁰ CCD:VI:388.

³¹ Mt 5:37.

³² Romans 12:8 urges the caregiver, "If you do acts of mercy, (do them) with cheerfulness."

response, even if inadequate, to the needs presented to her: a word, a referral, a hope. She was honest, knew her limitations, and was extraordinarily effective at the same time.

In "Paradise Lost," the angel who expels Adam and Eve from the garden also offers them hope of redemption and new life. Milton tells us that the angel's final words to Adam left a lasting impact:³³

*The angel ended, and in Adam's ear
So charming left his voice that
he a while
Thought him still speaking.*

Milton's angel presents a formidable challenge to all who make home visits. Do those we visit still hear us speaking even after we have left them? Do our words ring in their ears and gnaw at their hearts? Do they feel a new sense of hope, even as they struggle into the future?

³³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, revised edition, Book VIII, line 1.