

January is Poverty Awareness Month. In recognition, each January issue of Frederic's e-Gazette has contained a reflection on poverty from one of the Society's Voice of the Poor Regional Leaders.

Poverty: An Opportunity for Encounter or Exclusion?

By: Marian Lamoureux
North Central Region Voice of the Poor Leader

As Vincentians, have we ever thought about poverty as “social sin?”

This notion of social sin is a powerful concept in Catholic social thought and justice, and a spiritually enriching way for us to view our work with the poor and marginalized as stemming the tide of exclusion and indifference that Pope Francis rails against. Rather than exclusion, our work becomes an opportunity for encounter and growth, both for us as Vincentians and for the poor and marginalized we serve.

We recognize that as Vincentians we are involved in the minutiae of other's lives. We have no choice, it's what we do. We have to know the details of the struggle going on with someone we are trying to serve. What are the obstacles, the bills, the barriers that are keeping them from being the best person they can be? It is only through delving into another's messiness that we can begin to see how we can be of help

Yet as Vincentians, we also need perspective. A prayer by the late Bishop Ken Untener says it well: “It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.” This long view changed for me radically as a college student studying theology when I first studied Catholic Social Teaching and heard the words “social sin.” The concept was, to put a 1970's spin on it, mind blowing. It completely changed my understanding of Social Justice.

In his papacy, Pope Francis has consistently called on us to shoulder the responsibility of social sin with even stronger words in his Apostolic Exhortation, [The Joy of the Gospel](#). His words call us to a reckoning that cannot be denied:

“To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own (Joy, 54).”

Not content with mere words, Pope Francis has also been a living example of the power of the encounter starkly contrasted against the devastating effects of the sin of exclusion. Like Jesus, Francis and we as Vincentians meet people where they are, and this has the potential to heal and transform.

What are some of these social sins that we need to be aware of? Poverty leaps readily to mind, and I'm sure you can think of many more.

For this reflection, as social justice minded Vincentians, let's consider a bit further the ramifications of exclusion as social sin through 1) our immigration system, and 2) our criminal justice system. In this context, a very useful reference is the campaign, "A Year of Encounter with Pope Francis" (see the website www.piconetwork.org to learn more about this excellent program).

I. The Social Sin of Exclusion Through Our Immigration System

One doesn't have to look far before we run up against the tragedy of our failed immigration policies in the United States. Families are torn apart in communities everywhere when parents are separated from their children and deported for the "crime" of being undocumented. Tragically, migrants are risking everything to escape violence and gangs. Pope Francis' words again ring so very true:

"Immigrants dying at sea, in boats which were vehicles of hope and became vehicles of death. That is how the headlines put it. When I first heard of this tragedy a few weeks ago, and realized that it happens all too frequently, it has constantly come back to me like a painful thorn in my heart. So I felt that I had to come here today, to pray and to offer a sign of my closeness, but also to challenge our consciences lest this tragedy be repeated. Please, let it not be repeated!" [Pope Francis Homily at Lampedusa](#), July 8, 2013

As Vincentians, we must look at our own actions, how we are caring for the migrant in our midst. Are we taking to heart the words of St. Vincent de Paul, "Charity of infinitely inventive," i.e., no work of charity is foreign to the Society. Have we thought of ways that we can help secure a family, thinking outside of the realm of our normal actions? Have we been open to creative ways to journey with a family that is struggling within the immigration system?

II. The Social Sin of Exclusion Through Our Criminal Justice System

Our society has been slowly moving towards a new understanding of our criminal justice system. That this system is not serving the needs of the victims or the offenders has been made obvious in the huge rate of mass incarceration and correspondingly high rates of recidivism. I say this as a Wisconsinite, well aware of my state's ranking as the highest in the U.S. for imprisoning black men. In fact, we are nearly *double* that of our country's rate.

Restorative Justice is taking a new approach at criminal justice; instead of taking the simplistic view that crime is a violation of law, it expands the understanding that crime is a violation against people and relationships, i.e., what we know as "sin." This approach was broached in the Pastoral Statement of the Catholic Bishops – [Responsibility Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice](#).

We believe that both victims and the offenders are children of God. Despite their very claims on society, their lives and dignity should be respected. We seek justice, not vengeance. We believe punishment must have clear purposes: protecting society and rehabilitating those who violate the law.

Pope Francis' action on Holy Thursday of last year spoke volumes about the dignity of all people as he washed the feet of six men and six women in prison. And his words during a [New York Times interview](#) indeed were profound:

I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life. God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else - God is in this person's life. You can - you must - try to seek God in every human life.

In his thoughtful and inspiring [speech before Congress](#), Pope Francis supported our Bishop's campaign to end the death penalty and he pointed out that rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes benefits everyone in society.

No doubt many of our own Vincentian home visits touch someone who has had contact with our criminal justice system. Are we advocating for a restorative justice approach in our own communities? Are we reaching out to those on the fringes within this system?



So, in the end, where do these examples leave us as servants of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul?

They are reminders that we are all responsible, at some level, for the social sin in our world, we are all complicit. But this is also a graced opportunity to have our own impact on it, in our one-to-one ministry that is at our heart.

A popular song recently caught my attention, sung by Vance Joy, [Mess is Mine](#). While secular in nature the words have a touching message that can resonate with our ministry. We never truly know what situation we will encounter when we go on that home visit, but we are called to "go forth" into the human "mess." God is in the messiness and will be with us as we strive to bring healing and peace from it and help our friends in need climb out of poverty's devastating downward spiral.

But we have got to be a part of the mess...in Joy's words, "This mess was yours, now your mess is mine."