

CELEBRATION WITH ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY

ST MICHAEL'S, LINLITHGOW

SATURDAY 30TH MAY 2009

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege for me being here with you once more to celebrate this Mass and Thanksgiving for the apostolate of the St Vincent de Paul Society here in our Archdiocese. The Society is known throughout the length and breadth not only of our Diocese but throughout our country and indeed in most of the known world.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE SOCIETY OF THE ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY:

We might say that the origins of the St Vincent de Paul Society go back to the **Gospel teaching of Jesus Christ himself**. There are so many words of Jesus in the Gospels referring to the care, concern and love which we should have for others: We are told in St Matthew's Gospel that: "The greatest commandment of the Lord is to love God with one's whole heart and one's neighbour as oneself"; and again we are told in St Matthew's Gospel: "When you show it (love) to one of the least of my brothers, you show it to me"; and of course St John recounts that Jesus made charity the distinguishing mark of his disciples in the words "by this shall all men know that you are my disciples, by the love you bear for one another".

In the very early history of the Church we read an account of the Sunday gathering of Christians given by **St Justin Martyr who wrote in the early 2nd century**. He describes how on Sundays there is an assembly of all who live in the towns or in the country while the memoirs of the apostles and prophets are read – and this is followed by the Eucharist itself. Then we are told: "Those who are well provided for, if they wish to do so, contribute what each thinks fit; this is collected and left with the President of the Assembly so that he can help the orphans and the widowed and the sick, and all who are in need for any other reason, such as prisoners and visitors from abroad. In short, he provides for all who are in want".

Surely this is the earliest and most beautiful description of a St Vincent de Paul conference – although not then of course given that title!

FOUNDATION OF THE ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY:

With that basic teaching in Sacred Scripture we might wonder why it took so long to form a society to help Christians cater for the needs of those less fortunate in their midst. Whatever the reasons it was in **Paris in 1833** that seven young men, students of the University of Paris met in one of their rooms to found the first "Conference of Charity" later named the **Conference of Charity of St Vincent de Paul**. The meeting was indeed presided over by

one of the students called Emmanuel Bailly but the driving spirit behind the venture and the acknowledged founder of the Society of St Vincent de Paul was another of those young students by name **Frederick Ozanam**. That group of Christians under the guidance of Frederick Ozanam showed they were prepared to work for Christ and their suffering brothers and Christians to show their own faith. The infant Society had an almost miraculous expansion – by 1834 there were over 100 members, while just one year later, a Conference was started in Rome and a rule developed. By the mid 1840's the Society has spread to most of Europe including the British Isles and had crossed the Atlantic to America, Canada and Brazil. It is said that over one million visits are made every day to those in need by members of the Society throughout the world – in their work, the members of the Society of St Vincent de Paul have been likened to the hands and feet of Christ.

FOUNDATION OF THE ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY IN SCOTLAND:

Here in Scotland, the first Foundation of the Society took place in **Edinburgh in 1845** – just a mere 12 years following on the Foundation of the first Conference by Frederick Ozanam in Paris. Another group called “The Holy Guild of St Joseph” had been founded by Bishop Gillis and had 300 members by 1845. It was from this group that the first Conference of the Society of St Vincent de Paul was founded on **25th May 1845 in the rooms of the Guild of St Joseph at 7 Hunter Square, Edinburgh**. In the parishes of St Patrick's and St Mary's Cathedral nearby half the collection taken up at the door of the church was given to the Conference – with dedicated men giving an outstanding example of their Christian charity to others. Other Conferences soon began to appear with the springing up of new parishes, and one member of the Conference left for Glasgow where he formed the first Conference there in **1848**.

ONGOING GROWTH OF THE ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY:

Over the years various groups of Christians gathered together in organisations of one kind or another have faded away after a few years. We might ask why when so many other societies have failed and when increasing care has been provided by the Welfare State – just how has the St Vincent de Paul Society not only survived but grown tremendously in recent times.

Firstly, I would say that the members of the Society have not in any way stood still but have been prepared **to move with the times while maintaining their basic principles of charity**. The original rule of the Society came into existence in 1835 and was formalised in the first manual in 1845. This rule remained in operation until **1967** – it indeed was proved to be almost invaluable having stood the test of time for over 100 years. However at that time it became apparent that the vision was necessary to bring the rule into line with the modern world and the ideals of the Second Vatican Council. **Consequently the new rule was finalised at a plenary meeting in Dublin in 1973. Women** have been of course welcomed as full members of the Society for over 30 years now in Scotland; and in addition **youth conferences** of the Society provide an outstanding example to all members.

Secondly, it is acknowledged that much good has been accomplished by the Welfare State in our own time but **there are still needs – indeed very great needs**. Sometimes these needs are ignored but it is interesting to note that in some areas of Scotland even at this present time almost half of the pupils at primary schools receive some form of clothing grants. Local Authority publications often paint pictures of poor areas getting poorer and poverty seeping out in to neighbouring areas. Those who are unemployed are unemployed for longer times

and a particularly vulnerable section of the community, single parent households, are expected to increase year by year. In a very special way because of the present economic recession the needs have become increasingly difficult to satisfy – and it is a sad feature of our time that those who put by much of their income for pensions or joined various schemes for care in their old age have suddenly realised that there has been a drastic reduction in the sums to which they might look forward.

In a special way the members of the Society are intensely concerned with needs at this present time as stated in the update of the Society's rule in 1973: "The Society is concerned not only in relieving need but also in **addressing the situations that cause it**".

Thirdly, I would suggest that **twinning** has helped to keep the members of the Society here at home alive to the cares and concerns of others throughout the world. In this way, conferences which have more than sufficient funds for their own present needs are able to liaise with conferences in very needy parts of the world which have great needs to satisfy and quite simply do not have the means to satisfy these needs.

However we might say that the most important reason of all for the magnificent survival and growth of the Society in our own country and throughout the world is because of the **basic spirituality of the Society** – that spirituality which is handed on to all of the members and to everyone who comes in contact with the St Vincent de Paul Society. Anyone connected with the Society is fully aware of the sanctification of so many people, ordinary lay people, through the St Vincent de Paul Society.

CONCLUSION:

While listening to something of the history of the Society and its present aims we must never forget the humble origins of the Society and the reasons why it has continued right down to this present day. **Women and men inspired by the Gospel vision of Jesus Christ himself in love and care for those less fortunate than ourselves want to continue that basic apostolate of Jesus in the Church and in the world.**

I have referred before to the two signs of Jesus Christ in any Catholic church: The red light of the sanctuary lamp at one end of the church indicates the presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament; and the St Vincent de Paul box at the door of the church indicates the presence of Jesus Christ in his poor.

Seeing these signs day by day, Sunday by Sunday, should be a reminder to everyone coming into a Catholic church of their basic faith – Christ is still with us and Christ must be loved by us whether in the Sacrament or in our fellow women and men.