

MODULE VI

Our Vincentian Conference

SESSION 6.4:

Our Home Visits

Learning Objectives

After completing this Session
you will have greater insight to:

- ① Appreciate how the Home Visit is rooted in our heritage.
- ② Identify the attitudes of a Vincentian heart.
- ③ Recognize the Rules and Guidelines for Home Visits.
- ④ Understand the importance of Home Visit Teams.



SESSION 6.4: OUR HOME VISITS

Part I

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

Zacchaeus first ran out in front, and climbed a sycamore tree which was along Jesus' route, in order to see him. When Jesus came to the spot he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. I mean to stay at your house today." (Luke 19: 2-3)

OUR DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER:

(Each section is read slowly and reflectively, by different members)

Rule, Part I, 1.9 tells us that:

"Vincentians endeavor to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor. They do not judge those they serve. Rather, they seek to understand them as they would a brother or sister."

In observing both the Rule and the Spirit of the Society, the home visit is the closest thing the Society has to a fundamental activity, practiced universally. "The visiting of the poor in their dismal homes is the distinctive character of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul." (Emmanuel Bailly, 1841)

And so from the beginning of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the central and most fundamental activity of the Conferences has been the visitation of the needy in their home. This action is the clearest symbol of the Vincentian charism which dictates the highest respect for the dignity of the poor: the visitor becomes the guest and the person being helped is the master. It is in the home environment that needy persons feel most free to entrust their stories of struggle. It is there, in the family setting, that Vincentians are asked to listen, offer humble advice, and render assistance.

HOME VISITS

Frederic Ozanam told us: "The science of charity reform is not transmitted through books and at assemblies' tribunes as much as by climbing stairs to visit the home of the poor, kneeling at his bed, suffering

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from the same cold as he does, and discovering the secret of a grief-stricken heart in the course of a friendly conversation.”

The following “Rules for Home Visits” essentially deal with attitude. Attitude is what you bring to the visit. It affects the way you think and the way you act. It truly is your contribution to the encounter. It is not so much the material things that we give that are important as what we bring from our hearts.

RULES FOR HOME VISITS

1. One of our purposes as members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is to bring the love of God to those who are in need.

Our role as helper obliges us to keep as open a mind as possible. Give those we serve the benefit of the doubt—at least until you have heard their story and can make a reasonable judgment as to the validity of the need. And remember it is the need we are judging—not the person.

2. Vincentians must be good listeners.

Vincentians must listen carefully to the poor. They should visit those in need with the spirit of servants asking their masters, “What is it that we can do for you?” Our Lord has called out to us. It is He whom we are serving in the person of the poor.

3. Vincentians represent Christ to those we serve.

We must be pleasant, loving, and caring when we encounter those in need. Our Lord asked us to love one another as He loves us. That’s a tall order and we need to represent Him well. What this means is that if you are having a bad day, you can’t show it. As Vincentians, we represent Christ to those we serve.

4. Vincentians show those who are in need that God cares about them, and gives them some hope.

Christ’s love was unconditional. You may walk away from a visit feeling like you have made a real difference or you may feel like you were not able to change anything. The impact of what you do today may not show up for months or years.

Notes section with horizontal lines for writing.

5. Vincentians are asked to make a decision, a choice, and a judgment.

We are asked to make good judgments about whether to help or not. We are not to be judgmental about lifestyle choices. It is not easy. We have to deal with mind and heart issues as well as all our life experiences. Don't deny someone your help because you disagree with how they choose to live. Remember that our Lord told us that whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters we do to him.

6. Judgment not Judgmental.

We are asked to make a judgment about the need that is presented to us. We must not be judgmental about the actions of the people requesting assistance. Remember: "The measure with which you measure will be used to measure you." (Matthew 7:2)

7. The Conference Regulations.

It is the Conference that has the resources. It is the Conference that does the works of charity. It is the Conference that decides what will and what will not be done. If the Conference as a group decides not to give any further assistance to a specific family (regardless of reason), it would be wrong for an individual member or visiting team to assist the family in spite of the Conference's decision.

8. Vincentians bolster, encourage, and assist each other.

The visiting team members are the only ones present to hear the story, to ask the questions, to understand the circumstances and to formulate a resolution to the problem. Their decision, at that time, is the right one.

Rule, Part I: 1.11 tells us that:

"Vincentians are sincerely concerned with the deeper needs and the spiritual well-being of those they help, always observing a profound respect for their conscience and the faith they believe in, listening and understanding with their hearts, beyond both words and appearances."

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SESSION 6.4: OUR HOME VISITS

Part II

OPENING PRAYER: (Together)

Jesus said to his disciples: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Pardon, and you shall be pardoned. Give, and it shall be given to you. ... For the measure you measure with will be measured back to you." (Luke 6:36-38)

(Each section is read slowly and reflectively, by different members)

Rule, Part I: 1.7 states:

"Vincentians pray that the Holy Spirit may guide them during their visits and make them channels for the peace and joy of Christ."

HOME VISIT GUIDELINES

1. If you are on a witch-hunt, stay home.

- If you believe that the people you are going to visit are going to give you a phony story; and/or
- If you believe before you actually meet with the people that they are only going to sell the food to get money for cigarettes or alcohol or drugs, then you have prejudged them and shouldn't be there.

Stay home to pray and reflect on your Vincentian Vocation.

2. If you are an expert on life, stay home.

Some Vincentians have a tendency to feel that they know the answers, they've heard it all before, and they know what they are going to do to resolve the request before the visit occurs. The problem with being an expert is that experts:

- are ready with what needs to be done while the words of the request are still being formed in the mind of the one asking.
- do not listen.

Stay home to pray and reflect on your Vincentian Vocation.

3. If you cannot smile and be pleasant, stay home.

We are called to show them that God cares, but:

- Grumpy people never provide those they encounter with feelings of love and renewed hope.
- Burn out can cause ill-mannered and discourteous behavior. If you see this in yourself or your partner, don't go.

Stay home to pray and reflect on your Vincentian Vocation.

4. We are responsible for our effort, not for success.

It would be great to point to every home visit that we make and be able to say, "This is one of our finest success stories." But, we know, in fact, that very few of the families we visit for the first time ever even take the good advice we give them. That's part of human nature and we should not expect much more. Our role in serving those in need is twofold:

- First, it is to show those who are in need that God cares for them;
- Second, our role is to make life a little bit better for those who are suffering and to bring them some hope. If we can do more... that's great. If not, that's okay, too.

We are responsible for making the effort to help. We are responsible for our attitudes, for the amount of love we put into the visit, for the amount of love we put into the advice we give. We are not responsible for making it all work. We cannot place conditions on the help we give.

5. Judgment—not judgmental!

We are asked to judge the validity of the need and the level of resources that are available to us. We are asked to listen to what is presented, observe the surroundings, analyze the circumstances, and evaluate what we have to work with:

- It is the need that is important. Is this real?
- Do they really need the groceries?
- Do they really need the rent help? Do we have enough money to pay a portion of the bill?

We are asked to make a judgment-period.

Don't make your decision based on any one of the many lifestyle choices that people make:

- Are they living together instead of being married?
- Is the house filthy and the kids as well? Is he/she just lounging on the sofa?

These and a thousand other questions are based on lifestyle choices—and **cause us to be judgmental. But, we are asked only to make a judgment about how and what help we can offer.**

6. Who owns the groceries? Let go!

Oftentimes we are judgmental about the people we serve based on how they deal with the things we give them. But, Jesus told us to love one another as He loves us. And, He loves us unconditionally. The same should be applied as Vincentians give their gifts to those in need. Our gifts are unconditional.

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- When we give a person or family a box of groceries, who owns the groceries? **They do.**
- When we give a person or a family some clothing or some furniture, who owns the merchandise? **They do.**
- How they handle it, how they dispose of it is their business. **They have ownership.**

7. *Work within the procedures of the Conference.*

All Conferences are run democratically. The group makes all decisions. No individual member has the right to override what the Conference decides. Every Conference establishes a set of procedures upon which the members may operate as Vincentians, and they must be followed whether they agree with them or not.

8. *Your decision is the right one.*

Always remember: unless you are doing something contrary to your Conference's prior decisions or contrary to the Society, your decision is the right one. No one within the Conference has a right to criticize the team for the decision they made. Other members may make recommendations as to other questions that may be asked in similar circumstances next time, other resources that may be referred, other paths that may be suggested. **But criticism is out.**

Rule, Part I: 1.12 states:

"Vincentians never forget the many blessings they receive from those they visit. They recognize that the fruit of their labors springs, not from themselves, but especially from God and from the poor they serve."

(Pause in silence for reflection-underline the words/phrases that touched you - make notes in the space provided.)

DISCUSSION:

Which of the Guidelines for Home Visits challenges you the most?

CLOSING PRAYER: (Together)

We thank You, Lord, for the many blessings which we receive from those whom we visit. Help us to love and respect them, to understand their deeper needs, and to share their burdens and joys as true friends in Christ. Amen.

ENRICHMENT READING

FREDERIC'S WORDS

“Help is humiliating when it appeals to men from below, taking heed of their material wants only, paying no attention to those of the flesh, to the cry of hunger and cold, to what excites pity, to what one succors even in the beasts. It humiliates when there is no reciprocity, when you give the poor man nothing but bread, or clothes, or a bundle of straw — when, in fact, there is no likelihood of his ever giving you in return. . . .

But it honors when it appeals to him from above, when it occupies itself with his soul, his religious, moral, and political education, with all that emancipates him from his passions and from a portion of his wants, with those things that make him free, and may make him great. Help honors when to the bread that nourishes it adds the visit that consoles, the advice that enlightens, the friendly shake of the hand that lifts up the sinking courage; when it treats the poor man with respect, not only as an equal but as a superior, since he is suffering what perhaps we are incapable of suffering; since he is the messenger of God to us, sent to prove our justice and our charity, and to save us by our works.

Help then becomes honorable, because it may become mutual, because every man who gives a kind word, a good advice, a consolation today, may tomorrow stand himself in need of a kind word, an advice, or a consolation; because the hand that you clasp clasps yours in return; because the indigent family whom you love loves you in return, and will have largely acquitted themselves towards you when the old man, the mother, the little children shall have prayed for you.” (21 October 1848, Frederic Ozanam)

SPIRITUALITY ON HOME VISITS

Teams should always pray before and after making a home visit. If our primary goal is to bring the love and charity of Christ to those we visit, what better way of doing so than to say a prayer with the people we are visiting. God’s love is meant to be given away along with the food, rent or utility check. This is what makes us different; this is what makes us Vincentian. Guidelines for praying with those you visit:

- Be aware of what has been discussed during the interview and pray for that intention (health, employment, strength to overcome an addiction, etc.).
- Ask them: “How about a prayer?” If they agree, ask if they would want to “lead us in prayer”. If they decline to lead and you are not comfortable with a spontaneous prayer, pray the “Our Father” together.

HOME VISIT TEAMS

1. Always visit in pairs:

You make contact with your guests only as a member of a two-person team. Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs. This is the Vincentian Way. It also has several other benefits:

- Provides two sets of eyes to observe, two pairs of ears to listen.
- Protects team members from unfounded charges.

2. Pair new with experienced:

If a new Vincentian is learning this function, the team should have one experienced member. Example is the best teacher. For new Conferences, Vincentians from neighboring parish Conferences should be asked to provide this 'experience' during the first few weeks.

3. Two-gender teams have an advantage:

While any team meets the home visit standard, experience has shown there is great value in having teams with one man and one woman. Men and women notice different things on a home visit. It is not advisable for two men to visit a woman when she is alone.

4. The need for strength:

Your Conference will deliver a great deal of food. Older Vincentians are great on a team as they have ears and eyes that know what to listen and look for, but many Vincentians struggle to carry the heavy food boxes that their Conference provides. Pair your older members with younger, stronger members. You do both members a great service.

5. Security procedures:

Do not give out your last name or cell/home telephone number. Lock your car, even when you feel you will only be away for "a few minutes." You hope those who you are helping are honest, but there is no assurance about their neighbors. Although daytime visits are not always possible, team members (and their families) will feel more secure if they can be done during the day. But it is reasonable to be cautious in all areas day or night.

SCHEDULING

1. How often:

In the ideal, the Conference will have home visit teams available every day of the week to serve the poor who call in for help that day. In reality, few Conferences have enough members. If you can only cover a couple of days, try to space them out.

2. When:

Home visits are made when teams are available. Hopefully a home visit team will perform its duties at about the same time each week so that the person answering the Conference's phone can tell them approximately when to expect the home visit. Situations of pending eviction, imminent utility shut offs and empty food shelves

increase the anxiety and fear experienced by the people whom we serve. Therefore, it is important to remember that we try to serve, not at our convenience, but at their convenience.

4. Record-keeping:

"The job's not through until the paperwork's done." Always discuss the case with your co-worker before making any decisions. Then document who you visited, when, where, what you observed, the basics of the case, and what help was given and/or promised. The Conference needs these records to appropriately handle future requests from this individual or family. The IRS also requires you to keep records of where your funds were spent.

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