

Home Visitation

(from the Diocesan Council of Phoenix)

“The knowledge of social well-being and of reform is to be learned not from books nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man’s garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, hearing the secret of his lonely and troubled mind.” (Frederic Ozanam, Founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul)

“The Foundation, the very essence of our Society, is the visiting of the poor in their homes; we must see them in rags, and amid all the disorder and distress of their misery, improvidence and discouragement. Such a sight is both a lesson to us, and a motive of devotedness to them....” (Joseph Emmanuel Bailly, First Conference President, 1841)

As can be seen by the above quotations, home visitation has been emphasized as the primary method of our works of charity since our Society was founded in 1833. Unlike fads or trendy activities, this is not something that has faded away or is out of date.



It has been proven over and over again that this is the best way to learn about those whom we are serving and also the best way to be a servant to the poor. It’s a primary source of our spiritual satisfaction to go to the home rather than ask them to come to us. *The heart of the Vincentian Ministry is the visitation of the poor in their home...whether that is an ordinary dwelling place, a hospital, a nursing home, a hostel, a prison or even the street.* (Home Visitation, National Council of Australia).

One’s home is not just a house. A home connotes much more; for it is refuge and castle, as well as place of residence. A home, moreover, tells the story of its occupants. It reveals much that is intimate about those who live there. Because home is that kind of sanctuary, it belongs in a unique way to those who therein live. Under normal conditions, an outsider has no right to enter except by invitation. From this perspective, Vincentians who call on the poor are honored by those who receive them. The welcomed Vincentian is being accorded the status of friend, of privileged guest who is permitted to share in the inner life of another human being or family. (United States Manual (1995), page 101)

Why is home visitation so important? Why must we go to them? Wouldn’t it be easier and more efficient to ask them to come to us? There are several good reasons to do home visits:

1. Our Vincentian spirituality focuses on our search for Christ in those we encounter. Jesus told us himself (in Matthew 25) that when He was thirsty, we gave him drink; when He was hungry, we gave Him food; when He was naked, we clothed Him; whatever we do for the least of His brethren, we do for Him. We are in search of Christ; humbly we go to Him; only in pride do we ask Him to come to us.
2. *“You are a servant of the poor...They are your masters”* (St. Vincent de Paul). The whole concept of being a servant draws us to do for them rather than ask them to do for us. In the Peace Prayer of St. Francis we find *“O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love;”* and to this we can add: to have others come to us as to go to them.

3. Our act of going to them is a form of sacrifice. We have to give of our own personal time, we have to make an effort to leave our comfortable surroundings and the activities that we are involved in to go to the suffering Christ. Yes, this is a personal sacrifice; it is an act of love. *“If we wish to become friends with the poor and of the poor, then giving of assistance is not what we are doing – the sharing of ourselves is what we are about.”* (Robert Fitzgerald, SVdP Australia, 1988)

4. Going to the homes of those that request assistance is the best way to learn about them and their circumstances. At a minimum, it verifies that you were given a correct address, a real address, the families (or families) do reside there, the need for food is real, the need for furniture that they requested is real. *“We shall become acquainted with their sufferings, their hopes, maybe even their vices. We shall know what advice we ought to offer.”* (Bailly, 1841)



5. The work of the Society is a work of charity, not a business. We strive for efficacy rather than efficiency. It is the quality of our encounter that has a spiritual impact on us rather than the number of encounters. The home visit provides for this quality while enhancing the dignity and self-respect of those we visit.

6. The poor are too often required to go here and go there, travel is not always convenient for them. Oftentimes, the only means of transportation for the poor is walking. It is especially at times like this that we can build their self-esteem by going to them.

Fulton J. Sheen once wrote, “The truth is the truth whether everyone believes it or no one believes it.” The fact of the matter is that home visits are the best way to learn about the poor and the best way to serve them. We can come up with any number of reasons (excuses) for not doing this; but, the reality is: it is our responsibility as servants to the poor to give them the highest quality, the most efficacious service possible. It is Christ Himself whom we are serving.

“Let us continue visiting the poor in their homes, the fundamental work of our Society, exists and which will make it live, which has already brought us such a rich harvest of divine graces and will continue to sanctify us if we remain faithful to its practice...Visiting the poor in their homes is then our great, our distinctive business; the business which should occupy the time of the members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.” (Bailly, 1844)