

Love Serves

BY SISTER ALICE MARIE QUINN, D.C.

Serving the hungry out of obligation is one thing, but to help them in a spirit of Christian kindness is quite another. St. Vincent de Paul taught the Daughters of Charity to serve others as we would serve Jesus Christ—always seeing our Lord in those who need us. Anyone can bring a dish of food to someone, but not everyone does this with love.

In the early seventeenth century, Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), a priest ministering in Paris, became aware of the needs of the poor in that crowded city. His heart was moved with compassion and tenderness, for war had left many people without jobs and homes. There was no organized charity as we know it today. He considered it his Christian obligation to address the needs of the poor people living in and around the City of Lights.

As Vincent was getting ready for Mass one Sunday morning, a member of the parish came to him and announced that a large family, including the mother, father, and children, were very ill and had nothing to eat. Vincent told the people assembled at the Mass of the family's plight. On his way through the parish after the service, he was moved by the generosity of many people bringing vegetables, fruits, and other provisions to the family. Yet he was concerned that their food, being given all at once, might spoil for lack of available storage and be wasted.

Vincent called together some ladies of the church to organize and collect food, clothing, and other necessities for those needing service. It would not help the poor much to have everything given to them on one day, and then suffer a few days later because no one was available to

provide for them. Through this and similar incidents, Vincent de Paul began to encourage, organize, and train others to help the poor.

This was the beginning of Daughters of Charity, which is the largest order of religious women in the world. Louise de Marillac, a wealthy widow, assisted Vincent in the formation of the charity.

I am a Daughter of Charity living in Los Angeles, California, three hundred and fifty years later, doing what Vincent and Louise began in Paris, France. Taking food, clothing, medical assistance, and education to the poor out of a sense of obligation is one thing, but to do this in a spirit of love and Christian kindness is quite another. Vincent taught the Daughters of Charity to serve others as we would serve our Lord Jesus Christ—always seeing him in those who need us. Anyone can bring a dish of food to someone, but not everyone does it with love. As we say at St. Vincent Meals on Wheels, “Love Serves.”

LOVING THE HUNGRY

When, as a Registered Dietician, I was assigned in 1975 to a hospital kitchen in central Los Angeles, I visited in the homes of recently discharged hospital patients who needed dietary instructions for their medical recovery. I became aware of the many elderly people who were unable to get and fix food for themselves. Most of them lived alone and were poor. All of them were lonely.

As usually happens, God puts people in your path when He has a special mission for you. One person told me about government-sponsored places that served the elderly a hot and nutritious noon meal in a family setting. I checked several out. The food was hot, but not always very good. The seniors had to wait in line with their canes, walkers, and numerous parcels. Often the atmosphere was uninviting and even dirty, with little bugs flying around. I’m sure the food was nutritious, but it was not served with love.

Thus began my search for a small kitchen and hall where I could establish a lunch program befitting the Christ-like elderly poor. Where was the love? I was on my way to establishing what the good Lord wanted of me.

Jesus had a great concern for the hungry and all four gospels recount how he miraculously provided bread and fish for them (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13; and compare Mark 8:1-10). His concern for the hungry is evident in the details: he asked that they recline on a grassy slope and he requested the leftovers to be collected so nothing would be wasted.

I was formally educated in the techniques of food service management, but my religious vocation as a Daughter of Charity taught me the Christian values of compassion, love, and unselfish service. Through my religious instructions, reading of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac, and daily prayer, I have let myself be opened to what Jesus

wants of me, namely to feed the poor with love and good nutrition. Love comes first. Or, St. Vincent told us, “first the heart and then the work.”

Our first meal was served in the local church hall to eighty-four senior citizens on July 7, 1977. We invited them to sit at tables covered with white paper cloths and decorated with old beer bottles filled with fresh daises, and be waited on by cheerful volunteers. From this small beginning, we

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established a meal delivery service to those unable to leave their homes because of illness or age. The St. Vincent Meals-On-Wheels Program today delivers over 2,400 meals every day, seven days a week, to persons unable to leave their homes.

The last twenty-seven years have been a service of love. We consider

Meals-On-Wheels to be our mission, not our job. We ask our guests what they *don't* like and provide a substitution if it's on our menu. When they are without money, they still receive the food they need. We check on each one every day.

Our logo is an angel who carries a meal while driving a cloud. Yes, we are angels, God's messengers to the hungry, delivering our love, compassion, kindness, and a hot chicken dinner or, if they prefer, a savory meat-loaf with vegetable gravy. “Love Serves” every day, every meal, and for every person who needs us. We continue Jesus' work here on earth, showing His love for each person by what we do.

MINISTERING TO THE LONELY

Our Meals-On-Wheels Program is located close to downtown Los Angeles. About ninety-one other MOW programs serve the Los Angeles area and each one is independently organized and operated. Many programs are funded by the government and the clients must be sixty or older. While most of the people we serve are elderly, we do not have an age limit. We are here for anyone who needs us. Our meals are hot, nutritionally balanced, and delivered with love. Our visit, brief as it is, may be more important than the food we deliver. Often we are the only people our clients will see all day. I think their greatest poverty is loneliness.

Over the years I have delivered meals to our homebound clients in every neighborhood. When I visit people in unsafe and dirty dwellings, it troubles me. I want to move them to a clean, safe, and beautiful place. Time and again this “dream” has come to me: the poor, the lonely, and

the hungry deserve the best. We are in the process of building fully furnished apartments for one hundred fourteen of our neediest clients in the St. Vincent Meals-On-Wheels program. This residence, located next door to our new kitchen, will be called *Hotel Dieu* (or, “the House of God” in French). We will clean the apartments each week and provide fresh sheets and towels. In a large dining room, everyone will gather for food and companionship at the noon meal. We also hope to have a beauty shop, exercise room, and game rooms for our guests. It is so wonderful these persons will move into a safe and comfortable home to enjoy together.

Motivated by the teachings of Jesus, we are doing what our Lord did while on earth. It is such a blessing to do this work. St. Vincent assured his Daughters of Charity, “If you have served the poor during life, they will open the gates of heaven for you when you die.” I believe this is true. What better assurance can there be for what we do. We are blessed!

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on the St. Vincent Meals on Wheels program, go to www.stvincentmow.org. There are Meals on Wheels programs all over the world, each with the hope of keeping individuals at home and as independent as possible. To find a program in your community in North America, visit the search pages of MealCall.org (www.mealcall.org), the National Meals on Wheels Foundation (www.nationalmealsonwheels.org), or the Meals on Wheels Association of America (www.mowaa.org).



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