Community of Faith – The Society of St. Vincent de Paul

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul was founded by a young French student named Frederic Ozanam and a few of his friends. There was great social unrest in France in 1833 and Frederic became aware of the great poverty that was in his country. He decided that he, as a Christian, must do something about it. He needed to back up his faith with action. He approached the Daughters of Charity and they introduced him to poor families. He and his friends began to visit those living in poverty and brought them food and comfort. They decided to adopt the name of a patron saint for the organisation and so it became known as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Vincent de Paul was a Catholic priest dedicated to serving the poor.

“YOURS MUST BE WORK OF LOVE, OF KINDNESS; YOU MUST GIVE YOUR TIME, YOUR TALENTS, YOURSELVES. THE POOR PERSON IS A UNIQUE PERSON OF God’S FASHIONING WITH AN INALIENABLE RIGHT TO RESPECT. YOU MUST NOT BE CONTENT WITH TIDING THE POOR OVER THE POVERTY CRISIS: YOU MUST STUDY THEIR CONDITION AND THE INJUSTICES WHICH BROUGHT ABOUT SUCH POVERTY, WITH THE AIM OF A LONG-TERM IMPROVEMENT.”

BLESSED FREDERIC OZANAM, 1813-1853

Vision

The work of SVP is inspired by the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel. Frederic Ozanam had a vision to help people in need like Jesus did. As Frederic and his friends expanded their work they all discovered that their contact with the poor made them more caring and more compassionate. By the end of its first year over one hundred volunteers were working with the poor in the city.

All that took place almost 180 years ago. Today SVP is an international organisation: it helps people in need in over 100 countries worldwide. Today, many join the organisation because they want to spread the message of Jesus Christ. They want to put into action this message by loving and serving those that are disadvantaged. Their vision comes from the founder of the organisation to look after the weakest of society, and to love them and God like we love ourselves.
Leadership

Leadership is a characteristic of all communities. The role of a leader is to guide a community in following the vision of its founder. The SVP in Ireland elects a national leader or president and several regional leaders. All the local conferences throughout the country elect their own leaders.

The leader of a conference meets the members to plan and organise what work needs to be done. SVP volunteers have different roles in the organisation. They help out in different ways according to their interests and talents. For example many do home visits and assist families to budget and manage their money, others organise after-school clubs. Some members prefer to work in thrift shops or in preparing meals for people who are housebound.

SVP is an international organisation with a strong national presence in this country. There is an active SVP conference in most parishes of the Catholic Dioceses of Ireland.

Service

The society offers friendship and support to people in need. Its volunteers carry out their work in their own free-time. Each member takes on a role. Some members visit people in their homes to help them with various things like money management. Other members visit the elderly in hospital, or prisoners in prison, while others organise things for young children to help them in school. Whatever their role is, it is important, because so many people depend on their generosity of time and kindness.

In Ireland, even today, there are still many people who believe that poverty is something to be ashamed of. As a result, there is a certain amount of hidden poverty. The society respects people’s privacy and is very confidential in its work and practice.

Commitment

Adults and young people join SVP because they want to put their Christian belief into action. Members make a commitment to spend at least one afternoon or evening each week helping the less well off in their community. The organisation is committed to respecting the dignity of all people. As Matthew’s Gospel says: ‘I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome.. in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did this to me.’