

**Homily For General St Vincent de Paul Meeting: Oct. 27, 2007
Council of Phoenix, Presentation by Father Bill Fitzgerald**

On behalf of our pastor Father Tom Hever, and the parish of OLPH and our Men's Club and Choir, I welcome you this morning. It is so appropriate that a parish welcomes you, for the grass roots of our Church exist at the parish level..

No one knows more about the grass roots than you. For you indeed are the front line in our Church's mission to speak and act for the poor.

Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! For all your efforts to bring to life and action this morning's *gospel about the poor invited to the banquet...*

And Isaiah's prophecy in the first reading:

... "sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed, and the homeless and clothing the naked when you see them..."

More than ever you are vitally needed today.

For where shall the poor find a voice in a culture of consumerism?

How shall the cries of the poor be heard over the next decade when the latest estimates indicate we shall have spent \$2.4 trillion dollars on war?

(That will mean a war cost of nearly \$8000 from every man, woman and child in our country?)

How shall the voices of the poor be heard when rising incomes of the very rich are in contrast to 37 million of our fellow citizens living below the federal poverty level

(That level means a family of 4 living on \$20,650 dollars a year.)

How shall the voices of the nearly 13% of our neighbors living below that level be heard?

I suggest: not easily!

Jesus always taught in parables. So when I thought about the plight of so many of the clients that you so beautifully serve, I wondered what kind of parable might describe the current situation of the poor in our land.

And here is a possible parable

A Parable For Our Times

A few days after Katrina struck, a man named Juan {who had changed his name to John,) was found clinging to a tree in the bijos of Louisiana. And the poor fellow's feet were still immersed in the floodwater. Imagine that scene.

Soon an official looking person comes along; he looks at John and he asks him:

“Let me see your i.d.!”

John remains silent.

So the questioner pulls out a note pad; writes on it, and moves on.

John is bedraggled and poorly dressed for the evening cold, so a Saint Vincent de Paul volunteer comes by, notices his plight, and hands him a warm sweatshirt.

And John smiles... but he remains silent.

Now despite the fact that the flood water is going down, John seems to be sinking in the mud, so for him the water is rising; And the next day the water is now up to his knees.

Another Saint Vincent de Paul volunteer approaches and notices John, and realizes he must be hungry so he places food in John's hands.

And John smiles... he but remains silent.

And shortly thereafter the water is up to John's neck.

(What both volunteers did not realize was that John was deaf and mute. He had no voice. No wonder he remained silent.)

So he could not tell the two visitors that he was actually sinking in quick sand and sinking rapidly.

Finally the next day, a Saint Vincent de Paul volunteer comes by and can see no sign of John and figures everything must now be OK.

Only it isn't; the quicksand had swallowed up John and all his needs. He was now invisible. (Just like so many of the poor in the midst of a consumer culture.)

The Saint Vincent de Paul visitors could help his clothing need and his hunger, but they individually could not solve the problem of quick sand that permeated the whole area around John.

Longsuffering John had a systemic problem. The very ground he stood on needed to change—but he had no power and no voice.

I suggest this is a parable for our times.

Katrina illustrated for all of us a system that should have worked, but did not.

When we consider poverty in our land there are too many poor around us mired in a systemic dilemma; and like John, they have no voice to fix the system.

Is it not true that so many of the poor that you deal with every day are in quicksand and are sinking in our new global economy?

Similar to the babe in the womb, they have no voice...and that is why our Society has established "Voice of the Poor Committees" so that as followers of Christ, we are challenged to create conditions for marginalized voices to be heard."

The poverty stricken are in many ways like the baby in the womb who cannot speak for itself, but needs other voices to address the systemic causes—such as dire poverty—that facilitate abortion.

Pope Benedict:

Pope Benedict has stated our rationale very clearly: “Within the community of believers there can never be room for a poverty that denies anyone what is needed for a dignified life.”

And as recently as ten days ago, he spoke out again with these words:

“Certain peoples still live in conditions of extreme poverty. The disparity between rich and poor has become more evident and more disturbing, even within the most economically advanced nations.

This worrying situation appeals to the conscience of mankind because the conditions being suffered by such a large number of people are such as to offend the dignity of human beings and as a consequence, to compromise the authentic and harmonious progress of the world community.”

And then the Holy Father makes this direct appeal to all of us:

“I ENCOURAGE THEN AN INCREASE IN EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE THE CAUSES OF POVERTY AND THE TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES ARISING FROM IT.”

This is why the National leadership of St. Vincent de Paul encourages the various councils to establish Voice of the Poor Committees.

Their voice and your voice need to be heard by legislators and policy makers. Only you have the organization, the zeal, the energy, and the social justice consciences that are able to speak loudly and persuasively for the great number of poor who have no voice.

Our Phoenix Voice of the Poor Committee, chaired by Lucy Howell, gives our Society a needed voice on behalf of the poor. I urge your support of its vital work which is to urge systemic change to benefit the poor.

Like John in the parable, the poor lack even a whisper in our society.

There are too many others speaking loudly.

And worse yet, are there not so many strident, and angry voices in our current culture crying out against the poor?

Have you not heard these loud cries?

“Deport all the 12 million “illegals”men, women, and children alike!” ...or:

“Deny college benefits to their children!”...or:

“Let the poor help themselves!”...or

And this from the internet:“If so many of the poorer legalized citizens are in such need of children’s health insurance, ...let them be responsible... and practice birth control.and often we hear this:

“The government needs to do less and less. The government is the problem.”

Have you not heard these voices? Often they are the voices of good people you know---but are these voices in any way Christ like?

Our challenge is to be Christ like to the poor no matter where they come from.

Christ’s mission of compassion knows no boundaries.

Our goal is the common good of all.

But as Catholic Charities USA points out:

“A disturbing number of people in our society are guided by a philosophy of radical individualism and argue that government has little or no role in alleviating poverty. They claim the market without restraint will ultimately solve the problems of the poor.”

That is not what the Popes have to say. Quite to the contrary, the Church recognizes that the government’s role is to promote the COMMON GOOD.

In “Mother and Teacher” Pope John XXIII wrote:

“As for the State, its whole reason for existence is the realization of the common good in the temporal order. It cannot hold aloof from economic matters.”

A closing story:

A salesman was traveling through the Arkansas Ozarks, and a terrible thunder storm occurred. The rain came down in sheets. He began to get worried about flash flooding.

So he pulled into the yard of mountain cabin, and sought shelter.

These mountain folks were most hospitable and invited him in to supper. And all during supper the rain poured down in buckets. After supper the host and salesman walked out onto the porch only to discover that the cabin was now surrounded by rising water.

The flood had indeed arrived. And then as they stood surveying the scene, a strange sight appeared. A hat came floating around the house and as they stood there it came around again and again.

The salesman was puzzled. “Hey, how do you explain that hat continuously floating around and around your house?”

The cabin owner laughed, “Oh!” he said, “that’s just grandpa... he said he’d get the grass cut come hell or high water!”

The Ozark Grandpa in this story was indefatigable and unrelenting in pursuing his goal of getting the grass cut, “come hell or high water.”

I suggest to you the lesson we can learn from the dedicated grandpa is that we as Vincentians must be unrelenting in our pursuit of a voice for the poor—in a culture where their voices are lost in a flood of angry words.

And if we are, then the prophecy of Isaiah from today’s scripture will be fulfilled our time:

As Vincentians and followers of Christ, “both we and the poor shall renew our strength; we shall become like a watered garden, like a spring whose water never fails.”