

Life Together

One of the Mass readings last Sunday contained the insight from Genesis that it is not good for a man to be alone. But this talk is not going to be about Adam and Eve and marriage but rather about life together in the Church, specifically life in some kind of community and life together with a Patron Saint.

I don't think it is good for a priest to be alone and, although the Lord sent the disciples out in pairs, it's often the case that clergy do find themselves ministering alone, without clergy colleagues, often quite far from congenial clergy company too. So it's not surprising that some priests look for something like the Sodality that you are contemplating. You'll be pleased to know I don't intend to make any suggestions at all about how your sodality might order its life. But Fr Richard suggested that you might be interested to know something about the life of the Company of Mission Priests, of which I have been a member for nearly twenty years. You can decide for yourselves what if anything our life together in the Company might be of interest and help to you as you think about how your future might look.

The History of CMP

First then, a quick survey of our Company's history. On Saturday a number of us gathered at St Stephen's House for a Mass to commemorate the foundation of CMP 75 years ago in 1940 at the instigation of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Superiors of Mirfield, Kelham and the Cowley Fathers. (It was lovely to be in their Church for our anniversary Mass). The Company was founded for a very practical reason. At that time new parishes were being founded to minister to people living in the housing estates that were starting to appear on the outskirts of our big cities. These new ecclesiastical parishes tended to be very poor and, on the

whole, so did the people who lived in the areas they served. How could the Church resource ministry to these burgeoning parishes? The idea was that a Company be formed, whose members would remain unmarried for the duration of their time in it, and that these clergy would live together in clergy houses. If there were four priests, they would receive the stipend of three; if there were three priests, they would receive the stipend of two. So there was certainly an element of financial sacrifice on the part of the members of the Company. But there were economies of scale for the Church that made it more affordable both for dioceses and parishes to pay for the clergy. There was only one household to run.

There often seems to be a rather rose-tinted view of clergy-house life among those who look back on it. I imagine it must have had its moments. But there were certainly some very charismatic vicars who formed the curates in their own image and likeness. Even now, I can see by the way a priest celebrates Mass if he has been taught by Fr Michael Whitehead, for example. There were various other lines of apostolic succession too, which found expression in various different ways but, as far as I can see, there was a pretty constant sense of two things in the life of the Company: the serving of poor parishes and the formation of dedicated priests.

Our Company, like most communities, has lots of stories about the different fathers and what they said or did. And you can't help feeling that, tough times and awkward sods notwithstanding, there was much joy and, as Cilla used to say, a lorra, lorra laughs, in the clergy houses of parishes that might have been very lonely and hard for a person on his own. At its best, the Company was able to enthuse parishioners with the joy of Christian living because of the Common Life of the Clergy House. And although my title parish had not been a CMP parish for quite some years by the time I arrived as a deacon, and although there had been various ups and downs in the parish since the Company had departed, nevertheless there was still a really strong legacy of discipleship and spiritual maturity which

impressed me so much that I was moved to seek out the Company and eventually to join it.

Some members of CMP used to understand their membership of the Company as quite a functional matter. When they were working in a CMP parish and living in the clergy house, they would be members of the Company. When a curacy came to an end or a new parish was offered, some would simply leave the Company.

Others have thought of their membership of CMP more in terms of a consecration of life. And I suppose that's pretty much how I think of my membership of CMP now, although I don't particularly want to overstate things. Some of us do speak about CMP almost as if it is a traditional religious community, but it is not quite like that to my mind.

When I was the Warden of the Company I used to feel rather anxious about the different ways in which members of the Company viewed the character of the life. But, helped by a visitation of the Company by Bishop Lindsay, I think we have come to a more relaxed sense of it being ok for different members to place differing emphases on things. The centre holds and that seems good to us.

There was a moment when the future of the Company of Mission Priests was called into question. After the Church of England took the decision that it would ordain women to the priesthood, most members of the Company became Roman Catholics and there was a parting of the ways. 16 out of 40 decided to remain as Anglicans and, after the departure of the others, these 16 met at Damascus House in Mill Hill to decide whether they should wind up the Company and declare its work done, or whether some future mission and ministry could be envisaged. Without wishing to be over-dramatic about things, I think there must have been an element of divine providence at work when the remaining members of the Company organised their meeting, because Damascus House was a house of the

Congregation of the Mission, the Roman Catholic congregation that was founded in 1625 in Paris by St Vincent de Paul. One of these Mill Hill Vincentians, Father Fergus Kelly, came to meet the then Warden, Fr Michael Shields, and the peculiar group of Anglican clergymen and to find out who and what they were. And as the members of the Company described their life and work, it struck Fr Fergus that the work of CMP seemed very similar to the work of the Congregation of the Mission and that it reflected the double charism of St Vincent de Paul, namely the formation of the clergy and the care of the poor. Out of that encounter between Fr Fergus and the remaining members of the Company there emerged what for CMP has been a transformative experience. Over the past 20 years or so, I think we have become more and more who we truly are and have been by sinking our roots ever deeper into the rich soil of the Vincentian tradition. I really do think that this journey has been for the Company an experience of the Paschal Mystery, a death and resurrection experience, so much so that now it is difficult for us to imagine ourselves not being part of the Vincentian Family.

The experience of getting to know the other branches of the Vincentian Family has made us new friends and widened our horizons. We are a Company of men, but we have formed collaborative relationships with the women who are Daughters of Charity and who do phenomenal work with the poor, both far afield and in places like The Passage, the centre for homeless people next to Westminster Cathedral. We are mostly British, but we have become brothers with Vincentians from all over the world. I feel a particular bond now with the Philippines, because I have got to know Fr Marcelo Manimtim and that's where he is from. I feel a bond too with the Vincentian priests and sisters in Kiev, with whom I spend part of my sabbatical as part of their family. In this country, we are part of an umbrella organisation called Vincentians in Partnership. It is made up of various Vincentian congregations of clergy and religious, but also of organisations like the Society of St Vincent de Paul, and the Depaul Trust that works with homeless young people,

and like our Vincentian Justice and Peace network, and how good it is that when CMP clergy deal with poverty at ground level in our parishes, another part of our family is knocking on the doors of government ministers to challenge those in power and with authority and to speak our voice to them. And, of course, for Catholic Anglicans, who take to heart the Lord's prayer that his followers may be one, it is wonderful to realise, albeit in a small and quiet way, something of that unity in our fellowship with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, and I know how deeply they appreciate that too.

Vincent de Paul

Perhaps the greatest element of our Vincentian belonging has been our friendship and our life together with St Vincent de Paul himself. And I would like to tell you a bit about him.

Vincent was born in 1581 in Gascony, in the South West of France. I visited his birthplace a couple of years ago and, apart from the memory of picking up a speeding ticket, my recollection is of rich country, brimming with foie gras and rugby fanatics and all that sort of thing. The prosperous little town of Dax is a spa and very bourgeois and comfortable it looks too. Not far away is the *Berceau de St Vincent de Paul*, the birthplace, and the countryside around there is made up of scrubby-looking pine forests and sandy soil. Vincent was born, if not into abject poverty, then definitely into the hardness of the life of the 16th Century rural poor.

He was fortunate enough to get an education and at the uncanonically young age of 20 he was ordained to the priesthood. Was this proof of his incredible sanctity or his astonishing enthusiasm to be about the Lord's business? Sadly, it was not. Vincent's motives were at best mixed. In those times a career in the Church was a

practical way for a resourceful young man like Vincent to escape the harshness of peasant life and make something of an easier living for himself. Vincent was ambitious and it was social advancement that was the main motivating factor behind Vincent's decision to seek ordination at that early age.

He certainly could not boast any Benedictine stability in his early years in the priesthood. He moved around all over the place, never staying anywhere for very long. There were adventures, to be sure, like the time when he disappeared for some years, allegedly captured by North African pirates and taken away into slavery. Scholars disagree about whether or not this actually happened, but there it is in the tradition and I like it, especially a little detail about how he converted his master by the fervour with which he sang the *Salve Regina!* Sounds like some of our Pastoral Assistants.

But fervour was not a characteristic of Vincent's priesthood in the early years. When I read about his restlessness, his constant moving from place to place, the lack of fulfilment or joy he found in his ministry, I wonder sometimes if he was suffering from what we might call depression. I don't know. But for clergy or laity who experience that state of being ill at ease with their life, the young Vincent is someone with whom there are definite similarities.

Eventually in 1608 he found his way to Paris and was fortunate enough to come into contact with a priest, later a cardinal, called Pierre de Berulle, who became his spiritual director, (which is what we all need). Directive he certainly was. At his behest Vincent went to the parish of Clichy, now in the north of Paris but back then in the country, to spend time as a Parish Priest. It was a characteristically short posting, but a happy one for him and towards the end of his life Vincent cast his mind back to those days and said "I do not think even the Pope can be as happy as a parish priest with such good-hearted people". Berulle had more plans

for Vincent and after his time in the parish he set off to take up an appointment as chaplain and tutor to the children of the de Gondi family. This was a grand and important family. General de Gondi was master of the galleys. The family had extensive estates and it was here that a telling incident occurred that made a decisive impact on St Vincent de Paul.

In 1617 Vincent was called to give the last rites and to hear the confession of a poor dying man. This man lived in a hovel in abject poverty. On his death-bed he was terrified of dying, convinced that his soul was lost and that eternal damnation was awaiting him at any moment. Vincent absolved him. But the circumstances were imprinted on his conscience. The squalor of his impoverished life. The fear in his impoverished soul. It was this experience that was to shape the rest of Vincent de Paul's life. He resolved to devote himself to the practical relief of people who lived in poverty. He resolved to dedicate himself to the renewal of the Church, so that the people should not be left in ignorance of the love and mercy of God. Vincent knew that this renewal depended on good priests, Mission priests, who would have a common life and whose ministry would be directed to those who were poor. And the rest, as they say, is history.

St Vincent de Paul proved to be a remarkable administrator and inspirational pastor and role model for the clergy. In 1625 he founded the Congregation of the Mission, to preach and care for the poor. He was convinced that if the poor were to be cared for in body and soul, then good priests were needed for the task. Vincent is most famed for his love and care for people who were poor, but his efforts in the formation of the clergy is also a massively important aspect of his life. Every Tuesday he held meetings for ordinands and clergy called the Tuesday conferences. Through these meetings he set before his listeners a renewed vision of the dignity of the priestly vocation, which exists not for itself, let alone for the persons called to be priests, but as the means for bringing God's healing, his

forgiveness and love, his sublime teaching, indeed his very self in the gifts of the Eucharist, to God's holy people.

Vincent's love for the poor attracted many collaborators to the mission. He was certainly an innovator in the way he recruited women to work with him. The Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul were founded by Vincent and his spiritual companion, St Louise de Marillac, in 1633 for the pastoral care of the poor. Not confined to convents, for these women the world was their cloister and they were to discover Christ, not just in the sacraments and in their prayers, but in the very person of the poor whom they served. In fact, this practice of good works became so massively attractive, that people from the very highest echelons of society to the most humble associated themselves with Vincent and Louise. And later, even the atheist revolutionaries of 1789 were unable to suppress their regard for St Vincent de Paul. When the statues of the great and the good in the Pantheon were smashed to pieces in the French Revolution, only Vincent's statue was left intact. Mindful of Vincent's phenomenal legacy of sheer goodness the revolutionaries, as Bl Frederic Ozanam put it, 'forgave him the crime of having loved God'.

I'd like to share with you three Vincentian reflections on my own ministry as a priest.

Christ and the Poor

First, thinking of Vincent's visit to the dying man in his squalid home, I want to reflect on the priestly experience of people and their homes, or lack of homes. As soon as you are let into someone's home, you begin to know them better. When you see photos of the family, the way the house is furnished and decorated, the

accumulation of bits and pieces around the place, you begin to form an idea of the lives lived by the people in that place.

Sometimes we go to places that aren't very nice. On one occasion I remember visiting a house in Camden Town and being shocked to see that there was absolutely no furniture to speak of and not even any covering for the bare floor boards. I was given a rough old tea chest to sit on. The young person whose funeral I was trying to organise had died a drug-related death. It looked like he had sold or pawned every single thing in that house to fund his habit. I remember wondering how long his friends would last, because they all looked in a dreadful drug-raddled state too. Sometimes our ministry will take us to places like this and makes for a sobering reflection on human progress to think that the reality that Vincent de Paul encountered in 1617 has not exactly been relegated to the pages of history.

We might think too about caring for those who have no home. One of the most wonderfully Vincentian elements of my work in recent years has been participating in the work of the Haringey Churches' Winter Night Shelter. Along with various other Churches, our parish has welcomed up to 12 homeless guests during the coldest months of the year. Interestingly, it is the activity in our parish life that attracts more participation, enthusiasm and commitment from the ranks of the parishioners and more widely than anything else we do. Why? Because it bears witness to the deeply beautiful Christian conviction, which I think is shared by many of our fellow citizens, even if they don't articulate it in these terms, that every single human person, regardless of wealth, health, beauty, status or anything else, every single human person is made in the image and likeness of God and therefore worthy of our reverence and respect.

It is remarkable that the same Christ that sends out his priests to minister in the world, is also the one who chooses to identify himself so shamelessly with the poor and lowly and, consequently, allows us to encounter Him in them. ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee or thirsty and give thee to drink?...Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’
(Mt 25. 37,40)

Vincent de Paul, when he went to minister at the death bed of that impoverished man, was bringing him the sacraments of the Church. But the encounter led him to the realisation that we ourselves will find Christ in the person of the poor. This realisation guards against a patronising view of charity that boils down to the condescending dispensing of largesse to the wretched. It makes us open to the joy of encountering Christ in unexpected places, like in the faces of our Night Shelter guests. One of my most treasured moments of union with Jesus Christ in recent years was when I was celebrating a morning Mass just after doing an overnight shift at our Night Shelter. In my mind I had been thinking about the time I had just spent with all the guests and as I held the Host in my hands just before Holy Communion I suddenly realised that I was thinking and saying silently to Christ , “Well, Lord, you and I know each other a whole lot better now than we did before”. I think St Vincent de Paul would be looking down from the realms of glory and thinking, “Well, of course. What do you expect!”

The Formation of the Clergy

The second Vincentian reflection on my ministry has to do with Vincent’s concern for the formation of the clergy. In past years, priestly formation in CMP happened in clergy houses. Most of us no longer live in clergy houses and sometimes I think we used to beat ourselves up about this. More recently though this CMP charism of priestly formation in a context of common living has found a fresh expression,

to coin a phrase. In North London and the Black Country, members of the Company have been following the example of St Vincent de Paul by applying ourselves to the task of priestly formation through our Pastoral Assistant Schemes. These schemes allow young people to come and spend a year living and working alongside us in our parishes and institutions. The North London Scheme, which I am part of, has now offered parish placements to over 50 young people. We have got a little way to go before we catch up with Vincent de Paul, who between the years 1628 and 1660 had welcomed between 13,000 and 14,000 ordinands to his conferences and retreats. We haven't been going as long as him yet, so we are trying to catch up. What does it say to us that Vincent troubled himself to work with all these ordinands?

It says above all that he had a massive confidence in the priesthood. In order to care for the poor, he felt that what was needed was priests, and good ones at that. In CMP we still share that conviction and those of us who work with Pastoral Assistants are very conscious of the blessing that has been given us to help our young people think through their calling and play some part in the formation process that is so vital in the preparation for ordination. In recent years I have had the joy of going to the ordinations of people who came to work with me in Hornsey some time ago. We CMP priests are deeply thankful that we can imitate St Vincent by sharing with our Pastoral Assistants our love for the priesthood and our confidence in the graces that God gives us and the whole Church through the sacrament of Holy Orders.

The Kindness of St Vincent

My last Vincentian reflection has to do with the kindness of St Vincent de Paul. Mercifully it won't take me too long to tell you about it.

One of the features that I have always really loved and admired about Vincent is his kindness. I think that kindness to others is something that comes from a lack of self-protective anxiety, perhaps it is something that comes from the fortitude we gain from the conviction that we ourselves are loved and accepted by God. Being a kind person seems to me to be a pre-requisite for being a happy or a blessed person. It is certainly necessary for Christians to be kind to one another and even more necessary for priests to be characterised by kindness.

Apparently the retreat addresses that Vincent de Paul gave to his 14,000 ordinands and others were sometimes thought to be rather dry, even perhaps rather dull. I expect you think I have taken after him in that respect today as well! But what the many, many people remembered when they went to Vincent at St Lazare on retreat was the kindly quality of the welcome that they received from him. This is what one such person had to say (and just run with the slightly florid 17th century idiom!)

‘While I was in that house I was so well treated and was shown such kindness by everyone I spoke to that I was overcome. M Vincent, especially, welcomed me with such affection that I am still overcome at the thought of it. I cannot find words to express what I feel in my heart. What I can say is, that while I was making that retreat I felt I was in heaven.’

I can certainly think of kind priests who have had that effect on me and I hope that my own feeble attempts at kindness have their effect at least sometimes. Of course no one ever says anything about this, but I might venture a thought that being free from the obligations of family opens up a great deal of time and opportunity to be kind and encouraging to others, not least to our Pastoral Assistants. Not that every single person ought to be trusted to that sort of ministry perhaps, but I just mention to you that the pride and happiness I have found in

this aspect of my work might be reckoned as some slight counter-balance to the generally held perception, both in society and in the Church, that not having a partner is tantamount to living in a state of social and emotional catastrophe. You can make of that what you will.

Whatever you think, the kindness of Vincent de Paul is a deeply attractive personal quality. I think that kindness is the hallmark of a decent person and an absolute necessity for a Christian priest.

Conclusion

When he invited me to give these talks, Fr Richard told me that you have been attracted by the concept of a dispersed community of priests and he asked me to share with you something of the experience of CMP. I have no idea whether or not that survey of our CMP history and of the way we try to live out the charism of St Vincent de Paul will be of any help to you as you make decisions about your own future. But what I do think has served us well in CMP has been a surprising sense of belonging together (we often seem more 'dispersed' than 'community') and a rootedness in a vision of Catholic priesthood that comes from the life, example and prayers of our patron. It is not good for a man to be alone. I am thankful to belong to my Company and to be surrounded by another great Company of witnesses and particularly Vincent, Louise and others who have walked in their way. Perhaps these are things for you to reflect on too and to see where the Spirit leads you in your thinking and praying together.

Our 75 year history is not a long one in the grand scheme of things. But it does locate us in times and places and for new enquirers to the Company it provides something of an ongoing history into which a person can insert himself.

Your society is new and you don't have that yet. Here is Cardinal Hume talking about a situation that is not dissimilar

Recently I went to see one of our Community who has begun to live the life of a hermit. He does not know, and neither do I, whether this is the life to which God is calling him. It will take time for him to find out. And without a doubt he will have to go through times of aridity and difficulty if he is to become a hermit in the true sense. His present novitiate, as far as we are concerned, is based on no experience. We go forward tentatively, hesitantly. When he and I discuss his life, it is novice talking to novice.¹

But presumably when Benedict and Francis and Dominic and Vincent and their various companions began to live a common life that was their experience too. May they and Our Lady, Mother of the Clergy, pray for you as you embark on that same exciting process.

¹ *Searching for God*, G Basil Hume, Ampleforth Abbey Press, 2002, p. 27