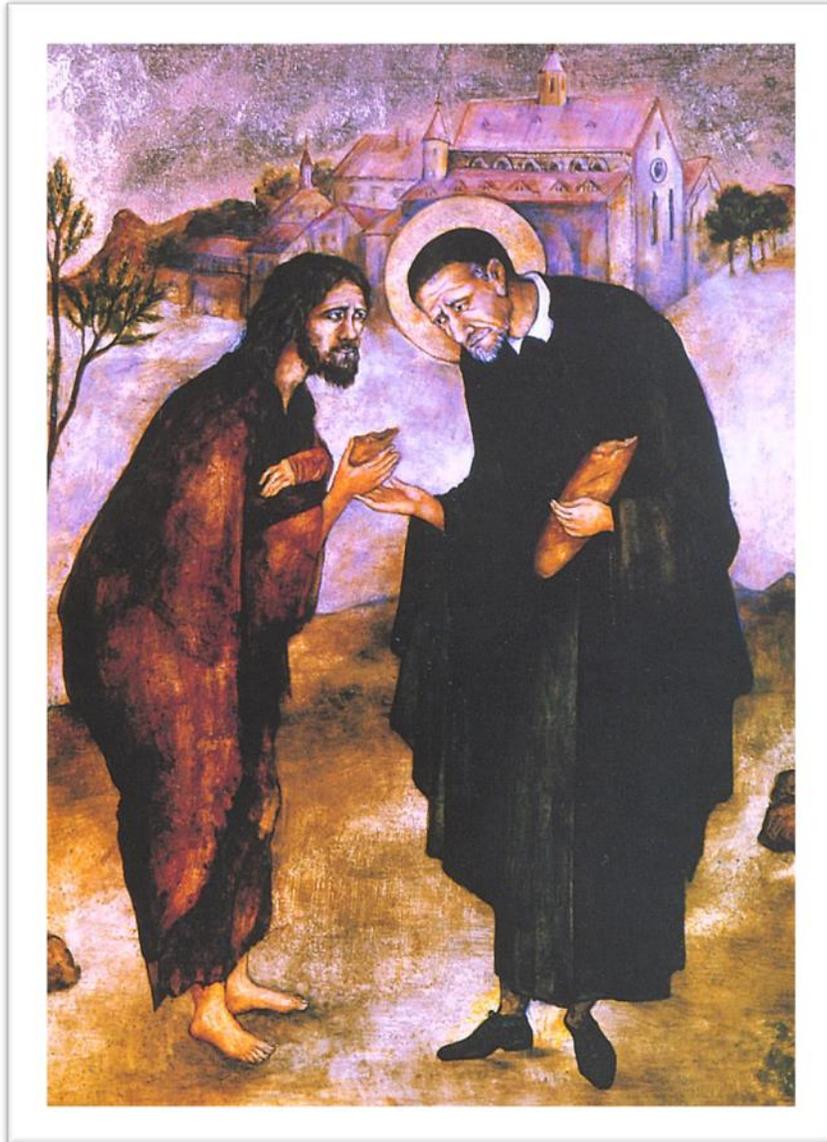


A MEDITATION ON THE ICON “THE BEGGAR”
By Sister Kieran Kneaves, DC



“Vincentians serve the poor cheerfully, listening to them and respecting their wishes, helping them to feel and recover their own dignity, for we are all created in God’s image. In the poor, they see the suffering Christ.” (The Rule: Part 1, 1.8)

MEDITATION

Reflecting on the sacred icon, “The Beggar” take a moment to ponder and pray. An icon is a sacred symbol and we pray not at, but through an icon. As an icon on a computer opens up a whole new world behind the symbol, so does a sacred icon. God speaks to us through the icon which the artist created through prayer and reflection, capturing a mystery and a message.

By praying with the icon “The Beggar,” created by Meltem Aktas, we can see deeper into the mystery of our Vincentian Vocation. As we look at the Beggar...Who is he? Pondering, we discover that the Beggar is Jesus, standing in the tattered robes and bare feet. This icon grasps the heart and soul of our Vincentian vocation. It captures the wonderful truth that indeed, “in the poor we see the suffering Christ” as the Rule challenges us.

Looking again at the icon notice that Vincent has a halo. Vincent radiates holiness to the beggar. This captures the secret of Vincentian spirituality in a simple and profound way: “We find Christ in the poor...and the poor find Christ in us.” St. Vincent tells us:

“After the love of God, your principal concern must be to serve the poor with great gentleness and cordiality, sympathizing with them in their ailments and listening to their little complaints...for they look on you as people sent by God to help them. You are therefore intended to represent the goodness of God in the eyes of the poor.”

To represent the “goodness of God in the eyes of the poor” is a blessing and a responsibility. Often the poor find it hard to believe in God, but because of our gentleness, sympathy and kindness they can believe in the goodness of God. And so we ask the question: “How can the poor see Christ in me?” Our Rule (Part1: 2.5.1) gives us the answer by telling us: “Vincentians seek to imitate and emulate St. Vincent in the five virtues essential for promoting love and respect for the poor: **Simplicity, Humility, Gentleness, Selflessness** and **Zeal**. A virtue doesn’t happen all at once...it grows slowly by consistent and repeated acts...sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing but trying again that virtue takes root. Let us take time to ponder these five Vincentian Virtues.

SIMPLICITY

Gaze at the icon and notice that Vincent has only one loaf of bread. Our Vincentian virtue of simplicity roots us in frankness, integrity and genuineness. Simplicity was the virtue that Vincent loved the most, he called it his gospel. Simplicity keeps our lives centered on God as we stand in purity of intention, doing everything for the love of God and for no other reason. Vincent knew in the depths of his heart that it was Jesus that he brought to the poor. Our service to those living in poor requires a commitment to simplicity, to doing ordinary things with and for the poor. One of the most important things we do is to give the poor the dignity and respect of calling them by name. It is by our smile, our handshake, and our gift of friendship that the people suffering in poverty will know that they are loved.

HUMILITY

Returning to the icon, notice that Vincent is leaning forward, listening in great openness and attention. Our Vincentian virtue of humility gives us the grace to accept the truth about our frailties, our gifts, talents and charism. We know that all that God gives us is for others. It is true that one of the greatest gifts we give to another is simply to listen to them. We don’t have to solve their problems, often they have the answer inside them and they only need someone to listen to them until they can find it. Humility gives us the grace to be patient and compassionate.

GENTLENESS

Looking carefully at the icon we see that the artist painted Vincent's left foot as bent or crooked. Vincent's foot was not crooked in reality...so what do you think the artist is trying to tell us? Someone once asked the question: "Who is the poorest person that Vincent ever knew? Think of the beggars, the sick, the dying, the homeless, the hungry...but who was the poorest person he ever knew? Vincent came to know that it was himself. Vincent's life led him to know deep down his own poverty, his own pain, his own weakness. In the gospel we hear the words of Jesus, "the poor you have always with you" and we find, like Vincent did, that the poor who is always with us is our self. Life teaches this over and over, and it is true that we all "limp" through life. We come to know our own poverty as we reflect on our life and see how we have made poor choices, made mistakes, been hurt, been betrayed. It is then that we can stand in gentleness. Through pain, difficulties, heart-breaks and suffering, our heart can become hard or it can become soft, tender and filled with gentleness. Indeed, our virtue of gentleness is rooted in a friendly and invincible good will expressed in kindness, sweetness and patience.

SELFLESSNESS

To find an insight into the virtue of selflessness, observe that Vincent's eyes are focus on the bread. This is the center of the icon so look closely at the hands and the bread. Considering the hands, we may assume that Vincent is probably giving the bread to the beggar, but looking more closely, it is difficult to tell. Perhaps it is possible that the beggar is about to place the bread in Vincent's hand. The exchange is one of mutuality.

Our Vincentian Virtue of Selflessness gives us the grace to die to our ego with a life of self-sacrifice, where we share our time, our possessions, our talents and ourselves in a spirit of generosity. Selflessness gives us the grace to accept being ignored, and helps us to let go of grudges and prejudices. In a wonderful way the icon captures the theological truth that, once we find Christ in the poor, the poor have as much to give to us as we do to them. We come to know the great gift of loving and serving the poor is found in mutual giving and receiving. Blessed Frederic tells us : "We come to give comfort, to relieve suffering, to bring hope but we come home comforted, hopeful and filled with faith."

ZEAL

To capture the virtue of Zeal, notice the unusually small left arm and hand of the Beggar. The small hand of the beggar tells us that those living in poverty often cannot help themselves. They are marginalized by racism, violence, hunger, despair, illness, drugs...all the faces of poverty. The poor lack the simple advantages that we take for granted: health care, education, jobs, homes, cars for transportation, food on the table. Highways around our inner cities keep the poor invisible and silent.

As Vincentians we are concerned not only with the alleviation of poverty but with the eradication of its causes. We are called to be advocates, to be a voice for the voiceless, hope for the hopeless. Vincentians make a commitment to walk with the poor not only for the short term-but especially for the long haul to empower them to become self-sufficient. Systemic change is calling us to a new understanding of Zeal as we are called to have a passion for the full flourishing and eternal happiness of every person.