

Saint Vincent de Paul

September 27

(1581–1660)

How much difference can one person make? When you hear the story of Saint Vincent de Paul, you know the answer. One person can make a lot of difference.

Vincent organized charitable groups to provide food and clothing for the poor, started a congregation of priests, helped begin another congregation for women, opened hospitals and homes for orphans and for the aged, established training programs and retreats for seminarians, raised money for the victims of war, and sent missionaries to other countries—just to name a few of his projects!

Vincent did not plan on a life of service and self-sacrifice, but rather on one of security and ease. He grew up in France, the son of peasant farmers. The life of a priest was more comfortable than that of a farmer, so Vincent studied and was ordained.

Little is known about his activities during the first few years after his ordination. Tradition says that during this time, while onboard a ship, Vincent was seized by pirates and sold into slavery in North Africa. Eventually he escaped and made his way to Rome. He returned home to France, and there he was appointed court chaplain to Queen Margaret of Valois. He seemed well on

the way to the life of wealth and comfort. But at the same time, he came to know Pierre de Berulle, who later became a cardinal. Berulle helped Vincent understand more deeply what it meant to be a true Christian. Vincent came face-to-face with himself and his empty goals.

As he became more aware of God's love and his call to serve, Vincent changed the direction of his life. He worked for a year in a small parish in a peasant area and saw how poor the people were. So he organized groups of people who would provide food and clothing for the poor on a regular basis. But Vincent saw another kind of poverty, a spiritual poverty. Many of the people had no real understanding of their faith. So Vincent organized priests who would go out and preach to the people. Eventually this group of priests became the Congregation of the Mission, also known as the Vincentian Fathers.

As Vincent saw the needs of others, he reached out to them. At night he would search the city for abandoned babies, and he founded homes for them. He cared for the prisoners who had been made slaves on the galley ships. He remained good friends with many rich and influential people and involved them in his work with the poor and needy. Vincent de Paul is the patron of all charitable societies.

INTERVIEW PEOPLE WHO SERVE OTHERS

Sometimes we need the help of others to see the needs of those around us. Have the students interview representatives of service agencies in your parish or community about the work they do.

WRITE LETTERS

It is said that Vincent de Paul wrote more than 3,000 letters. Discuss with the students how much good can be done through letter writing (to relatives, to people who need encouragement and care, to newspaper editors). Have the students make cards or write letters to people they know who are sick or lonely, to people in a nearby nursing home, or to policy makers in defense of the poor and in support of programs for the needy.

INVITE SPEAKERS

Vincent de Paul founded two congregations: the Congregation of the Missions (Vincentians) and the Sisters of Charity. If possible, invite members of these communities in for a firsthand presentation of their ministry.

LEARN ABOUT THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY

Research the St. Vincent de Paul Society, founded in 1833 by Frederic Ozanam. Invite a member of the society to tell the class how it serves the needy. Or visit the local St. Vincent de Paul Society. Have someone explain the purpose of the organization and where and how it distributes goods to the poor.

CELEBRATE GRANDPARENTS DAY

Vincent loved the aged. He never wanted them to be lonely. Have a “Grandparents Day.” Let each person in the class invite an elderly friend or relative to class. Have games and activities in which all can share.

MAKE PENNANTS

Vincent’s life was the Gospel alive! Find Scripture passages that match some of Vincent’s charitable works. Have the students make pennants of these passages and hang them in the school or parish hall.

Catechist’s Notes:
