

# The St Vincent de Paul Society



*“Show us your works”. This was the very real challenge thrown at FREDERICK OZANAM by fellow students at the Sorbonne in the 1830s, when he was defending the Catholic faith. He responded by founding a society in which members would perform some kind of Christian action by helping people in need – The St Vincent de Paul Society.*

George WIGLEY was a member of the first Conference (local group) established in France, and on his return to England he contacted Frederick LUCAS, editor of The Tablet. He, in turn, used his considerable networking skills to arouse the interest of others culminating in the first English Conference in 1844 in London, which increased to fourteen throughout England in five years with 274 brothers – it was at first restricted to men.

At that time state relief was refused except in exchange for work, and there was acute unemployment. Epidemics of cholera had swept the country through poor sewerage and contaminated drinking water. By the 1860s the outbreak of cholera had claimed 80,000 lives. However, it is considered that this figure could be much higher as the poorest in the city slums were not offered either medical attention or a proper funeral, nor did they feature in official statistics. The St Vincent de Paul Society helped by providing funding for nurses, medicines and coffins.

**“God loves a cheerful giver” – (St Paul, 2 Cor. 9:7)**

By 1851 there were 3.5 million children not attending school in no small part comprised of Irish Catholics who had come to England to escape the famine. Education was not compulsory and was privately financed.

The SVP recognised the absolute necessity of a basic education to enable children to be taught skills which

would later be employed in the workplace, so breaking the cycle of poverty to some extent. However, being ever practical, this involved providing the children with clothes and shoes to wear to school and, indeed, food for nourishment and strength, and payment of school fees. SVP brothers (male Conference members) taught in some schools.

Clothes were also provided to combat excuses from some rather pathetic Catholics who failed to attend Mass. In Walsall, Mass was celebrated very early on Sunday mornings specifically for those who refused to appear later on a Sunday because they had no “proper” clothes.

The Catholic Shoe Black Brigade was founded in London by SVP Conferences in the early 1850s both to provide employment for about 50 children and to safeguard their loss of faith. The scheme was approved by London police, who allocated 50 pitches to boys between 9 and 13 years old. The annual SVP report speaks of the children being “poorest of the poor, many from parents who were a harmful influence or who had rejected them since birth”.

*“We thank you Lord for the many blessings we receive from those we visit. Help us to love and respect them, to understand their deeper needs and to share their burdens and joys as true friends.”*

**Prayer (prior to a visit)**

**of Blessed Frederick Ozanam.**

The SVP helped to fund the Universe, when Cardinal Wiseman asked Brothers to produce a cheap newspaper accessible to poor people – the “penny” Universe was first printed in 1860. The “CliftonTracts” were also published at this time by SVP I Bristol. These were the first such printed pamphlets since the Reformation, giving guidance on Catholic beliefs and practices and were a forerunner of CTS.

The first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw widespread unemployment, making it a very busy period for the SVP. Archbishop Bourne of Westminster remarked that of all the charitable associations he knew, the SVP was the best adapted to deal with the needs of the poor at this time. Although there was a large number of Brothers killed during WW1, many others responded to this very great need and recruitment soared – 1905 active members numbered 3,000 Brothers in 200 Conferences; by 1925 members numbers had risen to 6,500.

With the advent of the Welfare State much of the responsibility assumed by the SVP for people in financial need has been taken on by the State. At one time the Society was the dominant, if not the only, lay organisation in the Church. Now there are many more with various areas of responsibility.

The challenge is as great as ever. There is a very active SVP Conference working

from the Oratory since 1948. Currently there are 5 members – all sisters! – with Brother Philip as our Spiritual Director. We meet each Thursday at 8 p.m. at the Oratory House for prayer and review of the week’s visits, and to be available should anyone want to talk. We visit people at their request and by mutual convenience either during the day or early evening. Currently we visit several elderly people living at home or in residential care, a refugee family, young families, a single mother, and we write to a prisoner in Liverpool who was known to us when in Birmingham.

We as Christians are exhorted to love and respect the human person. *“Everyone is made in the image and likeness of God and has a dignity that does not depend on age, race, wealth or any other attribute. We depend on each other profoundly, and we are responsible for each other in a variety of ways.”*

**Vote for the Common Good.** Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, 2001.

If you would like to join the Society of St Vincent de Paul, please contact Father Philip or Geraldine McCarthy.

*Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything.*

**St Vincent de Paul.**