

Voice Of the Poor - an Inspirational Magnet for New Vincentians

As told by Vincentians, Jeanne M. Harper and Mary Armbrust, March 2008

Jeanne Harper, Green Bay Diocesan Council president, and Mary Armbrust, theology teacher at St Thomas Aquinas Academy (Marinette, WI) share the following narrative. Jeanne begins their beautiful, faith-filled story:

On Holy Thursday, my husband, David, and I gave three presentations on the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to students and staff at the local Catholic high school. The power of the Holy Spirit's intervention was that our Conference gathered 16 NEW Vincentians to be commissioned on April 23rd at the St Thomas Aquinas Academy School Mass on the 175th Celebration day of the first Society Conference meeting.

After the presentations, Jeanne thanked the students and staff for their support and encouragement saying, "If you WANT to receive the Voice of the Poor information [so you can write your congressional and senate representatives] -- PLEASE let me know by return email -- I will then send you the recent Voice of the Poor (VOP) emails [on current issues before them] and then put you on the regular mailing list for the Voice of the Poor."

Jeanne received an email from Mary Armbrust, theology teacher at St. Thomas Aquinas Academy. "It is I who needs to thank you and David for giving of your time today. I would like to be a member--this work is important, and each time I hear about it my **heart tugs**--the training session [Ozanam Orientation] this summer has stayed with me. I am willing to help with the upcoming events, and really want to encourage our students to get involved--also very interested in the **letter-writing/justice end of the mission--there is much to do!**Thank you for continuing to inspire me--you are a blessing. In Christ, Mary"

Jeanne responded to Mary's email sending new initiatives received from National Voice of the Poor. These included the US Conference of Catholic Bishops update on PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) as well as Catholic Charities Action Alerts. Mary replied:

Thank you for sending along the VOP info--I have sent emails to representatives on all of the issues pending.

It is awesome to realize that SVDP is actively pursuing every avenue for aiding those in need through direct friendship and relief and by addressing the public policies that are unjust.

It is very humbling to know how hard so many are working. Thank you for inspiring me to get involved. Yours In Christ, Mary

Jeanne was moved and forwarded Mary's message to the National Chair for Voice of the Poor, Deborah Payne, and to North Central Region Vice President, Tom Fahl saying, "Thought you would be interested in one of our NEWEST Vincentians thoughts on VOP mission work.... Mary will be a daily inspiration at the high school for our Young Vincentians. After one year of her watching the Young Vincentians at work in the school and community – and after attending the two day Ozanam Orientation last July (for discernment, she said, about joining The Society) – she reported she could no longer hold off the calling from deep within herself (which she calls) **heart tugs.**"

The good news continues! Jeanne and Mary have been invited to share their experiences at the Society's North Central Region Meeting. Plus, another young Vincentian has asked to be placed on the VOP email list. "She really wants to be involved in legislation and justice issues," says Jeanne.

By the way, after Jeanne asked Mary to help with this narrative, Mary felt "spiritually" compelled to tell the "Rest of the Story."

Here is the larger, more humbling confession of why I must get involved. Through my graduate courses at St. Norbert (SNC), I have learned about some of the Vatican II documents that called for full and active participation of all baptized Catholics. I was led through a baptism reflection that helped me realize that, despite a seemingly barren spiritual upbringing, my baptism initiated me onto a family that honored their commitment to my spiritual well-being: with the words, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," my life was forever changed.

My professors at SNC have gifted me with powerful writings by holy men and women that have challenged me to reject excuses that I am too busy to do more than just read about my brothers and sisters who are suffering from injustices leading to poverty. Even writing a check isn't enough. In the midst of this time of extreme personal conversion, I was given the invitation to learn more about St. Vincent de Paul. When I heard the words, "Let us go to the poor," I knew that those words were for me.

Why the time gap from July's training until stepping forward in March? Like Augustine, I wanted to be happy in a life more deeply immersed in Christ, but knew that would mean changing how my days were ordered (if you can call them ordered!). There is the concern that more might be expected of me than I am able to do--it is easy to be egotistical and think that there are already so many that depend on you, when in fact, we all are completely depending on Christ.

When Jeanne and David came to our school to speak to our students, I knew that the Holy Spirit was also emboldening me to join the many students who signed up to help. How much more might my actions add to the words they hear in theology class? God, alone, knows, but I need to be in agreement with the opportunity. And

so, I am stepping out with a baby-step in faith, with the realization that "All things work together for the glory of God."

I don't have to do everything, but I do need to do something. It makes me want to chuckle that the Lord has so ingeniously used so many in my life to lead me to this next place of love. Praise God! Mary"

"It is the Holy Spirit that is leading us, if we listen," says Jeanne. She shares her part of the story.

A parent stopped me at the end of Mass one Sunday last spring in February – she was disheartened that the theology teacher was now in the hospital for the third time and the other theology teacher was to have a major surgery. She was worried for the teachers and equally concerned for the students and asked if there was anything I could do to help. She did not know that I had taught Theology at the Catholic High School from 1980 to 1985. She offered me an opportunity to be of service. I had just seen the one teacher who had just released from the hospital (a classmate of my husband's) – she was sitting by the back door of the school, waiting for a ride. I told her if there was anything I could do let me know.

And now this request. So I contacted the lead teacher, whom I had taught with back in the 80's – she was ecstatic to think I would help out. So I was the substitute teacher for Mary last spring when she had her major surgery and I subbed for the teacher who was hospitalized. All this offered me the opportunity to teach and present Vincentian Spirituality to the Freshmen, Sophomore, Junior and Senior students. What a SPIRIT led opportunity! And from that experience – the humble beginnings was two students and Mary, their teacher, agreeing to attend the first Ozanam Orientation for the Green Bay Diocesan Council. Now you know the "Rest of the Story" for both Mary and I.

The added VOP work of the Vincentian Society has developed into a dynamic response from the youth and their Theology teacher – they have grown from two students last July at the Ozanam Orientation to over 20 at the present time!

"FREDERIC'S Spirit of **CHARITY and JUSTICE** is MOVING through the veins of our youth," states Jeanne. "**He is such an attraction when at 19 he developed SSVdP (Society of St. Vincent de Paul) – what an inspiration to the YOUTH at a time when they WANT to believe THEY can MAKE a DIFFERENCE in this World and get involved right NOW!** What is most inspiring for me is the senior (students) pressure for the commissioning on April 23rd. These seniors joined the Young Vincentians of St. Joe's Conference – Holy Family Parish – Marinette WI after our September 2007 commissioning. These seniors desire to be commissioned as **Vincentians** BEFORE they go off to College so that they can join or start a CONFERENCE at their college of choice as a fully commissioned Vincentian – what HOPE – what JOY is HIS!"