



Vincentian Values Today

A shared statement of our Vincentian identity and purpose



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Purpose and context

The aim of this publication is to outline the rationale that underlies the development of “A shared statement of our Vincentian identity and purpose” for 15 of the Vincentian organisations that are associated with The Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul (DCs) in Britain.

It is owned and endorsed by the Vincentian organisations that have taken part in the initiative:

The Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul

– Seton Care Home

– St Catherine’s Care Home

– St Vincent’s Care Home

The Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul Services

Depaul UK

Marillac Care

Out There

St Joseph’s Services

St Vincent’s Family Project

The Passage

The Space

Vincentian Care Plus

Vincentians in Partnership

Vincentian Volunteers

These organisations make up VIVAT (*V*incentian *V*ALues *T*oday), which is a major element in the work of the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul Services (DCSVP).

This first-ever shared statement of its kind for this diverse group of Vincentian organisations aims to distill the core characteristics that they share.

It is not intended to replace or change the existing value statements of the individual organisations, but to complement them by expressing the Vincentian vision and commitments that they hold in common. It attests to the essential unity of this group of organisations, which are rooted in the specific, inspirational 400-year-old Vincentian tradition.

Rationale for a shared statement

Our VIVAT organisations are faced with three particular challenges:

- 1 the need for the continuing training of our people in the unique vision and ethos of Vincentian service;
- 2 an increasing need to communicate our “point of difference” and the underlying motivations of our work;
- 3 a need to improve the awareness of our organisations as a group of discrete, but like-minded, bodies. This will not only enable us to build a greater collaborative spirit, but will also enable us to speak with a single voice on some of the major issues of poverty and inequality in Britain.

We see the communication of “A shared statement of Vincentian identity and purpose” as an effective contribution to achieving these goals.

Role of a shared statement

Our shared statement of Vincentian identity and purpose is intended for use in four ways:

- 1 as a point of reference for Vincentian organisations’ internal audiences, to facilitate a better understanding, and consideration, of shared values;
- 2 in educating employees and volunteers in the appreciation of Vincentian organisations’ unique identity and obligations;
- 3 as a means of making it clear to external stakeholders what it is that motivates the organisations in the VIVAT group, and what differentiates them in the voluntary and social-care sectors;
- 4 to ensure that people in the future understand the relevance of the shared Vincentian identity and purpose in building a better society for all.

The origins of our shared Vincentian identity

Vincentian charities' distinctive values are inspired by our co-founders, the Catholic saints St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac.

During their lifetimes (they both died in 1660), France was engaged in a series of wars which, combined with famines and epidemics, are estimated to have killed up to a third of the population¹ and left many of the rest impoverished. Vincent and Louise worked together for 36 years to alleviate the plight of the poorest people. This was integral to their Christian faith. They believed that by serving the poor they were serving Jesus himself and, as Vincent wrote: *"To say 'Servants of the Poor' is as if one said 'Servants of Christ' since he considers done to himself what is done to them."*²

Vincent and Louise responded to the extreme poverty they encountered by visiting and nursing sick people in their homes, looking after abandoned babies, and teaching poor children in rural areas. They also cared for wounded soldiers on battlefields and helped prisoners held in galley ships.

Their legacy has far outstripped their original goals – their response to need in 17th-century France has formed the basis of today's social welfare, health care, and education services.

In our own time, Pope Francis has stated that social commitment springs from a belief in the Christian gospel: *"An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it."*³

¹Edward R Udovic CM, *Seventeenth-Century France in Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Rules, Conferences and Writings. Classics of Western Spirituality*, edited by Frances Ryan DC and John E Rybolt CM, 1955, New York Paulist Press

²*Vincent de Paul, May 30th 1647*

³Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, paragraph 183.

St Vincent de Paul



Born into a peasant family in a tiny village, Pouy, in south-western France, Vincent was nearly 15 years old when he began his formal education.

In common with many clever young men of the time, he saw the church as a promising career. Ordained at the age of 19, he spent the next 17 years trying to improve his prospects. It brought him to Paris, where he made invaluable contacts with the “rich” and “good”.

He became chaplain to the Queen, Parish Priest of Clichy, and tutor and chaplain to the aristocratic de Gondi family. A crisis of faith that brought him into contact with poor, sick people, together with attending a dying tenant on one of the de Gondi estates, made him aware of country people’s poverty and marginalisation.

He abandoned his life with the de Gondis to become the parish priest in Châtillon-les-Dombes in eastern France.

One Sunday, “when I was vesting to say holy Mass, I was told that, in an isolated house, a quarter of a league away, everybody was ill; that there was not even one of them who could render any assistance to the others, and all were in an inexpressible state of poverty. This news touched me to the heart...that evening, with another man, I went to visit these people. We overtook on the road some ladies who had set out before us and, a little further on, we met some others who were returning home. Later, I proposed to all those good ladies that they should club to all together to make soup, each on her own day, and not only for them but for all who were in need.”⁴ This was the beginning of a network of charity that Vincent orchestrated through a system of “Confraternities of Charity” – groups of volunteers caring for those in need.

Other social outreach work soon followed. In 1619, Vincent became responsible for the pastoral well-being of the convicts who were sentenced to row the French ships, particularly in times of war. Not content with providing practical help, Vincent successfully lobbied for a more humane prison system. He enlisted Louise de Marillac, and others, into his growing mission to poor people. Eventually, he established his own community of priests – the Congregation of the Mission – and, with Louise, founded the Daughters of Charity.

⁴ CCD, Vol 9, Conference 24, p 192

The next 35 years of his life were extraordinary. Between 1628 and 1660, 10,000 abandoned children were rescued and hundreds of thousands of poor people were supported. His continued involvement in public affairs ensured that the needs of the poor were brought to the government’s attention.

Vincent died on 27 September 1660, not in bed, but “sitting up, fully clothed, as if fully armed, fighting for the poor.”⁵

⁵ Hugh O’Donnell CM, *Vincent de Paul: His Life and Way in Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Rules, Conferences and Writings. Classics of Western Spirituality*, edited by Frances Ryan DC and John E Rybolt CM, 1955, New York Paulist Press.

St Louise de Marillac



Louise's early life was very different from Vincent's. She never knew her mother and for the first three years of her life lived with her father, Louis, who was a member of a wealthy and influential family that held positions of power in the French Court.

When her father remarried, there was no place for her in the de Marillac home and she was sent to the Dominican royal convent in Poissy, where her great-aunt was a nun. Her early life was lonely and she always thought of herself as an outsider.

She was a clever and able student and relished the classical education she received from the sisters. When her father died, however, she was moved to an orphanage-style "Dame school" in Paris, where she was taught the rudiments of running a household.

She wanted to join a religious community, but at the age of 22 she was married to Antoine Le Gras, a secretary in the Queen's household. The marriage was initially happy and the couple had a son, Michel, but Louise's contentment was short-lived: her husband became ill and she nursed him through his painful illness. She struggled with doubts about her family and her life. During her prayers on Pentecost Sunday 1623, she had a profound religious experience, her doubts cleared and she realised that she would lead a committed religious life and that Vincent de Paul would be her spiritual guide.

Two years later, at about the time her husband died, Louise met Vincent de Paul. Although they were very different personalities, he agreed to become her spiritual director. *“It is difficult to imagine two people less likely to spend the majority of their adult lives working together”*⁶, but the peasant priest and the aristocratic widow began a collaboration that was to transform thousands of lives over the next three decades.

It began slowly, with Vincent asking Louise to visit the groups of local volunteers in the Confraternities of Charity that had been established in rural areas. Louise proved herself to be an effective manager and to have many organisational skills. Her ability to assess situations and to recognise people’s needs was as developed as Vincent’s and she quickly moved into training teachers.

By 1633, a small group of rural girls had been chosen to move into Louise’s house to be trained to serve sick and vulnerable people, particularly the *“poorest and most abandoned”*⁷. They were dedicated to hard, frontline service, supported by a communal life of prayer. The Company of Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul was born and was the beginning of a new form of religious life: for the newly founded

Daughters of Charity, *“their ‘monastery’ was the houses of the sick, their ‘cloister the streets of the city’.*”⁸

By the time Louise died, aged 68, on 15 March 1660 there were 74 houses of the Daughters of Charity in France and two in Poland. The Sisters provided services to people in need at home, in school, hospital, prison and on the battlefield. The community expanded and, in 1857, a permanent community began its service to people living in poverty in England.

⁶ Louise Sullivan DC, *The Core Values of Vincentian Education, Vincentian Heritage Journal, 1995, p 167*

⁷ CCD, Vol 10, Conference 164, p349

⁸ CCD, Vol 10, Conference 111, p530

Vincentian values

The principle that life, and being human, has an intrinsic value is essential to the way these values are understood and enacted.

Through a process of listening and careful reflection, our 15 organisations have defined five Vincentian values that best describe our shared identity and purpose.

- 1 Serving people who are experiencing the effects of poverty.
- 2 Respecting each person's dignity.
- 3 Being compassionate and kind.
- 4 Enabling choice and change.
- 5 Acting in solidarity for justice.

These values are not restricted to people in any particular religious tradition, but invite everyone to understand the fundamental truths to which many of us aspire.

1 Serving people who are experiencing the effects of poverty

"Let us devote ourselves with renewed love to serve persons who are poor and even to seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned; let us acknowledge before God that they are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy of rendering them our little services."⁹

We believe that all people should be free to live full and dignified lives. We also believe that the people who are the poorest in our society are our priority. This "option for the poor" drives all our thinking and actions. It recognises that there are many forms of poverty, which range from acute situations to extreme material poverty.

Our attitude to service demands that we devote ourselves to being entirely at the disposal of those we serve and place their needs at the centre of our organisations at all times.

As Vincentian organisations, we commit to playing our part in changing the negative ways in which society views people who are living in poverty. Our aim is to create opportunities to enable the least privileged people to thrive and for each to have the opportunity to fulfil his or her potential.

⁹ CCD, Vol 10, Conference 164, p 349

2 Respecting each person's dignity

*"Above all, be very gentle and courteous toward the poor. You know that they are our masters and that we must love them tenderly and respect them deeply. It is not enough for these maxims to be in our minds; we must bear witness to them by our gentle and charitable care."*¹⁰

We believe that each person has intrinsic and incalculable worth, and must be treated by others accordingly. We are born equal and are all part of the same human family.

As Vincentian organisations, we have a fundamental regard for people and their inalienable human rights. We are committed to respecting each individual who comes to us for help and each person with whom we work. When we approach another person, we believe that we are on "holy ground".

3 Being compassionate and kind

*"Treat every individual with gentleness and respect, always using kind words and requests and never harsh or offensive expressions. Nothing is more capable of winning hearts than this humble, gentle way of acting, nor consequently better able to help you attain your goal."*¹¹

We believe that kindness and compassion are among the fundamental attitudes that enable us to carry out our service to people in poverty. This includes encouraging or challenging them to take opportunities for development or change – but always in a respectful and courteous manner.

¹⁰ *Spiritual writings of Louse de Marillac Correspondence and Thoughts*, translated by Louise Sullivan DC, 1991, New City Press, L 284B, p 320

¹¹ CCD, Vol 8, No 3027, p202

Vincentian values continued

4 Enabling choice and change

“Enable all the other poor people...to earn their own living by giving the men some tools for working and the girls and women spinning wheels and flax or linen for spinning...When peace is restored everyone will have something to do...and gradually get back on their feet.”¹²

Vincent and Louise practised a leadership style that respected people’s capabilities and strengths, and equipped them to find their own solutions – not “doing for”, but enabling them to do for themselves.

As Vincentian organisations, we believe in respecting people’s autonomy and seeking their full participation in making decisions. Our aim is to provide a service that engages with people who are experiencing poverty and to provide a culture in which the authority to make decisions is delegated to the most local level that is compatible with the common good.

We commit to working with others, knowing that we, too, are transformed by those whom we serve. We attend with care to the diversity of people’s lives and aspirations. We celebrate difference.

We work with people to facilitate change and to use their potential to transform their lives and society.

¹² St Vincent de Paul, CCD, Vol 8, No 2,936, p82

5 Acting in solidarity for justice

“There is no act of charity that is not accompanied by justice...”¹³

As Vincentian organisations, we believe that by serving people we are enacting justice and that the people with whom we work are participants in the search for that justice, not passive recipients of charity.

We aspire to a society in which poverty is eradicated and the voices of poor people are heard and acted on. We want to ensure that people are not deprived of the conditions they need to be able to choose to live well, according to their own beliefs, values and aspirations.

We encourage staff, volunteers and trustees to be “doers of justice” – to stand with those who are on the margins of life and to make the case for everyone to be an agent for social change, committed to building a better society.

Solidarity with people who are in difficulty represents a true love of one’s neighbours.

¹³ CCD, Vol 2, No 452, p68

Putting our Vincentian values into action

We believe that the best services to people in poverty are delivered by staff, volunteers and trustees who share our Vincentian values.

Our aim is to base the conduct of our relationships and services, with people of all faiths and none, on those Vincentian values.

We ensure that our ways of working are faithful to the values we share and that this is reflected in the way personnel are treated, as well as in the way they treat service users and one another.

Our Vincentian organisations ensure that they are aware of, and adapt to, changing social needs. This enables them to respond well to new demands on their services.

We consider our Vincentian values to be:

- **our beginning** – they are what inspire us;
- **our means** – they are what we do collectively, and inform the way we do it;
- **our end** – they are what we strive to achieve, now and in the future.

In all their successes and accomplishments, St Vincent and St Louise were simply following the Gospel maxim: “Whatever you do to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do to me.”¹⁴

That conviction continues to inspire and energise the work of international Vincentian organisations today, 400 years after the founding vision of Vincent and Louise.

¹⁴ Matthew 25:40

Summary

Shared statement of Vincentian identity and purpose

VIVAT (*V*incentian *V*ALues *T*oday), a major element in the work of The Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul Services, comprises 15 Vincentian organisations in Britain.

Our work is an expression of the vision of the Christian Gospel, that each person is precious, each life is a sacred gift, and that justice demands that everyone should have access to what they need to live a fulfilling life.

Our service brings together employees, volunteers, advocates and concerned citizens, of many beliefs and faiths and from many backgrounds. It is evidence that the 400-year-old Vincentian inspiration is still vibrant in Britain today.

Together, we answer the call of St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac, to make our values real by accepting a common purpose to serve. We act in different ways to defend and promote human dignity. We aim to pay special attention to our neighbours who are the poorest, most under-served and most vulnerable. Through our collective service, we strive to transform exclusion into community, and hurt into hope.

As Vincentians, we commit to becoming, and continuing to be, “value-driven organisations” that embed our Vincentian values in everything we do.

We are committed to:

- **servicing people who are experiencing the effects of poverty;**
- **respecting each person’s dignity;**
- **being kind and compassionate;**
- **enabling choice and change;**
- **acting in solidarity for justice.**

Acknowledgements

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We particularly thank Philomena Cullen, who spearheaded the work, designed its process and contributed hugely to the writing of the document.

The quotes from Vincent and Louise use the terminology of the time. Some can now, therefore, be seen as being patristic and lacking in gender equality.



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