

## **SPRITUALITY IN CHARITY:**

*Giving flesh to our holiness*

**Being a Talk presented on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Biannual Training to the Conference Presidents and Secretaries of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Archdiocese of Abuja today, October 23, 2021 at COJA Hall, Chida Hotel, Utako/Jabi, Abuja.**

### *1 Compliments*

If I am not mistaken, this should be my third encounter with a larger Conference of St. Vincent de Paul Society here in Abuja, in a forum like this. It was tough for me to accept this service given the fact that there are other expert and competent and more scholarly hands around than I; and surely, we can locate them. Thank you for this great opportunity to share my little thoughts on the topic: **SPRITUALITY IN CHARITY: GIVING FLESH TO OUR HOLINESS**

Let me remark here lest I forget: your monthly feeding of the prisoners is quite commendable. This is where your practical spirituality in the temple of mercy and charity is unparalleled. I must congratulate Sister Joy Ohiagu and his team for such awesome initiative and to you all for letting Charity be your spirituality and not a fanfare. You have been to salutary in your corporal works of mercy. God bless you.

### **2. Understanding Spirituality;**

Spirituality is not rocket science but life in the spirit. It has no specific definition because it has to do with something that we are all involved: the spirit you. Although the concept just made appearance within the last 30 or 40 years ago, everyone these days is searching for something deeper than the normal. What we call spirituality today had existed but in different faces and still evolving depending

on the religious traditions. But for us Catholics, spirituality was only found in churches referred to as “piety” if you go to confessions daily, receive communion and say your prayer, etc. But that is half holiness. St. Vincent de Pau actuality revolutionized the concept in his own time to make it a street business by locating God and holiness in the service of the poor. In fact, the poor were his sacrament on the streets of France.

It is worthy of note that spirituality actually existed in Charismatic prayer groups, Pentecostal fellowships and perhaps among the pious societies like the legionaries. Today everybody is getting much interested if not berserk about spiritual matters not necessarily to get holy but to be noticed by God or most get a chunk from God’s store house of resources and to kill Satan. Today spirituality is a new brand in town.

What is this madness about it? It is the fire that burns within us, it the breath of God into our nostrils the very first day matter turned into life. That why the psalm 8 says “ye are gods,” a divine descent. You cannot but have to be spiritual not just in wish but in activity. We cannot put off the sacred fire God put into us. One of my friends calls it “holy madness.” What you do with that holy madness constitute your spirituality. Vincent channeled to the service of the poor; others may channel it to something very destructive. How you handle the sacred fire God put into you determines whether you have a good spirituality or a bad one.

Spirituality is the inner you that always craves for fulfillment. It can be mistaken or misplaced depending what you treasure. This confirms what St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions* “Thou has made us for yourself O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Rohnald Rolheiser calls it “restlessness of the soul”, that inner longing to touch the sacred is your spirituality (The Holy Longing). Mario

Beuregard and Denyse O'Leary understand spirituality as "contact with the divine"  
(The Spiritual Brain)

### 3. Some Clarity

Just two points here:

1. As already stated above, there is good spirituality and there is a bad spirituality. Good spirituality is good disposition towards the things of God while the bad one is disposition towards the things that are mundane, vanity. Each person has his own spirituality depending on his priorities. This is why Christ said, where your treasure is, there lies your heart. My treasure can be my spirituality, it depends on where you keep it. Therefore, spirituality is a value, some worth one places on matters that concern either the divine or the worldly, each of them has a spinning angel or spirit.
2. We must also understand that there is a difference between religiosity and spirituality. Though religion and spirituality have some relationship, religiosity is the opposite of spirituality. While spirituality asks questions like, "where do I personally find some personal meaning, connection and value, religion asks, what practices, rituals and rites should I follow? What is right and what is wrong? What is true and what is false? Sometimes it may end here on moral or mental satisfaction. As I wrote in my book, ***"Turning Duties into Temples"***, "religiosity on the other hand is an excess and excessive adherence to external practices of religion which may even promote violence, eye service, sacrificing human beings on the altar of maintenance on what is visible while losing the value and dignity of such person." That

why Jesus said “unless your virtue goes beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the Kingdom of God” (Mat 5;20). To enter that kingdom which is spirituality, we must move from religiosity to spirituality.

In his book, *The Holy Longing*, Rolheiser identifies four essential pillars the underpins any healthy Christian spirituality derives basically from the ministry of Christ: prayer, fasting, almsgiving. However our prayer is not just private prayer without keeping the commandments of God and praying with the Christian community; fasting is not just abstinence without being in solidarity with the hungry as well as sharing in the joy of plenty; almsgiving is not just charity but also doing justice, tracking the root causes than just being at the treatment level. Therefore, our spirituality must be founded on the four blocks of private prayer and private morality, charity and social justice, mellowness of heart and spirit and human family and brotherhood. These become a healthy spirituality or spiritual life.

#### **4. Understanding Charity**

The word ‘charity’ originates is an old English which means, "benevolence for the poor," also "Christian love in its highest manifestation." From Old French *charité* "(Christian) charity, mercy, compassion; alms; charitable foundation" From the Latin *caritatem (caritas)* meaning "costliness; esteem, affection," from *carus* "dear, valued."

From this root meaning we will come to appreciate that Charity is rooted in God, “for God so loved the world” that he chose to be born among men as poor, that whosoever accepts and believes in him experiences the reign of God in his kingdom.

Therefore, charity is not a human invention but an act of the spirit. There is spirituality in charity.

People these days trivializes that concept on anything “giving”. Not every giving is charity. When giving is done without expecting a return, when you spend without counting the cost, when you work without taking and advantage of the weak, then that is charity. It is has moved from the realm of self-service to the realm of spirituality. Christian Charity is an act of the spirit which does not sound the trumpets, nor attract intended publicity but an act of prayer. When you give in charity, you pray, you glorify God. In fact God is much more glorified in a cup of cold water you give to the thirsty man than the days of fasting that you observe. This does not mean fasting is inferior, but it must enable me to love the poor and be willing to forfeit my comfort and convenient for the glory of God in a sister or brother who is less advantageous than I am.

Charity must be pushed further to justice, seeking the root causes of such condition of deprivation or want. Charity may be cheap because it is simply a handout, which of course can be delegated. It ends on the treatment of the malaise without getting involved in the course of justice. Charity may serve our personal needs and inner satisfaction but it does to guarantee the peace of the giver nor the givee. Where there is justice, there peace at the long run for both parties. While we cannot neglect ‘giving them something to eat’, we must engage the system that throws up the want and the deprivation.

Last point here is that Charity is also about stewardship. A steward is a person who is tasked with caring for another person’s valuables. The steward is accountable to the “owner” for how well he manages the property he oversees. On the master’s

business we must therefore bear in mind stewardship is intrinsically spiritual in the delivery of our services to the poor.

### **5. Vincentian Spirituality**

Vincentian spirituality then is an incarnational spirituality, immanent than transcendental. That God became man is a privilege for man to be godly. This has been the point of St Vincent spirituality. As Vincentians believe that Jesus Christ is not only God, but also truly human and at home in our world. Hence, we see our work as a continuation of Christ's own work. Our spirituality is to express our love for God, and for all God's people, "by the sweat of their brow and the strength of their arms," as St. Vincent told the daughters of Charity.

Our spirituality therefore calls us first and foremost to place a high premium in our relationship with God, to understand and be directed to the service of God in the poor. St. Vincent once said, "give me a man of prayer and he able to do many things." Once a Vincentian lacks this intimate relationship with God, unable to approximate relationship with God, service to the poor then is a humanitarian service provider or a philanthropist competing for space. After all, the pagans do as much as we do, do they not? What distinguishes our work with what UNDP does, or FAO of UN or WHO does is that meaning and value, that spirituality that God is at the centre of our service. My relationship with God distinguishes me from a Red Cross staff who does so for pay or for earthly medals or award. Our take off point is holiness, as we aspire to be burnt for love of God and grow more in love and expression of compassionate and tender love to the poor and one another.

## 6. Conclusion

Our spirituality therefore is putting skin on our holiness, since God first took the initiative to wear our skin in his transcendence. Our holiness must wear the presence of God in our charity. The goal is not to bring help to the poor, at least when defined solely as material or financial assistance, but to bring the incarnate(flesh) Love and Peace of Christ to those who are suffering. We are to discover, identify and serve our Master in humility, in compassion and in apologies. The poor then are the sacraments of Christ, they are the monstrosity on the streets. There lies our spirituality. In serving the poor in the body, we imbibe the spirit of dependency on God who will always make a way where there seems to be no way, as givers never lack. Without this Spirituality, our work for the poor becomes mere welfarism organization where we dispense food, clothing and money, pay fines for the prisoners. Without God at the centre of our lives the poor becomes one of those mistaken identities on our streets. **Our take home texts:**

*“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.” Colossians 3:12-14*

*“In every way I have shown you that by hard work of that sort we must help the weak, and keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus who himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” Acts 20:35*

God bless you all.