

WHAT CAN BE DONE

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I WRITE this article as a very ordinary Catholic layman. A schoolmaster whose work very definitely does not finish at four o'clock, father of four children not yet in their teens, an active member of various professional and Catholic organizations, the only handyman, painter and decorator about the house, I am pretty busy. But I feel very strongly that once family and professional obligations have been fulfilled, the performance of works of Christian charity is my most important duty.

It was as an undergraduate at Oxford after the war that I was persuaded by Catholic friends to join in works of charity. Like many others, we made a special effort to heal some of the wounds of war. We tried to become the genuine friends and tactful helpers of Polish students and German prisoners of war. We collected and despatched food and clothing to refugees and to Germany. Then a Dominican introduced us to the normal charitable work which can—and should—be performed in the ordinary Catholic parish. This country has a proud record of charitable works to distant peoples in misfortune and towards many unusual causes—but I do not think that our Catholic record in many of our parishes is so worthy of admiration. We were very fortunate to be introduced to such work at an age, old for undergraduates, but still highly impressionable. The St Vincent de Paul society was established there, so we joined it and there learnt something of the problems of the rapidly increasing family, of the aged, the lonely, the sick and of the ordinary Catholic family, suddenly struck by misfortune or some particular difficulty, such as the threat of eviction from its home. Some of us were permitted to become prison visitors and were appalled at the conditions—three prisoners in a cell designed for one in the heat of summer in a building frequently condemned but still operating.

Then, for a time I dropped the work almost entirely. I soon had three young children and many domestic duties to perform and I found the strain of beginning to teach very considerable. There was no S.V.P. conference established, but the parish priest did occasionally ask for assistance when charitable help was needed. Or there was some task that we could see for ourselves

needed doing. I think that that is the case with the normal Catholic. And obviously the first need is to be charitable and to try to cope with the obvious problems arising near to oneself. But there is a lot more that needs to be done and I think that the ordinary Catholic requires a stimulus, a routine, the constant example and encouragement of others, to persevere in works of charity and to make the effort to adapt himself to new needs. This can be provided by the S.V.P. or any other group which exists for the performance of such works.

When I moved to another parish I found an S.V.P. conference newly established but was reluctant to join at first, because of the already heavy demands on my time. But after five years I realize that no other work has a value and a reward equal to this. We visit old people. There are many of them here—married couples, widows, widowers, spinsters, and a few bachelors. They have so many difficulties—the practical business of living has become daily more bewildering and more onerous. We give them advice when asked for it, professional help when necessary, small but regular assistance in kind where it is clearly needed, we put them into touch with other agencies who are better equipped to help them; but above all else we try to give them our genuine friendship. Only when this is established will they feel happy about accepting other forms of help. How rich a thing Catholic friendship should be—intelligent, sensitive, aware of the needs of both body and soul. There can never be too much of it. In this part of the country our conferences rarely consist of more than half a dozen members so that those whom we visit get to know us all. But the individual members do usually keep to a fairly regular visiting list, so that it is easier to establish genuine friendships. Only then will the proud and the lonely reveal their real needs. I felt that for once I had succeeded when, visiting an old lady in a home, one of the helpers there announced to her, 'Oh, Miss Duncanson, your son has arrived to see you'. She, for her part, is still trying to live down the scandal!

Occasionally, one is privileged to see God's providence and grace working in a person's soul. The parish priest once asked us to call on a lady whose husband had just died and who was in practical difficulties. We did so and decided that we ought to call regularly for a time because of the distressed state she was in. She soon became seriously ill with cancer. By this time we had won

her confidence and she revealed to us that she had not been properly married to her husband—indeed, he had not been divorced from his first wife—and we discovered also that she had forgotten most things about her faith even though she had been brought up in a good French-Canadian family. In time she returned to the sacraments; a Catholic lady, with whom she had become friendly, with incredible generosity took her into her own home to nurse her; we managed to get her to Lourdes; and, although she was not cured physically, the spiritual cure was most remarkable. Her sufferings were terrible and her temptations to despair and rebellion were equally severe over a period of nearly two years. But our visits obviously made what seemed to us a quite disproportionate difference to her, and they encouraged the lady who bore the burden of nursing her in such a distressing illness. She was a remarkably holy person when she died and taught us far more than we ever taught her.

At the moment I am not doing regular prison visiting because the prison is ten miles away and I cannot devote a full evening to it. But I do go a few times every year to give talks to a discussion group of Catholic prisoners organized by another S.V.P. brother. There is an urgent need for more Catholic prison visitors. The proportion of our co-religionists in prison is certainly higher than the Catholic percentage of the population as a whole—but the same is not true of our Catholic prison visitors. If you are near a prison and would like to know more about the work, ask the priest who acts as chaplain. There is no need to be a member of the S.V.P. to undertake this work. Only those prisoners receive a visitor who have expressed a desire to do so, so there is no need to be afraid that you will not be welcome. It is the practice to name the number of prisoners you have the time to visit regularly, but you have to agree to accept whoever is allotted. But usually the C. of E. chaplain, who does the allocation, will respect your wishes to have the Catholics on your list. The object of such visiting is to give the prisoner a much-needed contact with the outside world and to help him to decide on his manner of life when his prison term has expired. There is much discussion of religion in prisons. Sometimes one can help the prisoner about his worries over what is going on at home by contacting his parish priest or the local S.V.P. conference and asking them to make a visit.

Probably the most difficult cases to tackle are those of feckless and large families. Unfortunately, the large and well-conducted but poor families do not ask for the help to which they are entitled; but the parish clergy do give a list of deserving families for presents at Christmas and non-Catholic organizations also sometimes ask for names at that season. However, with regard to the former group considerable caution is necessary. Often the husband is not shouldering his responsibilities. He throws up a steady job for one with better money that is usually seasonal or unstable, and then is out of work just when jobs are most difficult to get. Such people often show an extraordinary knowledge of the different regulations under which they can get help. To give money is to encourage them in bad ways and, in addition, with a host of hire-purchase commitments, their needs prove a bottomless pit which our limited resources are incapable of filling. The most that can be done is to give help in kind for the sake of the children when need is most urgent. Regular visiting is essential to keep an eye on developments and sometimes helps to keep them in the Church, although very little progress often seems to be made. It is a strange fact that the teaching of the Church with regard to contraception and abortion is still so often obeyed when normal religious observance seems to have gone by the board. Great is the danger of respectable Catholics treating such families as being outside the pale, because they are a scandal to their neighbours, with their dirty and unruly children, and the *bête-noire* of the professional social worker.

There are also many broken Catholic homes, where the wife has been left to struggle unaided with the maintenance of the home and the upbringing of the family. There is much that can be done here to help the mother with her worries, and to speak to the boys of the family, in particular, when they are being troublesome.

The care of the blind has greatly improved now, but there are still serious gaps in the service. The most serious is the shortage of places in homes for the blind and the fact that in most cases they will not accept anybody who is not otherwise able-bodied. This can lead to quite long delays before they can be admitted. One such lady, whom we had visited and taken to mass while her non-Catholic husband was still alive, had a fund of wonderful anecdotes, including the one of the occasion when she and a blind

friend groped their way into a building which they were certain was a public house. They ordered a couple of drinks at the counter, only to be told that they were in the bank! After her husband died, she was living in a house alone for some months before a home could take her in. We still visit her there, although it is situated some way off. This is not only because of the bond which has been established between us over the past years, but also because, although we have approached the clergy and various societies there, no one has come forward to undertake the work of taking her to mass occasionally or out for a walk or merely dropping in for a chat. The clergy, of course, take her holy communion. She is not the only case of this kind. Another elderly blind lady (French), living by herself, has been confined to bed for over a year. A neighbour brings in her meals, but frequently she is alone from dinner-time till next morning at breakfast—a very lonely life. An S.V.P. brother calls daily, does necessary odd jobs, spends some time chatting to her, deals occasionally with her business correspondence and generally keeps an eye on her. But she is an amiable character, well-read, marvellously contented with her lot, never upset, and a person in whose company it is a pleasure and an inspiration to be able to spend half-an-hour. The giving is never all on one side.

You may say that in these days of the welfare state material need no longer exists. Certainly the amount of it has been drastically reduced in this country. But the work of Christian charity and the spirit of the St Vincent de Paul society has always been that of service and the giving of self rather than the doling out of alms. I have also heard the criticism that all we do is to give money to tramps, idlers and ne'er-do-wells. Such types do present a problem and it is often extremely difficult to sort out the genuine from the false; some of their stories are so very plausible. If there is any serious doubt, obviously one must give the person the benefit of that doubt in the name of Christ. But in this parish we have worked out a procedure to follow in co-operation with the clergy. Such casuals call at the presbytery—we are particularly careful to keep our own addresses secret. The priest will then ring one of us to come over to interview the person, or give him a time to come back when this can be done. If he gives an address we arrange to visit him. Frequently he has never been heard of there. Our time has been wasted but not the alms entrusted to us.

This is not meant to be merely a recruiting article for the S.V.P. Some people are happier and more effective working alone. In other cases it may be easier to set up a group for charitable work within an existing society. Many of these must exist already. But it may help if I explain how a parish conference of the Society of St Vincent de Paul operates. The organization and procedure is simplicity itself. There are no frills. A member merely agrees to attend the weekly meeting, to carry out a minimum of one family visit per week and to contribute to the secret collection according to his means. The meeting opens and closes with prayers, there is a short spiritual reading, and the rest of the time is taken up with the consideration of the next week's work. Our own meetings do not last longer than forty-five minutes. Each member reports on his visits. If family or professional obligations or other reasons have prevented him from making one, he merely reports the fact. Also it is fully understood that some members have more time than others. If a family needs material help, the visiting member presents their case for consideration and the conference decides what help should be granted; or their problems are considered and the best line of action decided upon. The proceedings are, of course, completely confidential. In an ideal conference youth and age, enthusiasm and caution—not that there is always a direct connection between the two—contribute to securing the wisest solution. One of the clergy is usually present as chaplain. The programme of visits for the next week is decided upon. It is ordinarily necessary to supplement the collection of a small conference and usually a parish priest will give permission for a special collection or a permanent box or something of that nature. In practice we also often undertake works of Catholic Action, such as the selling of Catholic papers and magazines, because no other group is prepared to take on the responsibility.

To start a new conference only two or three initial members are necessary, and as soon as they have secured the authorization of the parish priest they can go ahead. After working for at least six months, they can approach the S.V.P. central council of the area to secure recognition, or 'aggregation' as it is called. The work has been endowed with many spiritual benefits by successive popes. Membership is restricted to men, but if the parish has the good fortune to possess a group of ladies engaged in charitable

work, then we provide mutual assistance to each other in the service of the poor, the sick and the troubled.

The work itself presents a continual challenge to spiritual sloth or pharisaic self-satisfaction. Those whom we visit usually regard us as benefactors, but it is we who feel most in their debt: many are so obviously better people than we are ourselves; whilst in those cases where the spiritual and moral needs are clearly very great, one's own personal inadequacy to satisfy them is very keenly felt. Hence the stress laid on the need for personal sanctification.

The spirit of the society is that no work of charity is alien to it; and that no new demand should be rejected in the name of a false conservatism and loyalty to the past. The whole life of our patron St Vincent de Paul represented a refusal to be contented with the performance of contemporary conventional works of Catholic charity alone. And the whole aim of Frederick Ozanam, who founded the St Vincent de Paul society before the middle of the last century, was to attempt solutions of the new problems of his own times. As a student in the profoundly irreligious University of Paris of his day, he used his intellect and eloquence to great effect in the defence of the Church. But when he was challenged to 'show us your works', he had the honesty to acknowledge that Saint-Simonian criticism of the neglect of the poor by Catholics was all too justified. With a true youthful spirit of faith, charity and adventure, he set himself to remedy this state of affairs in Paris at least and so the first conference of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul was born. Later, as a professor, he was outstanding not only for his exceptional care of his students but also for the production of original work of a high standard. As a husband he was happy and devoted to his wife and full of joy in their only child. But he refused to remain contented with what had been achieved in the enthusiasm of his youth, and continued to inspire and labour for a new movement of charity which spread at an astonishing rate throughout Europe and beyond. It is our hope that he will soon be beatified so that more laymen will be drawn to follow his example. The character of the need for charity has changed much since his times: but the need itself remains.

