

Making Vincentian Charism Intelligible

Final Report Special Request

Summary¹

Vincent de Paul Center Nederland

November 2021



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Content

Introduction

Part I Question

Part II Exploration of the context

1. Practices of organized charity
2. Secularization
3. 'Not decrease but transformation'
4. Language as barometer of transformation
5. Concluding part II

Part III Towards answering the question

1. Theoretical explorations
 - a. Catholic social thinking
 - b. Vincentian charism
2. Empirical explorations
 - a. The Societies of St. Vincent of Paul in The Netherlands
 - b. Method of inquiry
 - c. Contours of an answer

Part IV Insights, recommendations and practices

1. Perspectives and insights
2. Recommendations
3. Practices

¹ Appendices are available.

Introduction

On January 21, 2018 the secretary of the Vincent de Paul Center Nederland received an email from the director of the Vincentian Family Office, Joe Agostino CM. He put forward a 'special request': Would it be possible for the Vincent de Paul Center Nederland to initiate a research project concerning the translation of the Vincentian charism, intended for lay people? We have limited ourselves to our secularized world. This research could well be conducted in less secularized parts of the world, followed by discussions within a group of international theologians.

On May 10, 2018 the board of the Vincent de Paul Center Nederland installed a Special Request Team. Participating members were Marieke van de Ven, Tjeu van Knippenberg and Jos Roemer. Shortly after Henrike van Riel joined and a couple of months later Jozef Tettero as well.

This team engaged in an extensive discussion on the request and, with input from the board, formulated this working definition:

- as Vincent de Paul Center Nederland we want to coordinate a process,
- in which the Vincentian charism,
- which has been passed on to us in extraordinary cultural circumstances,
- is considered among a group of theologians and other relevant people,
- in such a way that we can present it and make it intelligible and inspiring for generations to come.

Structure of this report:

In **part I** of this report we formulate the issue, the main question and the goal of this project.

In **part II** of this report, we explore the context in which we perform our investigation. What are the specific circumstances in which we envision the question? Firstly, we give a brief description of the situation of charity in our country. Our context is partly characterized by extensive organized assistance. After that we spend some attention on secularization. In our research we discovered also new perspectives: secularization is not just a matter of a gradual decrease, but maybe first a matter of transformation.

In **part III** we develop an answer to the question: How can we make the Vincentian charism intelligible for people in these postmodern circumstances? We do this in two ways. The first is theoretical. What relevant insights in the literature do we find useful? The second is empirical by nature. How do volunteers in Societies of St. Vincent of Paul describe their work and their motivation? We gained insight in this question by means of interviews.

In **part IV** we summarize all the insights and perspectives. We conclude with a few recommendations and practices.

Part I Question

As mentioned in the Introduction, it is about putting the Vincentian charism into words in such a way that lay people can recognize themselves in it. The term 'laymen' is used on the one hand as opposed to religious professionals; on the other hand, it is a direction for people who are situated in the middle of today's secular life. What spirituality is required to be able to receive direction from the Vincentian charism in the current cultural and social context and subsequently live and act from that charism?

What's the problem here? The center of gravity of Christian spirituality lies in people's evangelical relationship with God. That relationship is not up in thin air. It is embedded in the actual reality of time and space. The history of spirituality indicates that the two poles between which this takes place, God and man, do not always have the same meaning.

In the time and space dimension of Vincent, the seventeenth century in France, the word God played the same role in the collective language game as the word man. The belief in the transcendence had yet not been fundamentally compromised. However, there was a growing belief in people's own capabilities. The connection between God and man was quite uncontested. In today's Western culture, the relationship itself is being questioned. Faith in what's beyond us is minimal.

In the seventeenth century, and certainly from the eighteenth century onwards, the slow process of the demystification of the world begins. This goes hand in hand with the broad movement of secularization. That process is what the French philosopher Ferry calls the humanization of the divine. On the other hand, Ferry sees a deification of the human as a form of compensation. In the 21st century in Northwestern Europe, the commonly used word 'spirituality' takes on meaning within this form of secularization.

When we look for a contemporary form of Vincentian spirituality, we ask about the connection between Vincent's sense of life and the sense of life of the 21st century in Northwest Europe. We must find that connection in the basic word of spirituality: 'Spiritus, spirit'. It is there that Vincent discerns his sense of direction. "When God created the Company of the Daughters of Charity, he also gave them their special spirit. It is the Spirit that makes it come alive. It is important that you know exactly what this spirit consists of. This knowledge is of equal importance to you as for the traveler, who must know the precise path he must take to reach his destination. Without this mental knowledge, you would not know which virtues you must practice for everything."

In the year 1617 Vincent discovered the direction of the spirit specifically in two basic experiences: at Folleville and at Châtillon. They received their name in the concepts that are at the heart of the gift of grace Vincent received: mission and caritas. It is mission and caritas, that in their interconnectedness, will determine the direction of Vincent's life and work. Mission, being sent, is being a substitute of the person who sends, to pass on His presence. Caritas is the assistance and care for poor and vulnerable people. Caritas keeps mission grounded and mission gives caritas inspiration and enthusiasm. Since the profound experiences of 1617, Vincent not only looks at the poor, he really sees them; he is no longer a spectator but a person who is intimately connected. "We and the others must help the poor in their material and spiritual need, in every way possible. This is evangelizing with word and deed" ('C XII, 87).

In line with the motto from Luke 4, 'evangelizare pauperibus', Vincent focuses the charism of mission and caritas on the poor. From everything he does he is particularly concerned with the material, social and spiritual dimensions of poverty.

In our research we want to clarify the old and new meaning of these key concepts in order to be able to deal with the legacy in an original way. We are, on the one hand, guarding ourselves against reproduction of the legacy and, on the other hand, with alienating ourselves from it.

Part II Exploration of the context – a sample of the research

1. Practices of organized charity

What is the current practice of helping the poor in our country? Or should we speak of 'practices', as, on closer inspection, a multitude of initiatives emerge. These multi-quantity concerns, in first instance, are the areas in which all these initiatives are moving; from the poor to refugees. In addition, there is also a multitude of parties that take these initiatives in all these fields, from companies through the media, to national and international organizations. And also, we found out, the Roman Catholic church in our country is very active.

The question arises: is there then sufficient help? But perhaps another question is even more interesting in the context of this project: what does 'help' mean? It is precisely because of the overview provided that the contours of help with a Vincentian background may emerge in contrast.

2. Secularization

In the following we report on a conversation Marieke van de Ven had with religion sociologist Staf Hellemans and with the theologian Jos Moons. The question she put at the heart of both conversations was: how can we characterize the current situation of (Christian) religion in Western societies and how can we find a new religious trail?

Shift from religious to secular

What current developments are emerging? In Western societies we see, on the one hand, a decrease in the dominance of a religious culture and on the other hand an increase in the dominance of a secular culture. Religion sociologist Prof. Staf Hellemans PhD argues that in the field of religion and church, a new era is ushered in, in which the great world religions, including Christianity, lose their dominance and that - with the appearance of new spiritual currents and activities - a diverse and turbulent religious field is created. Some random examples of this broad, diverse spiritual field are nature-oriented spirituality, yoga, aura reading, pop festivals, wellness, reiki or mental coaching.

According to Hellemans, Christianity and the other major religions will not disappear but will become one of the many players on the religious field. There is also internal pluralism; within the Christian churches we see an increase in different positions such as orthodox, liberal, progressive. This blurs the identity of traditional religions. According to Hellemans, the loss of impact of the great religions does not mean that the desire for transcendence also disappears. According to him, people will always look for connection to the transcendent. However, there is no scenario for the future of Christianity; the future is fundamentally open.

Future?

What could be the future of religion, especially that of Christianity? What's next? There's no blueprint. What leads do we see? According to Hellemans, it will be decisive whether Christianity will be rediscovered as a relevant factor for the quality of life. What factors are important for people for the quality of their lives? According to Guardini, it will be about finding a fruitful balance again between will, heart and mind; for example, by examining the scenario of a tempered dominance of the ratio in favor of an emancipation of the heart.

Perhaps developing a methodology for the philosophical conversation can contribute to this. Or activities that can generate religious experiences both in terms of mission and charity. For example, a night of vigil (World Youth Days), a music festival, a wakeup call across the meridians, a pilgrimage, laying flowers, visiting the sick, burning candles, active mantras, joint silence, help with poverty, fair trade and investment, supporting marginalized groups, *'Pray as you go'*, an approximately 10-minute daily podcast about the liturgical readings/saints of the day with info,

music and meditative considerations etc. In other words, events that touch the heart, that move people and makes them enthusiastic.

3. 'Not decrease but transformation'

Pete Ward is an English theologian, who began his career as a youth pastor at Oxford, where he met young people mainly from working-class neighborhoods. His reflections on that work have brought him into the world of the university. He is currently professor of practical theology at Durham (UK). Pete has undergone a change in his thinking about mission: it's not primarily about the message but about the relationship. Pete, who has worked with young people a lot, says: "A longer-term relationship is needed to get young people to open up to faith." Based on a longer-term connection, you can explore with each other what it means to believe. This needs to be discussed in a way that is meaningful to young people and for that a turn towards youth culture is important.

People want a meaningful life and in part they achieve this by joining the memory of something religious, a reference to religious aspirations. "Our society lives in the ruins of a large cathedral, where numerous fragments lie scattered that people pick up and decorate their lives with." But also, in non-religious activities people find meaning, such as in e.g., gardening.

Mirella Klomp gave a good example of this by means of 'meaning through fragments' in her study of the Passion in our country. The Passion is a multimedia event, which takes place every year on Holy Thursday in one of the larger cities in our country. What the author particularly notices is that in response to statistics on church membership, there is talk about the disappearance of religion, while the popularity of the Passion is unabated every year. Hundreds of thousands of people follow this theatrical-musical ritual every year live or on television and give it personal meaning, connected to the story of Jesus' suffering. Klomp therefore prefers to speak of a transformation rather than a disappearance.

4. Language as barometer of transformation

Marleen van Casteren (1968) is a specialist in elderly medicine and a palliative care executive. She worked in a nursing home (Kalorama, Beek/Nijmegen) for twenty years, and for fifteen years also in a hospice (Bethlehem, Nijmegen).

Traces of Catholic background in her work

Marleen sees in her work 'traces' of her Catholic upbringing / background, e.g.:

- in the choice of her profession, which is strongly determined by 'what your attitude in life is'.
- a less strong belief that everything in life is possible. She finds the idea of 'manufacturability', that 'everything is possible' in society is increasingly strong, even in the twenty years she worked as a nursing home doctor; she observes this especially in the increasing demand for euthanasia in the last part of life.
- the meaning of trust: Marleen mentions trust as the counterpart of the idea that everything is possible. "We were raised with a lot of confidence. Sometimes things happen in life, but you can also face them with confidence and then you accomplish that together. That's the basic attitude I've had."
- a kind of 'natural' relationship with death. E.g.: "When my grandmother died, she was at home. We went there as a family, looked at her and prayed for her. My parents explained, 'This is what happens and that is the way it is.' And when it is done in such a normal way, then it's normal."
- a greater sensitivity to symbols and rituals. When they come from another religious tradition, it is sometimes more difficult to 'understand' them properly. Good listening is very important. This often allows you to sense what certain things mean to people.

Attention to the spiritual dimension in palliative care

In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to the spiritual dimension in the field of palliative care. The main reason for this is that it is now included (by the government) in the definition of what palliative care is. "So, we have to do something with it." Marleen does not dare to properly assess as to what extent colleagues really think how important it is. That is simply not clearly visible. That may certainly be the case, but there is no further discussion about it.

For example, the increased attention to the spiritual dimension in palliative care is evidenced by more ongoing training in this area. Marleen talks about a training that she and her colleagues recently followed. Central to this was the question: How can you talk about the spiritual dimension with a patient in relation to the question of which treatment someone would, or would no longer want? By first speaking about what someone thinks is important in life, it is easier to talk about what someone wants or doesn't want anymore. For example, in case of pneumonia: whether he takes antibiotics depend on how at that moment a person experiences his quality of life; can he still experience what he thinks is important in life?

Lacking language, in two ways

In palliative care, more attention is paid to the spiritual dimension of conversations, but it is often also very difficult to 'find the words' for this. Both doctors and patients struggle with it. Doctors need to learn asking good questions and it is important that they listen carefully. Marleen makes a distinction between listening and understanding. She tries to teach her interns (mostly GPs) that they need to become a little sensitive to (possibly) different layers of meaning in what someone is saying. According to her you can train that sensitivity.

During ongoing training meetings, she and her colleagues practice to conduct spiritually oriented conversations. They learn from each other, through role play, feedback, etc. It's about learning how to raise certain topics and questions, provide openings, 'get things out in the open'.

But... it may be the case that at some point doctors are better educated, but if people are not used to talk about these things (anymore), 'then it also becomes very difficult'. Some patients have little or no words for this and some people talk very little.

Need for language for 'what cannot be reasoned'

When it comes to the orientation to the big questions in life, one of the biggest needs in her field, according to Marleen, is: "The need for language, for openness and attention to things that you cannot know, that cannot be reasoned, ... yes... mysticism... I just would like more attention to that." Religion can be a source from which to draw just such 'language', Marleen thinks. She regrets that religion is now often seen as 'obsolete'. That is not correct, she says. But also, poetry, and even songs can help 'find the words'.

5. Concluding part II

What is the result of this first phase of exploration? What can we say about the context in which we were asked the question: How can we make Vincentian charism understood? The charism with which countless people have been following in Vincent's footsteps over the past centuries has been for the benefit of the poor.

We can conclude first that a huge amount of assistance is being provided through numerous organizations and funds in many different areas. When we highlight two areas, children and poverty and refugees, we see a long list of foundations and funds that focus on them. In addition, the initiatives of the media and broadcasting companies and concerns such as Albert Heijn, the Salvation Army and the Red Cross stand out. In addition to these civil society initiatives, we observe facilities set up by local authorities and the national government. In short, the conclusion is justified that a great deal of help is being offered. The question then arises is: Is this assistance also well organized and what is its Vincentian impact? We will address this question later in the report (see empirical exploration).

Secondly, we can say about the current context that it is characterized by a process of secularization. From our explorations we can see that we can speak of a decrease in the influence of traditional forms of religion. A 'diverse and turbulent religious field' is gradually emerging. The increasing dominance of reason also plays an important role in our current society. We increasingly value reason and this weakens the form of doubt associated with faith. The challenge we now face is to find a balance between the will, the intellect and the heart.

Theologian Pete Ward offers an interesting perspective on secularization. He argues that there is not so much a decrease in religiosity but rather a transformation. This notion was also reflected in the paragraph on secularization. However, Ward adds something new here. Traditional forms of religiosity do not disappear but fragmentize and those fragments can be meaningful to people. Further on we will see that the fragment 'Vincent' is such a meaningful fragment for many people in our country.

When we shift our focus to institutions in general, we are reminded of the importance of language. In the past, we have seen many institutions in which work was done based on a religious foundation. Think of hospitals, healthcare institutions, orphanages and schools. The names of many of these institutions still betray their origins, as does the history of their foundation (mostly by orders and congregations). Due to the reduced influence of traditional religiosity, also within these traditionally religiously based institutions, the importance of language is paramount. In order not for the language of business to prevail, we need to look for language with which the heart can resonate. And that language is not readily available. There seems to be a shift from 'background' to 'foreground'. When, in Vincent's time, you refer to the gospel, you can assume a commonly shared background. Many are familiar with religious language and the meaning and role of faith.

This common and stable background gradually disappears. At the same time, there are signs of something new. New activities are now taking place in the foreground, but there is hardly a background that connects. The challenging question becomes: Is there such a thing as a 'source language', a language that lies beneath all languages, a language of love? We are inclined to answer this question with 'yes'. You could say that many people are busy in many different ways to put love in religion, art, concrete care and attention to others into practice. In this sense the Vincentian charism is not unique, but one of the manifestations of the universal language of love.

Part III Towards answering the question

1. Theoretical explorations

Before we look for an answer to the research question through an empirical study (how can the Vincentian charism be made intelligible for people of our time?), we first must explore other attempts that have been made, from a theoretical perspective, to make religiously motivated commitment intelligible.

First, we want to present Catholic social thinking. You could say that this shows several values, which people who do not immediately experience a connection with the Catholic tradition are able to recognize.

A second perspective we take from Sister Alfonsa Richartz, who devoted a study to the Vincentian spirituality. Based on her findings, we can describe Vincentian charism in greater detail.

a. Catholic social thinking

In their thinking about their place in the world, Catholics have found over the centuries a focus, which of course is rooted in the Bible, but it has also had a specific effect. This effect was given by the authorities in the Catholic Church (which led to Catholic Social Doctrine) but also by Catholics who did not play such a role in the Church but had an influence in society (Catholic Social Thought). How should we relate to issues such as poverty, oppression in dictatorial countries and the environmental problems? What values can guide us to take in a position and find guidance? In general, you can say that the following four values are at the heart of Catholic social thought.

- human dignity
- the common welfare
- solidarity
- ownership where possible.

Also, Vincent embodied this social position and way of thinking. He coined the terms 'mission' and 'caritas' to denote this view. The value of the solidarity that became concrete with him in aid to the poor (caritas) had a color: that of a Christian vocation (missio).

b. Vincentian charism

When you Google 'charism', you will first find references to 'appearance' and 'character'. It's only when you continue your search that you find the evangelical connotation. The Christian concept itself has its source in the New Testament, especially in the Pentecostal story, where there is talk of 'receiving the Holy Spirit' (John 20 and Acts 2). This is explained later in the New Testament as receiving gifts such as the power to heal the sick or the gift of wise counsel (1 Cor. 12). It is essential to understand that these gifts have been 'received', they have been shared undeservedly (charis). The suffix '-ma' (charisma) indicates the effect of 'charis'.

This means two things. First, charism is a complex of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes received as a gift from the Spirit of God. So, we are not the ones who can pass it on to others, it is not to us to give it to others. Secondly, we are not the ones who can judge whether others have also received those gifts. When we encounter with others love, joy, and peace, kindness, goodness and trust, modesty, and self-control (Gal. 5: 22-23), could they not as well be gifts which the Spirit makes grow and mature?

Then the adjective 'Vincentian'. This leads directly back to the person of Vincent de Paul, born in France in 1581 and founder, together with Louise de Marillac, of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

One of Vincent's statements in witnessing the commitment people showed to the poor was that there is plenty of love, but it is poorly organized. Vincent proved resourceful in organizing. In this

way, he also succeeded in establishing a congregation at a time that was unfavorable for it, to provide the work for the poor with a structural as well as with a spiritual bedding. This congregation offered the community-forming framework for the commitment to the poor.

When we look at this structural form of the congregation, it is noticeable that the organization of Vincentian charism has been shaped largely according to the guidelines of canon law. There are constitutions, a statute and practical norms.

In this respect, the vows play an interesting role. Those who wish to enter the congregation vow to complete their preparatory training. These vows originate in the so-called 'evangelical councils', the good counsel Jesus gives his followers: "Do not lose your heart to the world or to something that is worldly. If one loses his heart to the world, there is no place in him for the love of the Father. For all that is worldly, everything we set our sights on, everything that lures the eye and all the earthly things we are so proud of, all of that comes not from the Father but from the world" (1 John 2: 15-16).

Sister Alfonsa Richartz (member of the Company of Daughters of Charity) has written a contribution about the vows from a Vincentian perspective. In this she mainly expresses the spiritual layer of the vows. She approaches these vows very fundamentally and anthropologically: deep down, man feels an urge to pay God (however we experience it, I would add) the honor that is due to Him. A vow is a way par excellence to make God receive this honor. It is important to note that the restrictive explanation of the vows (you may not have property, you may not have a family and you may not have your own will) has in history often led to the function of the vows as keys closing doors. When you return to the spiritual sources, you can see the vows much more as keys that open doors: share what you have, be honest in your relationships, listen with an uninhibited heart. We believe that this approach is understandable for lay people.

A central element in Vincentian spirituality is the encounter of Jesus in the poor. Richartz describes how Luke 4: 18 (the passage in which Jesus reads in the synagogue of Nazareth: God sent me to bring good news to the poor) was the key for Vincent to understand the incarnation of God. The pericope Matthew 25: 35-40 ("For I was hungry and you fed me") can also be a source that is fundamental to Vincent's spirituality.

In the vows we can see an existentially pronounced expression of identity rooted in spirituality. It is an expression of a feeling being called to dedicate all of life to the service of the poor. You just don't do it for a while, until you choose something else; you do it always, with all your heart.

At the same time, we can also see it as an expression of entering a community with vows. You just don't do it on your own. You need others to feed, experience and strengthen this commitment to service. From this point of view, the vows have a spiritual and an organizational aspect, an experiential and a community aspect.

2. Empirical explorations

How do volunteers at Societies of St. Vincent of Paul in The Netherlands put their work and their motivation into words? With this general question as a starting point, we held talks with six volunteers at the Societies of St. Vincent of Paul in our country in the months of October 2020 – February 2021.

In the following we will briefly discuss the situation of the Societies of St. Vincent of Paul in The Netherlands. What is the relationship of these societies with the Vincentian charism? Then, in a second paragraph, we discuss the way in which we set up and carried out the research, as well as with what questions we entered the conversations with the volunteers. And at the end, we describe the results and indicate which answer emerges to the research question.

a. The Societies of St. Vincent de Paul in The Netherlands

Our country currently has about 53 local societies, where numerous volunteers are committed to settling immediate needs. These local associations each have their own articles of association and board members and are united in the National Society of St. Vincent de Paul. In turn, this National Society is affiliated with the International Society of St. Vincent de Paul, in which 148 countries take part.

In the middle of the 19th century, this movement started in France under the inspiring leadership of Frédéric Ozanam. Still at a young age, he decided to work with eight fellow students to combat poverty. At that time, the social problems in France were enormous: of the 34 million French citizens, 12 million lived in poverty. For Frédéric Ozanam, Vincent was an important source of inspiration. In 1833, when the activities of the group of students began, he christened their covenant with the name *Conférence de St. Vincent de Paul*.

In 1846, relatively soon after the first movements in France, a conference was established in The Netherlands. Twenty-five years later, there are conferences in many cities (later they became societies). The Catholic emancipation during this period appears to be a fertile ground for this form of social commitment.

b. Method of inquiry

What common characteristics can be found in the meaning volunteers give to assist and that which is given to it in the Vincentian tradition? We interviewed volunteers at the St. Vincent de Paul Societies in a semi-structured interview. We took the questions from the exploration of the Vincentian charism.

The interview questions

What elements did the exploration of the Vincentian charism yield, which we chose as the starting point for a conversation with volunteers from the Societies of St. Vincent of Paul? It is precisely the perspective of the vows that offers us such a starting point, they serve as an expression of identity for Vincent's followers: this is me; I am accountable for this. We can summarize the exploration of the vows as follows:

- the vows are an expression of being called to a wholeness of life
- they deal with the motivation
- for the commitment to the poor
- in whom Vincent meets Christ
- which requires specific active virtues;
- they also concern the organization of that commitment
- and the commonality with others.

These aspects of the Vincentian charism led to the following questions for the purposes of the interviews:

- a. Why did you choose this particular volunteer work? How did you get into it?
- b. What does it mean to you that this work is mainly focused on the poor?
- c. What is in it for you? How are you affected as a person?
- d. Have you experienced a development in your volunteer work?
- e. Are there meaningful experiences in your life that have proven to be important for your commitment?
- f. How do you look at the poor? What image do you have of them?
- g. What does this work mean for you in terms of your life's situation? For example, would you also be able to do this work while you would be living in great luxury?
- h. What does this work require of you? What skills are important? What attitude to life is important in this work?

- i. How important is it that you do this work with others?
- j. Is there some form of solidarity with other volunteers? How does that manifest itself?
- k. Does your view of life play a role in your commitment to the poor?

In the months of October 2020 – February 2021, six volunteers were interviewed. Five interviews took place via a Zoom meeting, which with the consent of those interviewed was recorded. The sixth interview took place by telephone, which we also could record. The conversations had a duration ranging from 40 to 60 minutes.

Next to these interviews another interview was taken with a volunteer of a Society with not the same questions. Remarkably one characteristic of a Vincentian working principle emerged in this interview: the pay-it-forward principle. It refers to the principle of performing a good deed instead of returning a favor. A good deed may result in more good deeds.

Processing the interviews

The six conversations were first written out based on the recordings made. Fragments were then identified as examples of a particular 'subject' (for example, 'the people who do it'). In this way, the material could undergo a first organization. This resulted in four categories of fragments:

- the people who do it
- the concrete work
- the society
- the local Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

After this phase, the codes were refined. For example, the category 'the people who do it' could be refined in the following subcategories:

- the motivation
- the experience
- the philosophical background
- the image of the poor
- the volunteers.

We were able to refine the category 'the concrete work' as follows:

- concrete activities
- focus of help
- tailor-made help.

The category 'society' showed the following refinement:

- working with a network
- regular services.

Finally, the category 'the local Society of St. Vincent de Paul' yielded the following refinement:

- traditional origin
- organizing commonality
- Christmas activities.

In the final phase, a start was made on the interpretation of the fragments and the making of connections. What is there to discover in the first place, what emerges? By always going back to the interviews we were able to stay close to the material and subjective giving directions by the researcher was prevented.

c. Contours of an answer

The regular services

The respondents frequently refer to the help by the government that exists already in our country. "We are supposedly a welfare state." In fact, so much help is offered that we work together with

professionals who know their way throughout all the services, because those need to be applied to in the first place. Of those regular services, respondents say they fall short. People are constantly in danger of falling between the cracks. After all, those regular services are intended for certain categories of people, people who belong to a group with specific characteristics (earning no more than just so much, being able to work less than so much percent, living in a house with up to that amount of rent, etc.). But it's hard to take the details into account. "We pick up the pieces." In contrast to these regular services, the respondents ask the help from the Societies of St. Vincent de Paul: 'no trouble with papers', 'help within one day', 'you have to dare to go off the beaten track'. "We help where the boundaries of the welfare state become visible". "If society has not organized it properly, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul can offer help."

Help

The help from the Society of St. Vincent of Paul is described more precisely by the respondents: it is assistance based on the human touch. It is often about primary matters: an empty fridge on a Friday evening, a broken washing machine, a visit to the dentist. A multitude of concrete projects have been set up, such as thrift stores, a coffee corner, a book fair, a social restaurant, a toy fair and debt relief coaches. No structural aid is provided. The respondents indicate that their societies are part of an extensive network of all kinds of organizations, so that it can be quickly identified where tailor-made help is needed.

It is assistance aimed at poverty but also loneliness. Because the help from regular services sometimes falls short, 'the difficult cases' end up with the volunteers of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. This is sometimes accompanied by home visits. "I want to keep seeing the face of poverty."

Help is personal

Providing help is described by respondents as not only meeting material needs, but also in giving attention, being trustworthy, patting them on the back, being patient, listening, taking people seriously, letting people tell their stories. To offer help is to enter into a personal relationship. In that relationship, the respondents want to give the other person the confirmation that they are worthwhile.

Dignity

The respondents describe their help as a reciprocal relationship, in which the contact is regularly deepened. There is talk of 'ownership of the situation'. "You have to help them to get active." "People have their own choices and you can address them on their own responsibility". Most people are happy with that too, the realization that you must do something for it contributes to their self-esteem.

Long-term engagement

"Once a Vincentian, always a Vincentian!", one of the respondents commented. From the talks the voluntary commitment to the poor is certainly not without obligation. There seems to be a long-term engagement with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The respondents talk about little turnover within their society.

'My upbringing has laid a foundation'

For all respondents, their motivation for this work is related to their faith. "My DNA is the faith." "I have been raised a Catholic and that means that I want to do something for people." The respondents cite love of neighbor and selflessness as important values. All six also indicate that it also brings them something: they are happy that they can do it and are happy and satisfied after every concrete mediation.

For four of them, it means that the connection with the church has loosened. "I find the rules of the church too restrictive." "To me people are important, not the institute." For two others, their church involvement is high.

'You just can't do something like that on your own'

The respondents are happy with their membership of a society. There is talk about 'sparring with other volunteers in a working group', but also about 'a strong connection within the society', social moments ('a luncheon') and in one case a Christmas celebration. "Working with others is motivating."

What is also striking is that any philosophical motivation is not explicitly discussed within the societies. "Faith, you don't talk about that with each other."

Institutionally unraveled

In all conversations the Catholic origin of the Societies of St. Vincent de Paul have been discussed in detail. What is striking is that over the years the connection with that origin has faded. In one instance, there was talk of a change in the bylaws of the society, whereby the prefix 'Saint' at Vincentius was removed. The general members' meetings are described as profane meetings. "The church has become passive, we are compensating for it," one of the respondents put it. Respondents also refer to negative perceptions in the past ('formerly an elitist club', 'charity by and for Catholics'). Meetings don't start any longer with a prayer like they used to. At some societies the connection with parishes has fallen away, but not with all of them. What is striking at the same time is that the name 'Vincentius' is meaningful to all respondents. The name refers to 'the deeper meaning behind the work' and to the religious origin. In some societies, new volunteers receive a booklet describing this origin and the person of Vincent. Another reference to that origin is the additional activities carried out during the Christmas period.

An attempt to find 'commonalities'

What commonalities arise in the description by the volunteers regarding their commitment to the poorest people on the one hand and the spiritual sources of the Vincentian charism on the other hand?

Previously we have described those spiritual sources as:

- the meeting of Jesus in the poor ("For I was hungry and you fed me...");
- the ingenuity in the organization of help;
- the entering into a vowed community (open ears, open hearts and open hands);
- the working from the inspiration of the gifts of the Spirit.

When we want to see the volunteers' commitment to the poorest, as we encounter them in the interviews, in conjunction with these spiritual sources, we could formulate the commonalities as follows.

There is a commitment to the poorest and this commitment is set up with ingenuity (see the well-organized forms that help has adopted) and personal in nature (not only to meet the material needs but also to enter into a reciprocal relationship). In the motivation for this commitment, love plays an important role ('something caring in me', 'nice that I can do something for others'). This commitment is also experienced as binding; there is a deeply felt connection with others who do this work (see the long-term connection with this work). The name of him who once started this from his faith, Vincent, is also considered to be of importance. One works with a sense of gratitude, that one can do this work ('I experience satisfaction', 'it makes me happy', 'I am privileged to pass on the love I have received myself').

Part IV Insights, recommendations and practices

So far, the research has yielded many fruitful perspectives and insights. We summarize them in the first paragraph as conclusions. Based on these perspectives and insights, we formulate several recommendations in the second paragraph. In the last paragraph we describe some practices that are deployed in our context.

1. Perspectives and insights

1st. A very first finding is that 'caritas' is abundant in our country. However motivated and experienced, the research into practices of assistance and the conversations with volunteers show that there is a lot of organized care in The Netherlands. Within this endeavor the Societies of St. Vincent de Paul form players in a plural social field.

2nd. When we focus on the Vincentian charism, we can conclude that volunteers from the Societies of St. Vincent de Paul have a common ground (see part III par. 2c). When it comes to the intelligibility of Vincentian charism in that common ground (the core of our research assignment), we can suspect that it depends on the religious attitude of the person concerned, in particular his/her openness to caritas and mission, two central concepts in the Vincentian charism.

3rd. The meaning of mission ('I have been sent') is in danger of becoming vague in a culture in which personal autonomy seems to prevail ('I am my own channel'). In this same context, we can say that an important part of the task of making people of our time sensitive to 'mission' and 'caritas' lies in the 'charis aspect' of these concepts. To express this in religious terminology and to experience This (not only) religiously expressed and to experience of 'living in a larger context' strongly determines thinking and attitude.

4th. Through our exploration of the phenomenon of language, we have also come to understand the importance of promoting our 'story dynamics' and in particular the story about the relationship with our source, however we experience it. After all, spirituality embedded in that relationship and it can form a basis for us to know the direction (meaning) in our lives and for the forces needed to go in that direction. In that spirituality, the Vincentian charism could be recognized as a specific expression of the universal language of love.

5th. When we zoom in on the empirical research, we can conclude that in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul an understanding of help is embodied, characterized by a surprising depth. A depth very similar to the Vincentian charism. Help ('charity') is personal in nature, is embedded in a personal relationship ('mission'), in which the intention is that the recipient grows. The volunteers who have been interviewed all indicate that they have been asked for the work. Once asked, they appear to show a long-term connection. It can be observed that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is increasingly unraveling the organization and institutionalized forms of Catholicism, while the 'fragment' Vincent appears to be very meaningful.

2. Recommendations

1st. From all the insights gained and the perspectives that have arisen, we deduce the following recommendations for subsequent steps. First, it would be good to share the findings of this project and to discuss it with other interested parties and stakeholders. This sharing can take the form of publications, lectures or making this available as a basis for discussion meetings.

2nd. We have focused on the circumstances in a secularized context and we have spoken to specific individuals. We can imagine that the same question produces different findings in a different context.

3rd. A third recommendation concerns a possible follow-up study at a Society of St. Vincent de Paul. It would be nice if we could find a Society that is willing to act as a pilot for the elaboration of the findings gained.

4th. Fourthly, it is conceivable that we should connect with research at existing Vincentian institutions that focuses on the question: How do these institutions renew their identity in a secular context?

5th. A final recommendation concerns the initiation of activities 'that touch the heart'. One could think of initiatives that put 'language' at the center. What does it mean when we explore in our story dynamics: What relationship do we have with our source? Does this increase the intelligibility of the Vincentian charism?

3. Practices

In our center we are developing various practices on a Vincentian foundation for people in a strongly secularized context. The following practices seem fruitful.

1st. In the Low Countries (The Netherlands and Flanders) research is being conducted on work ethics among employees in organizations founded by the Daughters of Charity and the Lazarists. This will result in a schooling program, which will be initiated by the Vincent de Paul Center Nederland.

2nd. Project Generation17. The title stands for the 17th generation after the year 1617. In this project different activities are employed like 'exploring one's own religious biography', 'conversations on religious orientation' and 'exploring the boundaries between the secular and the religious'. In 2022 the Vincent de Paul Center Nederland will organize a symposium based on the outcomes of the activities in Project Generation17.

3rd. A schooling program will be initiated by the Vincent de Paul Center Nederland for administrators of Societies of St. Vincent de Paul.

4th. In 2023 the Vincent de Paul Center Nederland will participate in a meeting with several religious organizations in our city. We will discuss what these organizations can do for the city in dialogue with the government of the city.

5th. We initiate publications in magazines on the same question that formed the starting point of this Special Request.

Concluding remark: it would be interesting to find out what results will come from a research project in other countries (continents). In an international gathering these findings could be discussed.