

75th ANNIVERSARY OF THE ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY

ST MARIE'S, KIRKCALDY

SUNDAY 7TH JUNE 2009

HOMILY PREACHED BY KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a joy for me being here with you in St Marie's today as you commemorate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the St Vincent de Paul Society here in your Parish. The St Vincent de Paul Society has had a long and illustrious history in our country and I know that firm foundations were laid in this the Mother Parish of Kirkcaldy in 1934.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE SOCIETY OF THE ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY:

We might say that the **origins of the St Vincent de Paul Society go back to the Gospel teaching of Jesus Christ himself**. There are so many words of Jesus in the Gospels referring to the care, concern and love which we should have for others: We are told in St Matthew's Gospel that: "The greatest commandment of the Lord is to love God with one's whole heart and one's neighbour as oneself"; and again we are told in St Matthew's Gospel: "When you show it (love) to one of the least of my brothers, you show it to me"; and of course St John recounts that Jesus made charity the distinguishing mark of his disciples in the words "by this shall all men know that you are my disciples, by the love you bear for one another".

In the **very early history of the Church** we read an account of the Sunday gathering of Christians given by St Justin Martyr who wrote in the early 2nd century. He describes how on Sundays there is an assembly of all who live in the towns or in the country while the memoirs of the apostles and prophets are read – and this is followed by the Eucharist itself. Then we are told: "Those who are well provided for, if they wish to do so, contribute what each thinks fit; this is collected and left with the President of the Assembly so that he can help the orphans and the widowed and the sick, and all who are in need for any other reason, such as prisoners and visitors from abroad. In short, he provides for all who are in want".

Surely this is the earliest and most beautiful description of a St Vincent de Paul conference – although not then of course given that title!

FOUNDATION OF THE ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY:

With that basic teaching in Sacred Scripture we might wonder why it took so long to form a society to help Christians cater for the needs of those less fortunate in their midst. Whatever the reasons it was in **Paris in 1833** that seven young men, students of the University of Paris met in one of their rooms to found the first "Conference of Charity" later named the Conference of Charity of St Vincent de Paul. The meeting was indeed presided over by one of the students called Emmanuel Bailly but the driving spirit behind the venture and the acknowledged founder of the Society of St Vincent de Paul was another of those young

students by name **Frederick Ozanam**. That group of Christians under the guidance of Frederick Ozanam showed they were prepared to work for Christ and their suffering brothers and Christians to show their own faith. The infant Society had an almost miraculous expansion – by 1834 there were over 100 members, while just one year later, a Conference was started in Rome and a rule developed. By the mid 1840's the Society has spread to most of Europe including the British Isles and had crossed the Atlantic to America, Canada and Brazil. It is said that over one million visits are made every day to those in need by members of the Society throughout the world – in their work, the members of the Society of St Vincent de Paul have been likened to the hands and feet of Christ.

FOUNDATION OF THE ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY IN SCOTLAND:

Here in Scotland, the first Foundation of the Society took place in **Edinburgh in 1845** – just a mere 12 years following on the Foundation of the first Conference by Frederick Ozanam in Paris. Another group called “The Holy Guild of St Joseph” had been founded by Bishop Gillis and had 300 members by 1845. It was from this group that the first Conference of the Society of St Vincent de Paul was founded on 25th May 1845 in the rooms of the Guild of St Joseph at 7 Hunter Square, Edinburgh. In the parishes of St Patrick's and St Mary's Cathedral nearby half the collection taken up at the door of the church was given to the Conference – with dedicated men giving an outstanding example of their Christian charity to others. Other Conferences soon began to appear with the springing up of new parishes, and one member of the Conference left for **Glasgow** where he formed the first Conference there in 1848.

THE FOUNDATION OF SOCIETY OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL IN KIRKCALDY – ST MARIE'S CONFERENCE:

It was in 1933 that in a report of councils and conferences it is stated: “**Negotiations were opened at the beginning of the New Year to have the Society introduced in Kirkcaldy.** As this report goes to Press we are pleased to learn that this has been successfully done in “the 1934 Report there will be a record of its formation and a review of the work accomplished”. That report in 1934 goes on to state that: “The Conference is still in its infancy but the brothers have been very active since its formation in the early months of the year. Excellent support has been received from the people of the Parish and in particular from the honorary members of the Conference to whom we are exceedingly grateful”. The spiritual director is named as Father Harold and the names of the principal office bearers are Thomas Kavanagh, P Toole, Patrick J Burn, and John Sweeney. In that year 1,769 visits were made with 250 articles of clothing being distributed while two cases were helped with cash and 78 cases were helped in kind.

It was in the 1960's that the numbers of the St Marie's Conference were reduced when some of those members who lived in the new St Pius X Parish formed the Society there.

Twinning which is seen as a vitally important part of the St Vincent de Paul activity began in September 1985 when the **St Marie's Conference was twinned with St Anthony's in Tamil Nadu India** with the Conference also being twinned with **Uppington, Orange River in South Africa** – with these two Conferences still being supported by St Marie's.

ONGOING APOSTOLATE OF ST MARIE'S CONFERENCE:

One might ask how when so many other organisations cease operating because of lack of interest and lack of numbers, how does the St Vincent de Paul Society here in Kirkcaldy and throughout our country and indeed throughout the world continue.

I think that basically this happens because there is an ongoing need despite material wealth round about us. It is a true saying that: "**The poor are always with us**". And one must realise that more and more at this present time. Despite apparent wealth round about us the poverty gap does seem to be getting greater. And of course the present economic situation has affected so many more people who at one time might have thought they were reasonably well off. Those who have made arrangements for their care in old age by way of pension funds or accumulating a certain amount of money in banks have suddenly realised that perhaps their pension funds no longer exist and their savings have been greatly depleted. This can affect all classes in society – and consequently there is a greater need for mutual help. The apostolate of the St Vincent de Paul Society continues in much the same way as the original founders of the society intended in 1833 in Paris with Blessed Frederick Ozanam as in Kirkcaldy in 1933 with the foundation of the St Marie's Conference. Material help and home visitation still continues – with help being of various kinds such as bags of coal, help with fuel bills, distribution of clothing, redistribution of furniture, caravan holidays, shopping bought, advice on benefits and allowances or where to go to get such advice, baby food and clothes, and so on. Furniture projects continue by the Fife group of the St Vincent de Paul Society and a caravan project continues being run at Archdiocesan level.

It is heartening to read the annual report of the Society of St Vincent de Paul when a basic account is given of the work of the province.

CONCLUSION:

When speaking elsewhere with regard to the St Vincent de Paul Society I have indicated that in any Catholic church there are invariably two signs of the presence of Jesus Christ, There is the flickering red Sanctuary lamp in the Altar area at the front of the church indicating the **presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament**. The other sign of the presence of Christ is the collecting box for the St Vincent de Paul Society invariably near the church door. This is an indication of the **presence of Jesus Christ in the poor of our Society** in those in need in each and every parish.

I take this opportunity on my own behalf and on behalf of all of those in need in this Parish of thanking the members of the St Vincent de Paul Society down through the years. May those stalwarts who saw to the foundation of the St Vincent de Paul Society now enjoy eternal rest; and may there be a steady stream of women and men, young and old, willing to continue that valued apostolate here in this Parish.