

**FEAST OF THE VISITATION**

**Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Luke 1:39-56**

St. Luke has a wonderful touch as a storyteller. Today he recounts how Mary, already pregnant, travels for four days on foot to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, who is about to give birth to a son. And when Mary and Elizabeth come together, filled with joy, they sing the praises of God. They are like two sopranos standing at the center of the stage in an opera by Verdi, singing a duet about the marvelous things that God has done in their lives. Elizabeth cries out in a loud voice, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed are you who have believed that the word of God is fulfilled in you". And Mary immediately intones her own song: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because he who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name." In the meantime, John the Baptist, as he hears this music, dances with joy in his mother's womb.

Do you hear the voices of Mary and Elizabeth as they sing in praise today? Their joy explodes in prayer. Luke's gospel wants all of us who are visitors of the poor to be filled with joy. The Lord calls us to offer the poor our solidarity, our friendship, and our service. He calls us to share with them our belief that God loves them and us. And because we know that God's love is so abundant, we can join with the poor in praising and thanking God joyfully for his goodness.

Today we celebrate the beautiful feast of the Visitation. Let me say three things to you this morning, as leaders in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

1. This feast is especially relevant for you. Visiting is an essential part of your life. You have a wonderful vocation which your new Rule describes in this way: "The vocation of the Society's members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to his compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope" (Rule 1.2)

Your Rule speaks again and again about the person-to-person quality of your visits. It urges you to bring to the poor reverence (1.8) and empathy (1.9), to promote their self-sufficiency (1.10), to have a concern for their deeper needs and spirituality (1.11), and to express gratitude to those you visit (1.12).

These visits are a privileged moment in your lives.

2. Your vocation is ultimately a deeply spiritual one. Your Rule states that your vocation is to *follow Christ* through service to the needy (Rule 1.2). You are not simply organizers, though you must surely organize. Nor are you merely planners, though plan you must. You are members of a Society built on faith and, I am happy

to say, you are members of a Society whose faith and works impress me and encourage me more and more.

Frederic Ozanam did not merely organize young people to serve the poor. He taught his followers to contemplate Christ in the face of the poor person. He wrote to a friend:

*We see the poor with the eyes of the flesh. They are there, and we can put finger and hands in their wounds, and the scars of the crown of thrones are visible on their foreheads. And at this point, incredulity no longer has place, and we should fall at their feet and say with the apostle, "My Lord and my God." You are our masters and we will be your servants. You are for us the sacred image of that God whom we do not see, and not knowing how to love Him otherwise, shall we not love Him in you?*

3. Thirdly, your Rule states eloquently: "Vincentians never forget the many blessings they receive from those they visit. They recognize that the fruit of their labours springs not from themselves, but especially from God and from the poor they serve" (Rule 1.12).

In reality, it is often the poor themselves who teach us fundamental lessons of today's gospel. Both Mary and Elizabeth were poor women. They sprang from the poor of Israel and had a keen sense of God as the giver of all good gifts. As Jewish women, they recognized God's love in creation, in the daily rising of the sun and its setting. And as women who hungered and thirsted for God's Kingdom, they recognized God's presence as he erupted into history and took flesh in the Virgin Mary's womb. Like so many poor people, Mary and Elizabeth were attuned to the rhythms of nature and could see both the unexpected and the expected as grace. They were grateful for life, and they teach us today how to celebrate life and to thank God for it with exuberant joy.

I want to encourage you, when you return to your countries, to bring enthusiasm, hope and joy to your companions in the Society. With them, develop a deep spirituality of service. With them, be alert, as Mary and Elizabeth were, to the Lord's constant in-breaking into your own life and the lives of the poor. With them, let your daily prayer be filled with wonder and hope. Believe, as Mary did, that God's power overcomes evil, that God is a liberating force in history. He casts down the mighty from their thrones; he lifts up the lowly.

Today, I urge you to breathe in the faith of Mary and Elizabeth. When you leave this Assembly and return to your countries, sing a new song with Mary and Elizabeth. Sing with them in thanks to the Lord for your wonderful vocation as Vincentians. Sing in thanks for the support and witness of your brothers in the Society. Sing the praises of God for the poor who draw us out of ourselves and help us to see the world as God sees it. Like Mary, let your heart and your voice cry out with this faith-filled, grateful song that combines humility and gratitude: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior. He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name."