

## **The Saint Vincent de Paul Ethics Launch Event**

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**Speech by President Michael D. Higgins  
At the Saint Vincent de Paul Ethics Launch Event  
Davenport Hotel, Dublin  
Monday, 22nd September 2014**

Tá áthas orm bheith libh ar fad anseo.

May I start by thanking very warmly the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul for organising today's event, held under the auspices of The President of Ireland's Ethics Initiative. I am deeply grateful to the willingness expressed by Geoff Meagher in his introduction, on behalf of you all, to engage with this Initiative which I launched in November of last year with a view to stimulating discussions, across all sectors of Irish society, on the challenges of living together ethically at this beginning of the twenty-first century.

I very much share Geoff's feeling of urgency, the sense that *now* is the right time to kick-start such a discussion – a time, as he put it in Saint Vincent de Paul's freshly released pre-budget submission, of both "risk and opportunity for our country."

The Saint Vincent de Paul's pre-budget submissions have always been among the most detailed, empirically-based and accessible of the submissions I recall attending over the years. I believe that the organisation is well placed to lift the commentaries of our time beyond a description, or reiteration, of the consequences of poverty on our people. They can lead a discussion on the "why" of it all.

The opportunity we must not let go to waste is that of addressing the root causes of the crisis precipitated by the global financial meltdown of 2008 and the model of society it supported. Indeed it is not enough to say that the upheavals caused by an unprecedented banking collapse and property bubble can be fixed if the right supervision and regulatory mechanisms are put in place. The current crisis has moral and intellectual ramifications that run much deeper than that. It calls for an interrogation of the values, the vision of life and of human relations that animate us as a society.

An amalgamation of highly individualised projects of accumulation, self-centred ideals of consumption, have displaced models of public welfare shared in the public space, enjoyed in the public world. Greed, self-interest, the insatiable pursuit of material gratifications, unrestrained competition, and the placing of the market as the centre of public policy for all human needs – such values have become widely endorsed, with sweeping repercussions on policy making, media representations and, more generally, contemporary public discourse on what constitutes 'prosperity' and the good life.

What is on offer at times is, as it were, an increasingly private life in a gated community of the mind that serves to protect itself from, or is at best indifferent, to the excluded.

The risk, as I see it, is that if we do not tackle the assumptions that have inflicted such deep injuries on our moral imaginations, we will end up going back to “business as usual” – as many of those advocating acquiescent fortitude on “the road to recovery” would like us to do. There are signs already – on the housing market, on the credit markets – that such a return to business as usual may be underway.

We must not, then, miss this opportunity to seek, together, a new set of principles by which we might live ethically as a society. This idea was very well encapsulated by Saint Vincent de Paul’s former Vice-President, Professor John Monaghan, when he said:

“We do not want to look back on this period as one when the seeds of future social inequities were sown, but one in which the values necessary for a socially just, fair and caring nation emerged.”

We must seize the energy of our times – find the moral and intellectual energy to overcome the inability that is currently so pervasive when it comes to addressing the matters of economy, society, ideology, and the deadening fingers of bureaucracy.

In a first phase of the Ethics Initiative – the second of my Presidency initiatives after “Being Young and Irish” – I invited Irish third level institutions and the Royal Irish Academy to contribute. Indeed universities have, I believe, a crucial role to play in nurturing alternative ways of thinking and in crafting an intellectual response to our current situation.

The positive answer Irish universities gave to that invitation, the many ideas they put forward, and their commitment to organise some 50 events over the course of this year – many of which have already taken place – are greatly encouraging.

Yet one had the impression of a fractured vision, of concerned scholars not in contact with each other, of a system under such neo-utilitarian grip that it yielded in the goal of delivering a pluralist teaching of economic theory and history.

The reflection on ethics, we must never forget, is not just a matter for academics; it concerns us all. This is why in a second phase, I proposed that this Ethics Initiative be brought to civil society organisations as an overall frame, as a debate, above all as an opportunity for critical and fresh thinking, which, I hope, can contribute to harnessing and supporting the profusion of positive initiatives that exist in Irish society.

Last June, Geoff Meagher, Tom MacSweeney, John Monaghan, John Mark McCafferty and I had a very fruitful conversation in Áras an Uachtaráin on how the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul could contribute to the Ethics Initiative, in collaboration with other organisations who have also expressed an interest in doing so, and some of whom have sent representatives here this morning.

As Geoff mentioned in his introduction, The Wheel has initiated a large consultation process – entitled “People’s Conversation” – addressing our conceptions of citizenship ahead of the centenary of the 1916 Proclamation; Dóchas, the umbrella organisation for overseas development agencies, has resolved to

seize the opportunity of the European Year for Development in 2015 to conduct a reflection on the meaning of “development”. My office has also had contacts with, among other, the National Women’s Council and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

May I, once again, then, thank Saint Vincent de Paul for providing us with a platform to formally launch, this morning, the second phase of this national conversation on ethics. I am confident that the debate can and will garner momentum among the wider public, for the simple reason that it is a reflection many Irish citizens have already undertaken, and regard as urgent.

As members of a society which has been affected more than most by the global financial crisis, Irish people have been led to an abrupt realisation that the challenge of living together in a way that permits a flourishing of human capability and a cohesive society cannot be met, indeed can be contradicted, by an uncritical confusion of real needs and consumer wants of an insatiable kind, and the reliance on the market for the satisfaction of both.

Our citizens are anxious for a vision of where we are heading to as a society. Too many of them live in an atmosphere of unabated stress, dealing with financial circumstances that curtail their horizon and constrict them to a regime that is one of survival. If I may quote from Saint Vincent de Paul’s own publications, here is what one woman has to say about the future:

“We are educating our children at huge cost with no hope of a job for them.”

And another one has those heart-breaking words:

“I’ve noticed how I think about the future has changed a lot...In the past I had kinda five or ten year plans...I still have hopes for the future...dreams maybe... there is still a bit of ambition there but...now you just think so much in the short term...You don’t have the luxury of planning a future because so much effort is put into just getting by.”

Such voices are telling us something that is urgent we hear. They call upon us all to articulate a sense of our long-term perspectives as a society. It is a call that invokes the mid-range horizon of emancipatory collective struggles, the promises of improvement, in terms of the removal of insecurities, of prospects for flourishing, that the future must hold for all of our citizens. Irish people are seeking space for a reflection – for an authentic new vision in an impoverished present.

Among the important questions and choices which we must urgently address in today’s Ireland are: how do we view those who are vulnerable? How do we respond to their circumstances?

In several of my previous speeches, I suggested that the use of the term ‘vulnerable’ is too often associated with specific categories of people – “vulnerable older people”, “vulnerable children,” for example. In fact, none of us present here this morning are ‘invulnerable.’ All of us have urgent needs for care at various stages in our lives, as a consequence of infancy, old age, physical or mental illness,

impairment or other difficulties. Vulnerability is a constituent part of the human condition: all of us will, one day, face existential circumstances such that we will need support and assistance.

We should be mindful of using too uncritically, and with a suggestion of inevitability, words such as “the poor”, which have such loaded connotations in the history of our country, and have too often led to harmful distinctions between ‘the deserving’ and ‘the undeserving’ poor.

Interrogating our attitudes towards poverty, at home and abroad, is therefore one of the vital questions which, I hope, the Ethics Initiative will address. In this regard, the debate underway within the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, and beyond, on the respective merits of charity on the one hand, and the social justice perspective on the other – this debate is a very fundamental one.

As some advocates view it, charity does not provide a robust way of responding to the needs for housing, health, childcare and education of the most vulnerable, because it is based on a willingness to give, which can be taken away, and not on a collectively binding agreement of solidarity recognising the rights of those who receive assistance. What Ireland needs, those critiques argue, is a full-blown welfare state, real citizens with socio-economic rights, and not just recipients of charity or, as they are often recast nowadays, “customers”.

Yet with a strong argument for tomorrow, today’s needs have to be met. I personally do not see the need for making an excluding choice between the two – but it is not for me to settle this discussion. Let me only remark that if tensions exist within the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul around these issues, I would view them as productive and moral – frictions that keep this important debate going.

In fact, it seems to me that Saint Vincent de Paul is an organisation that has the ability to traverse all the critical ground between both ends of the spectrum, by combining the spirit of charity with the pursuit of social justice. As your mission statement makes clear, Saint Vincent de Paul is committed to providing support and friendship, through the personal bonds of trust and companionship which the members forge with those they visit week after week, and through the pragmatic, hands-on responses they apply to people’s pressing needs. But you are also committed to working for social justice, as you put it in your own words:

“to identifying the root causes of poverty and social exclusion in Ireland, and, in solidarity with poor and disadvantaged people, to advocate and work for the changes required to create a more just and caring society.”

In a speech I gave to Saint Joseph’s Conference, in Cavan, last February, I said that the unique force of Frédéric Ozanam’s vision is precisely that it combines very practical concerns of how to respond to poverty and exclusion here and now, with the long and difficult quest for social justice:

“You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis,” Ozanam wrote, “you must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long term improvement.”

Indeed we need both. We need your spirited concern for others, your willingness to offer of your time and support. But we also need the public policies, institutions and redistribution mechanisms that can reduce inequalities in our society. A thriving charitable sector of course does not and should never exonerate the state from its duty of care towards all of its citizens.

The ethics of friendship, with its moral gift, and the building of a caring state, the achievement of concerned citizens, go hand in hand.

To conclude, without pre-empting the shape and content of your contribution to the Ethics Initiative, nor the manner in which the dialogue you have initiated with other civil society organisations will unfold, may I say that I am convinced that your input will be a most valuable one, for your experience is so vast, deep and has authenticity; for the insight which all of you, Saint Vincent de Paul members, have is a precious one.

Day after day, you seek out the forgotten; you listen to the voices of the voiceless; you support those who have to cope with unemployment, indebtedness, a relationship breakdown, a disability, or loneliness, and sometimes several of these plights at once. Your knowledge can very productively inform, not just our collective discourse, but also the policies aimed at tackling poverty.

Of course the experiential knowledge of the citizens whom those policies are serving must also be central to their devising. In this regard, I find exemplary the manner in which the research conducted by Saint Vincent de Paul makes such space for the voices of the people your members support. This is the case in your recent publication entitled *The Human Face of Austerity*, and it is also a strong feature of the research you will discuss later on this morning, which focuses on the difficulties faced by households headed by a person parenting alone.

All of us Irish people should be grateful for the quiet, sustained weekly work of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society’s volunteers. But we must also be challenged by their actions, rooted as they are in the conviction that the struggles of the marginalised are the struggles of society in general.

Indeed an adequate collective discourse for the Ireland of tomorrow must be one that includes the capacities and goals which, in the eyes of our most vulnerable citizens, render human life worthy of living. A discourse that would let the poor and the unemployed of Ireland speak.

As the philosopher Theodor Adorno said:

“The need to let suffering speak is the condition of all truth.”

The test of authenticity for our democracy lies in its ability to reconnect with the practices, perceptions, aspirations and everyday realities of the most vulnerable among our citizens in a way that enables them to perceive their circumstances in policy options – this requires so much more than the periodic conducting of polls.

Irish citizens have made it clear that they are awaiting a new substantive agenda of ethical options that might compete as policies for our shared future. They are willing, with adequate invitation, and when presented with challenging alternatives, to take part in the crafting of this new agenda. In that journey a change of consciousness may occur, that in turn becomes a policy aspiration, and in time becomes the fabric of a real Republic.

Thus this Ethics Initiative is an invitation to you – volunteers, members and staff of charitable organisations – to critically reflect on your own conceptions and practice. It is a call on all the civil society associations represented here this morning, and hopefully more of them will join this platform, to join forces to voice the values that they wish to see placed at the heart of our collective future. It is an encouragement to you to compel us, your elected representatives, to listen to the voices of the most vulnerable in Irish society.

Today's event marks a further step in a process which, I am convinced, can yield very important results. I greatly look forward to the outcomes of your efforts, and I assure you of my support in your future endeavours.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.