

**Presentation to the St. Vincent DePaul Society
Hamilton - October 5th 2024
Msgr. Cornelius (Con) O'Mahony**

I am very grateful to have the opportunity this morning to speak to you. During my forty-two years of priesthood, the Society of St. Vincent DePaul has been an important partner in ministry and your quiet and gentle way of dispensing the love and generosity of Jesus Christ to the poor is both a comfort and a challenge. Comfort - in knowing that angels of mercy are living true discipleship every day in the community and responding to the cries of the poor. Challenge - in that your experiences and stories challenge my own comfortable bubble and open my eyes and ears to what is often hidden and out of view, and yet, right in front of me as I walk or drive by.

In the time I have with you, I would like to draw on the words and example of Pope Francis who almost daily draws our attention to the needs of the poor, those on the margins, and challenges the comfortable pew to roll up its sleeves and get on with the works of reaching out, hands extended, to those who need a helping hand.

While Pope Francis is a man with a great ability to communicate with words that can stir us, often, it is what he does, who he meets with, where he goes, that speaks more boldly. One notable instance is when he spoke about ministry to the poor in a homily that he gave in November 2021 on the Sunday designated as the World Day of the Poor. During this Mass, held at St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis focused on the theme of **inclusion**, especially of the poor and marginalized as central to Christian life.

In his homily, Pope Francis drew attention to how society often excludes the poor, leaving them at the margins. He described how the poor are "not just people to whom we can give charity, but brothers and sisters whose sufferings we must share." This framing of the poor as integral members of the human family exemplifies his inclusive message—that no one should be left out, especially those most vulnerable.

He emphasized that Christians should not just perform acts of charity but truly build relationships with the poor, breaking down walls of indifference and isolation. He said, "It is not enough to offer help by passing on a plate of food or giving a donation. This is good, but we need to go beyond it, we need to reach the hearts of the excluded, build relationships, give them back their dignity."

One of the most symbolic moments at that Mass was the involvement of the poor in the Mass itself. **Pope Francis invited a group of poor people to sit in the front rows, giving them a place of honor.** This act symbolized his vision of inclusion—placing the poor at the center of the Church and its ministry.

Pope Francis' words and actions during this Mass reflect his broader message that caring for the poor is not just a matter of giving material aid but also of breaking down the barriers of exclusion and restoring dignity and belonging to those who have been pushed aside. He consistently calls for a more inclusive community and Church where everyone, especially the poor, has a place at the table.

In my role in the diocese of Hamilton as Vicar for Education over the last fourteen years, one of the most interesting and at times controversial conversations that I am called to are centered on the meaning and understanding of the word **inclusion**. It is almost always used in the same sentence with the words **equity** and **diversity**. In some circles, they have become loaded words in a culture war that is very quick to attach meaning that seeks to divide and build walls. Yet, it is interesting to note that if we were to construct a **Word Worl** of the Catholic Church's tradition of writing and

teaching on Social Justice, these three words would pop out at us as being at the heart of our core values as Christians.

Pope Francis has been a vocal advocate for **inclusion, equity and diversity** throughout his papacy especially when he speaks about the church in the modern world and addresses modern social challenges. **His approach is rooted in the Catholic Church's mission to uphold the dignity of every human being, promote social justice, and foster unity among diverse groups. In doing so, he emphasizes that these principles are not merely secular ideals but are deeply embedded in the Gospel and the teachings of Christ.**

Inclusion is at the heart of Pope Francis's papacy, and he frequently emphasizes the importance of ensuring that all people, regardless of their differences, are welcomed and valued within the Church and society. **He often speaks about building a "culture of encounter," which involves opening oneself to others and creating opportunities for dialogue and understanding.** This, he argues, is especially necessary in an increasingly polarized and fragmented world.

Since 2013, Pope Francis has taken a more pastoral approach with **an emphasis on listening**, modelled as I speak in Rome today as part two of the Synod brings its first week to a conclusion. Similarly, his outreach to marginalized communities extends to those who feel alienated from society and from the Church. He has repeatedly emphasized that the Church is a **"field hospital"** meant for healing and inclusion, dispensing lavishly the balm of mercy, not a place of exclusion and judgment. **His message is that the Church must be open to all, particularly those who are suffering or feel cast aside, such as the poor, refugees, the elderly, and the disabled.**

When he speaks about **equity**, he often frames it within the context of **social justice**, particularly the Church's commitment to the poor and marginalized. He consistently critiques the inequalities that stem from economic systems, emphasizing that the wealth gap between the rich and the poor is not only a failure of economics but also a moral crisis. In ***Fratelli Tutti***, which I mentioned earlier, he decried "a world that is increasingly indifferent to poverty" and underscored the need for a more just distribution of resources, ensuring that everyone has access to what they need to live with dignity.

He calls for a global shift toward equity that ensures fair treatment of all individuals, irrespective of their social or economic status. He is particularly concerned with how the poor are treated in a world that prioritizes profit over people, often stating that economic systems need to prioritize the common good rather than catering solely to the powerful and wealthy. His advocacy for equitable treatment extends beyond poverty to include other marginalized groups such as refugees and immigrants. Francis has been a consistent voice in reminding world leaders and the global community that equity demands the protection and inclusion of these vulnerable populations.

Diversity, for Pope Francis, is both a challenge and a gift. In his various speeches and writings, he acknowledges the tensions that arise in diverse societies but also **insists that diversity can enrich humanity.** The pope promotes the idea that **differences — whether cultural, ethnic, or religious — should not be seen as threats but as opportunities for dialogue and mutual enrichment.** He highlights the importance of intercultural dialogue and the need for people of different backgrounds to work together for the common good. If you were following his recent trip to southeast Asia, this was a theme he returned to again and again.

Referencing ***Fratelli Tutti*** again, he writes about the importance of fraternity and social friendship across diverse lines, emphasizing that no group should see itself as superior or more deserving of rights than others. He stresses that real peace and unity come from recognizing and appreciating

differences, not erasing them. **The richness of humanity lies in its diversity, which should be celebrated rather than diminished.**

Pope Francis's commitment to diversity is also evident in his efforts to improve interfaith relations. He has actively sought to bridge gaps between the Catholic Church and other religious traditions, particularly Islam. His historic meeting with the **Grand Imam of Al-Azhar** (Arabian Peninsula) in 2019, during which they signed a document on human fraternity, was a landmark moment in fostering mutual respect and understanding between Christians and Muslims. **For Francis, diversity of faiths should not lead to division but can be a source of unity when rooted in shared values like compassion, peace, and justice.**

Inclusion, equity and diversity are not only reflections of the deep concern Pope Francis has for social justice, but also a testament to his belief in the transformative power of **empathy, dialogue, and love**. In his words and in his gestures, he challenges individuals and institutions, including the Church itself, to embrace these values in their fullest sense, calling for a world where all people are treated with **fairness, dignity, and respect**, regardless of their background or circumstances. **His message is a powerful reminder that inclusion, equity and diversity are not just social goals, but spiritual imperatives aligned with the Gospel's call to love one's neighbor.**

I am very grateful for your invitation to be here this morning and as a parish priest, who sees on a regular basis the good that you do, to thank you for your commitment, your passion and your witness. Every day, as **St. Vincent DePaul** wrote, you "**set people's hearts on fire to do what the Son of God did.**" Thank you.