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Vincent de Paul

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Wilk said the conference assists many inner-city residents but goes all over Monroe County. Deacon Bill Schmitz, who helped begin the St. Andrew/St. Philip Neri group as well as three other conferences in the diocese, hopes more parishes will adopt the attitude of St. Vincent de Paul society members — known as Vincentians — by sharing their resources with a wider community.

"Parishes can't look inward all the time. They have to look beyond the boundaries to see the need," Deacon Schmitz said. "We are an organization to jump into the breach when there is a family that is cut off from aid or help."

Society grows in diocese

Of the five St. Vincent de Paul conferences in the diocese, four have originated in the last quarter-century. On the other hand, the conference at St. Mary's, Canandaigua, has existed for more than 60 years, said Dee Valvano, president.

The coalition is still going strong, she said, with 60 active members including several recent additions.

"We give out food vouchers for people who are homeless, and who just need money in between jobs," Valvano said. "Sometimes they need lodging for three or four days, or money to put gas in their car or for their electric bill. Very often people have gotten established in a job, and come and given the money back."

In addition, Valvano said, the conference offers a food cupboard, free clothing and Christmas baskets for those in need.

The second St. Vincent de Paul conference in the diocese began in 1977 at Irondequoit's Christ the King Parish. According to Ed Stahlecker, treasurer, the conference has 15 to 20 active members whose main ministry is to take up weekly food collections for the poor. These Vincentians also offer financial support for the needy, he said.

Stahlecker remarked that Christ the King's Vincentians get strong parishwide backing, even though they don't make frequently pleas to support their ministry.

"We don't put out bulletins or anything like that. People just seem to know about us," Stahlecker said.

Deacon Schmitz was among the conference founders at Christ the King. Ordained to the permanent diaconate in 1986, he also helped established a St. Vincent de Paul conference at St. Leo in Hilton, where he served from 1986-93.

Today, the St. Leo's conference numbers eight to 10 regular members "and others who do spot things," said Betty Henner, chairperson. The conference has a tradition of distributing Christmas and Easter baskets for the poor, and more recently it added a funeral ministry.

St. Leo's Vincentians, according to Henner, have helped people with gasoline ex-

penses and prescription costs. They also offer a parish-based food pantry. "If we know of a family in need, we will bring the groceries to them," Henner remarked.

Henner said she remembers once bringing a holiday food basket to "a single mom and her son in fifth grade. They were so appreciative and thankful that the church was doing something like this."

In the early 1990s, St. Leo took on a mentoring role by assisting in the start of a conference at St. Joseph Parish in Wayland. Don Dolan, a charter member, said the nine-member group has been quite active, dispersing more than \$8,000 last year. In addition to helping with food vouchers, clothing and cash assistance, the society offer transportation as well.

"We transport people back and forth to the city — Rochester, Hornell, Dansville — to hospital appointments," Dolan said.

Dolan noted that the Wayland Vincentians originated the idea to turn the former convent at St. Joseph Church into a home for the dying. The facility, which opened in December 2000, is appropriately named Vincent House and is sponsored by area churches.

St. Joseph became part of a four-church cluster, Holy Family Catholic Community, in 1998. Dolan said that membership in the conference is now open to people from Sacred Heart, Perkinsville; St. Pius V, Cohocton; and St. Mary, Dansville as well.

The most recently formed St. Vincent de Paul conference is at St. Andrew, where Deacon Schmitz moved in 1993 and served until earlier this year. A conference formed soon after he arrived; the 11-member conference added St. Philip Neri Parish in 1999.

One recipient of that conference's good works is Christine White, who was profiled in a November 2000 *Catholic Courier* article. White received grocery vouchers and furniture courtesy of the Vincentians and the annual *Catholic Courier*/Catholic Charities Christmas Appeal. White said in the article that the Vincentians' personalized ministry was what touched her the most.

"They made me feel human, like somebody actually cared. It's something I haven't had for a long, long time," White said.

This direct approach is typical of Vincentians, Wilk said. "We'll go right to the house, right into the neighborhood and see what's going on. It's not pleasant sometimes," she commented.

For instance, she once went to an inner-city residence where candles were lit, and



children were sitting in the dark crying because their family didn't have enough money to pay their gas and electric bill.

Tripiciano said that Vincentians strive to "look at clients in the most favorable light you possibly can," and Wilk added that they pray with residents before leaving their homes. She said she draws inspiration from people who are in dire financial straits, saying, "They have wonderful faith that God will take care of them."

And Jim Battaglia, conference president for St. Andrew/St. Philip Neri, said his own faith has been enhanced by becoming a Vincentian. He had fallen away from the church for several years, he acknowledged, but now finds spiritual inspiration in helping others.

Conferences in this diocese generally rely on donations from parishioners. St. Mary's in Canandaigua also receives assistance from the United Way, Valvano said. Meanwhile, Battaglia noted that someone recently donated badly needed garage space so the Vincentians could store furniture.

"We have miracles that happen to us," Battaglia said.

Deacon Schmitz noted that in many cases, the work of Vincentians is similar to parish social-ministry committees. The key differences, he said, are that Vincentians perform more one-on-one service and also gather weekly for prayer and Scripture readings.

"There is a significant spiritual component," Deacon Schmitz said.

Battaglia said these prayer meetings serve as the cornerstone for his conference's ministry.

"We always thank God for our group," he said.

Long history of helping

The society's roots go back to 1625 in France, where Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) founded the Congregation of the Mission to help the poor and uneducated. Vincent de Paul also founded the Sisters of Charity and co-founded the Daughters of Charity, two worldwide religious orders, and was especially noted for raising awareness about the underprivileged to the wealthy. He was canonized by Pope Clement XII in 1737, and was later named patron saint of all charitable works by Leo XIII. St. Vincent de Paul's feast day is celebrated Sept. 27, the anniversary of his death.

Another Frenchman, Frederic Ozanam (1813-1853), founded the Conference of Charity in 1833 on his 20th birthday. The

group soon became known as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. For the rest of his short life, the esteemed author helped foster worldwide growth of the society. In 1997, he became Blessed Frederic Ozanam when Pope John Paul II beatified him during World Youth Day in Paris.

The St. Vincent de Paul society had spread to the United States by the 1850s; Deacon Schmitz noted that Vincentians performed numerous charitable works during the Civil War. The society's national office is based in St. Louis, Mo., where the first U.S. conference was established. According to the national office's Web site, the society has 120,000 active, associate and contributing society members in the United States.

Vincentians' charitable efforts go beyond their own diocesan borders. They support disaster-relief efforts in the United States and other countries; in fact, the national order has begun a \$1 million fundraising campaign to aid people affected by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Deacon Schmitz said the society is highly active in the Toronto, Buffalo and Niagara Falls areas, as well as such major U.S. cities as Chicago, San Diego and Phoenix. However, he doesn't believe there's been any purposeful neglect of the society in the Rochester Diocese.

"A lot of it depends on historic reasons; it had to do with church leaders and tradition," Deacon Schmitz said.

According to Father Robert McNamara, diocesan historian, "There had been two or three other (conferences) in the diocese but they never stuck. I don't know why, because it's a very good example of Catholic action."

Despite its lack of tradition here, Jack Balinsky, executive director for diocesan Catholic Charities, said he fully supports the local growth of St. Vincent de Paul conferences.

"The work of the St. Vincent de Paul society is excellent," Balinsky said. "It's one of many ways that parish communities can live out their responsibility of service and justice."

Numbers to call

The following are phone contacts for St. Vincent de Paul Society conferences in the Diocese of Rochester. You can call these numbers either if you're in need of assistance, or you wish to learn more about the society.

Christ the King, Irondequoit:
716-266-1288 (parish number)

Holy Family Catholic Community,
Cohocton/Dansville/Perkinsville/
Wayland: 716/728-5192 (hotline)

St. Leo, Hilton:
716/349-1413 (hotline)

St. Mary, Canandaigua:
716-394-1220 (parish number)

St. Andrew/St. Philip Neri,
Rochester: 716-538-2330 (hotline)

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