

This Month's letter is from Revd Pauline Ashby

I wonder if you have a favourite saint? One of mine is Vincent de Paul whose saint's day the church commemorates on September 27th. St Vincent is an inspiration - and a challenge!

Born into a French peasant family in 1581, as a young priest he became chaplain to a rich Parisian family. One day, called to bedside of a dying peasant, Vincent became aware of the squalor and misery endured by the local poor. Enlisting the help of pious women Vincent began to organise help for those in need. His work spread throughout the region and into other cities. In 1625 he founded the Congregation of the Mission (the Vincentians) which eventually spread around the world. His work inspired the formation of many other organisations, one of which, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, today works in 153 countries.

So, a really inspirational character - but what about the challenge?

Albert Holtz is an American Benedictine monk, teacher and writer. After visiting the headquarters of the Vincentians in Paris he wrote this:

'In a hallway not far from the reception desk hangs a large map of the city of Paris. Small red dots are sprinkled evenly over its entire surface. Reading the legend at the bottom I see that each dot marks a place in Paris that was somehow touched by Saint Vincent during his life: an orphanage founded, starving people fed, a hospital staffed, a school begun. There are dozens of these dots, each one telling a story of charity, of boundless energy, of commitment to spreading God's love on Earth.

Vincent de Paul was not a profound thinker; yet few people have ever accomplished as much with their lives ... as I stare at the old map, I begin to understand the secret of Vincent's success: these dots are actually the fallout of Vincent's spiritual life ... Vincent was always aware of God's constant presence when trying to help the poor, or when agonizing over a difficult decision ... His intense prayer life had a surprising result: instead of becoming a visionary lost in the clouds of contemplation, he became a man of deeds.

Vincent believed in the “indispensable priority of action.” He didn’t move from principles to practice or from insight to deeds; he simply began with love. This is the key to understanding his tremendous ability to get things done.’

Holtz reflects: ‘The gospel calls us to a life of love. Each of us, whatever our state in life, is expected to leave a bunch of red dots sprinkled across the map of our own life, marking places where our love has made a difference, made God’s love real for others. I start to wonder what my own map looks like.’

And there’s the challenge. If we imagine a map of where we live or work, with a red dot for each time we had shown real practical love for others, how many dots would there be - and would there be areas where there were none?

‘Brother, sister, let me serve you; let me be as Christ to you; pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too. *(Richard Gillard)*

(Albert Holtz’s book is ‘Pilgrim Road’ published in 2006).

Revd Pauline Ashby