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OPINION

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER DAY

For the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia, International Volunteer Day provides an opportunity to celebrate the contribution of members and volunteers to Australian life and society, and to reflect on the deep connection between volunteerism, faith and Catholic Social Teaching, writes **National President Claire Victory**.

Every day, St Vincent de Paul Society members and volunteers give their time and energy to support Australians in need and to create a fairer Australia.

For many, this work is an expression of their faith, through which they aspire to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

Our members offer a range of services including housing support and emergency accommodation, meals, emergency relief and connection to employment services.

They also provide the equally valuable but intangible offering of solidarity—of genuine relationship, true encounter, and restored dignity—as they sit with people during their darkest night.

That is why the theme of International Volunteer Day this year—'solidarity through volunteering'—is particularly relevant to the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia and why it provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the connection between volunteerism, faith and Catholic Social Teaching.

Vincentians believe that Jesus Christ is not only God, but also truly human and at home in our world.

When the voice of the poor calls, they willingly leave their prayers, or other religious practices, knowing that they are leaving God for God. They seek to honour, love and serve their truly human God by honouring, loving and serving the poor, the abandoned, the victims of exclusion and adversity.

Inspired by the compassion of Jesus Christ to all, Vincentians seek to be compassionate, kind and deeply reverent to all those they serve. With trust in God's help, they see their work as a continuation of Christ's own work.

Vincentians express their love for God, and for all God's people, by the sweat of their brow and the strength of their arms. They seek to do this with gentleness and humility, striving to be selfless and genuine, yet passionate about the needs of the poor.

As an organisation and as proud Vincentians, our work is informed by Catholic Social Teaching, which reminds us that as brothers and sisters in Christ, as sons and daughters of God, we all have equal and infinite dignity, and that we are also all in need of healing.

There is no artificial hierarchy or divide between our members, volunteers and the people experiencing poverty or disadvantage that they serve, whom we call *companions*.

I have been a St Vincent de Paul Society member since I was 10 years old, and I have experienced the privilege of serving companions in need.

The profound opportunity it offers for mutuality—to sit with a person experiencing poverty or disadvantage and to truly encounter each other, so that both transformed and healed by the interaction.

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia consists of 45,000 members and volunteers who operate on the ground through over 1,000 conferences located in individual parishes across the country.

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Our faith in action embodies the Catholic Social Teaching principles of human dignity, solidarity, the common good and subsidiarity.

Through the principle of human dignity, we recognise the sacredness of life and the inherent dignity and worth of every person we serve.

Through the principle of solidarity, we stand in unity with our fellow Australians, particularly those who are powerless or disadvantaged.

Through the principle of the common good, we recognise our responsibility for each other and to advocate for a just society.

Through the principle of subsidiarity, we strive to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in and contribute to decision processes that closely affect them.

These have been the Society's compass points for almost 170 years and will continue to guide us as we support Australians in need through the current cost-of-living crisis and respond to the challenges and opportunities of emerging trends in volunteerism.

Today, in an Australia that is one of the wealthiest countries in the world and that prides itself in being the country of the 'fair go', our members and volunteers are needed more than ever.

The Society is seeing a huge spike in the number of people asking for assistance—many are coming to us for the first time as the spiralling cost of everyday essentials—such as housing, food and fuel—push them into disadvantage and poverty.

Low-income earners are carrying the burden of hurt. JobSeeker, at a brutally low \$48 a day, is cruel and condemns around 830,000 Australians to live an increasingly desperate life every day that inflation jumps higher.

Housing is simply unaffordable for many Australians and the 'Australian dream' has turned into a nightmare. Rental affordability has plummeted across Australia as confirmed by last week's Rental Affordability Index, which showed that 40 per cent of low-income households are now under chronic housing stress.

The Government's failure to lift Commonwealth Rent Assistance is another brutal blow to disadvantaged Australians hoping to find a safe, secure home for them and their families.

Australia is no longer the 'lucky country' for a growing number of Australians who rely on organisations like the St Vincent de Paul Society and the support of our members and volunteers to survive.

This jump in demand comes after a challenging period for charitable organisations as the impacts of COVID-19 exacerbated the long-term decline in volunteering and expectations of volunteers change, as confirmed by the Draft National Strategy for Volunteering.

There is cause for optimism, including opportunities to re-engage people who were unable to volunteer during COVID-19 due to health or economic challenges, and to engage new people, particularly youth, many of whom are looking for more flexible opportunities to volunteer, for the first time.

We have started a conversation within the Society about responding to the evolving expectations of members and volunteers.

An organisation that seeks to serve the community should reflect the community, and its leadership should reflect its membership; the St Vincent de Paul Society is no exception. We must always strive to do right by our members and our companions, and this includes ensuring a diversity of voices and talents within our ranks and in all places where decisions are made. Having a good mix of ages, genders, cultural backgrounds, skills, and life experiences in our conferences and works and especially on our councils and boards is essential.

As we test new approaches to engage members and volunteers and the broader community, our response will be grounded in our faith, Catholic Social Teaching and the needs of our members, volunteers and companions.