

Help Me to Never Become an Expert

(excerpted from *For Your Love Alone* by Michael Syslo)

As I was growing up, one of the ideals that was placed before me by my parents, as well as others who were important to me, was that I should try to be the best at what I do, to learn as much as I can about the field of my choice, to be an expert. I guess that is a fine ideal; to be an expert in your chosen field, that is achievable.

When I joined the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, one of my goals was to learn as much as I could about the Society and the work we do. There are a great number and variety of aspects of our work – a great deal to learn. Obviously, it could take a long time to reach my goal.

Well, I learned very quickly that this is not true. What it takes to be a great Vincentian is simple. First, we need a desire to grow closer to our Lord. And second, we must have a desire to help those in need. It is a simple formula. In fact, Jesus Himself told us what is necessary: to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Sound familiar? Simple as A, B, - see?

If it is that simple, then we can all be experts at Vincentian work quickly. After all, we all love God and we would not be doing this if we did not love our neighbor.

Well, there is a problem. Vincentian work and expertise do not go hand in hand. A simple formula, easy to attain, yet it should not be. Is this a paradox? No, not really. We need to consider this for a moment.

What are the normal traits of an expert? KNOWLEDGE of the work is one. That is not bad. We can gain that over time and experience with various cases and exposure to the different works of the Society. QUICK ANALYSIS of the situation is another aspect. Again, that will come with experience. Another aspect of being an expert is IMMEDIATE JUDGMENT as to the best solution to the problem. That is great. Our cases can be handled quickly and easily. So, what is wrong with being an expert? Well, there are some side effects to expertise that tend to lead us away from the Vincentian spirit.

Experts will spend a great amount of their learning time in categorizing and labelling. The situation is similar to that one, so the case falls within this category. The person we are talking to stutters and your experience shows that stutterers are unsure of what they are saying and are suspect. “You are living in a nice home (all electric, you say), you are out of work and have high bills. It is obvious to me that you are living above your means.”

Experts can analyze the situation quickly and come to a solution to the problem. This particular aspect of expertise can lead to the Vincentian-by-phone syndrome. This can lead to the analysis of need and pass the buck to someone else. Simply stated, we will be tempted often to handle the call by phone and not bother to visit the people in need.

Experts can get a good feel for the situation just from surface or environmental circumstances. Unfortunately, in Vincentian work, we learn quickly that you have to dig deep and with persistence to see the true conditions.

As Vincentians, over time, we will all see many different situations. The people we work with will come from all walks of life. Their needs will vary from one family to another. Although circumstances in one may be similar to those in another, each case is unique and should be treated that way.

We need to acquire knowledge of our Lord, knowledge of our work, knowledge of people, knowledge of poverty, and knowledge of services available. But we always need to question ourselves about what we have seen, about our impressions. We need to continually remind ourselves that we are dependent on God in all we do. We need to continually ask for His guidance.

One of the key factors which makes Vincentians stand out above the rest is that we make house calls. We care enough to go to those in need. It is essential that we avoid the Vincentian-by-phone syndrome.

Because we care, we need to dig deep and find out all we can about those we are assisting – without being offensive. The more we know about them, the better we can help them. The more we know them, the better we can love them.

Lord, guide us in our Vincentian vocations. Remind us to seek Your guidance on each case. Help us to learn and to share with others. Help us to show that we care – that we love those we help. Help us to never become experts.