

By the Words We Speak

(excerpted from *For Your Love Alone* By Mike Syslo)

Words are an important part of our lives. From age 1 to 101, we use words to reflect things going on around us, to reflect feelings, to reflect thoughts, to reflect desires. Linguists are able to tell the part of the world we are from by the expressions that we use. By listening to our vocalization and our accentuation, they can narrow us down to our ethnic background and the place we were raised. By listening to our words, people can tell both our faith and our prejudices.

As Vincentians, we must be aware of the words or phrases we use. These not only speak about us; but they also reflect the way we treat those whom we encounter as Vincentians. They may enhance or degrade a person's dignity; they may enhance or degrade a person's self-image.

One of the things we have grown accustomed to doing is to refer to our dining rooms as ***feeding*** sites. We ***feed*** our pets and we ***feed*** cattle, but we ***serve*** food to people. We should simply refer to our dining rooms just as that: ***dining rooms***. We can draw on the scripture passage which says, "Feed my lambs," but our Lord was speaking figuratively rather than literally. The words we use reflect our actions. We ***feed*** cattle; we ***serve*** people. We are called to be ***servants*** to the poor.

Fr. John Boetcher, former Spiritual Advisor to the District Council of Santa Rosa, CA, spent several weeks touring Europe on foot a few years ago. He said that what he felt from other people (including priests) was distrust, fear, lack of welcome, and general unfriendliness. He said that people here in the states are basically the same and treat the homeless and the poor as ***cases*** or ***clients***. Why not change that and start calling them ***friends*** and ***guests***. The change in words may cause a change in our actions and enhance our Vincentian role as servant. For example, instead of saying "we fed 1,000 today," we could say "we served 1,000 guests today."

There is a wall that exists between *us* and *them* that needs to be torn down. Have you ever referred to the people we serve as ***those people***? Or have you ever heard one of your fellow Vincentians make a judgment that way? We have a slogan that we have used for years, “Help Us Help Others.” *Others* – again – us and them. Why not change the slogan to “Help Us Help Our Neighbors” or “Help Us Help Our Friends In Need.”

Here is one trap we all tend to fall into on occasion. **How many times have we wanted to help only the *deserving poor***? We each have a picture in our minds of conditions that cause people to *deserve* help. Those pictures help sway our judgment as to the amount of help we are willing to give to those who call on us. We must keep reminding ourselves that we must **make judgments related to need and not be judgmental** related to circumstances or life styles. Besides, what makes us think we are ***deserving*** of God’s love.

As Vincentians, we are urged to seek Christ in the face of the poor. **If we truly saw Christ** in those we assist, would we ***feed*** Him or ***serve*** Him? Would He be our ***case/client*** or our ***friend/guest***? Would we keep a wall between us or try to draw closer to Him? Would we be concerned with how ***deserving*** He is of our help?

So where do we go from here? Well, there is always the first step and then, the next step. The first step is to think about the words we are about to use, and the next step is to use more appropriate words. The words we use *do* reflect in our actions and also reflect in the way people see us.

Excuse me now, I have to go feed my cat.