

**Universalizing an Ethic**      Twenty-sixth Week in Ordinary Time      Tuesday,  
September 27, 2016    8:15 AM    Job 3:1-3, 11-17, 20-23;    **Mt 9:35-38**    **St. Vincent de Paul, priest**    (“**Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.**”)

**“At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.”**

We might dwell on this image “like sheep without a shepherd.” **Do shepherds really follow the sheep or do the sheep follow the shepherds, or is it a little bit of both?** That’s a question. Since we are not too familiar with the behavior of sheep, it’s hard for us to answer. But it seems that as often as not the shepherd follows the sheep. But even in following the sheep he protects them, guards them, and gradually at the end of the day gathers them together for the fold, for a night of protection and rest.

But here Jesus is encountering people that don’t even have that kind of help. And yet God promised through the prophets to be the shepherd of the people. So what gives? What gives is that **people’s awareness of God is lacking.** God does follow us wherever we go, and God does direct us, but we don’t have any sense of it very often. Some have no sense of it ever, and this is very sad. This made Jesus sad when he saw it. It moved his heart with pity. **Pity** is a very important emotion. **It’s a love that is also sad. There are evils in the world that are strictly speaking tragedies because they don’t have to happen.** When we speak of the tragic we mean something very sad and bad that isn’t at all necessary. There are tragedies that follow our choices if we don’t make the right choice, or when **we don’t even perceive the guidance of God, the word of God spoken to us quietly.** It’s available. That is the clear evidence of the Scriptures. But we are not always very keen to perceive it.

This is what Matthew is talking about, the sad state of humanity at the time of Christ, the same sad state of humanity today and **in the days of St. Vincent De Paul**, seventeenth century France before the bloody revolution, a country that was really corrupt, in many ways similar to present-day United States: powerful, **where the rich and the powerful reigned supreme and cared very little about the suffering of others**, quite unlike Jesus and St. Vincent De Paul. Vincent in fact put himself in the place of Jesus, and he did something rather significant in the history of the Church, not only he, but others too.

But Jesus taught his disciples an in-house ethic. “Love one another”—he meant love each other, one another, y’all, followers of me, love one another. **“Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, my disciples, you do to me.”** That’s what Jesus said. All Christians believe this. But most Christians outside of the Catholic faith interpret that exclusively to their group, their brethren, their others. “One another” means other members of this congregation.

But **Vincent de Paul** and many other Catholic saints realized a long time ago that that didn’t work; that was not an ethic that would really transform the world. What was necessary to transform the world was **to regard everybody as that least**: believer or not, fellow Christian or not, for everyone to be the one we love as Jesus does, again, fellow believer or not. **This is the universalizing of an ethic.** It happened under the influence of many of the great saints and was supported by the magisterium of the Church, most notably the papal magisterium. And this is the **foundation for what we call the Church’s teaching on social justice.** It means regarding everybody as part of the Church, at least morally, as some theologians might say virtually. Virtually means they should be, could be, can be, may be, and will be some day. This is what Vincent De Paul gave to us, a new sense, a new vision of what the mission of the Church is, **much broader and deeper than just a community that love one another.** It was a community whose **mission is to love the whole world and serve the whole world.** This is really what Vincent was getting at. And if you think about it very long, you will see that this is the only kind of vision that can change the world and be hope for the world.