ST VINCENT DE PAUL

Vincent De Paul, a remarkable priest and founder of the Lazarist Fathers and with St Louise De Marillac, the Daughters (Sisters) of Charity. Vincent was born in Gascony, France, the son of a peasant farmer. After studying under the Franciscans at Dax, he was ordained in 1600, subsequently attending the University of Toulouse. In 1505 while travelling by sea he was captured by Turkish Mahomaden pirates and taken into slavery. He spent two and half years as a slave, finally escaping in 1607 with the help of his owner whom he had converted to Christianity. Journeying first to Rome where he spent a short time he then travelled on to Paris. Vincent decided to devote his life to charitable work and was appointed a Parish priest of Clichy, a suburb of Paris. After only two years there he was asked to be chaplain and teacher to the household of the Count of Gondi. Since the count was in charge of ships Vincent got an opportunity to see the plight of the galley slaves and get better treatment for them. He told the daughters of charity: "the galley salves are abandoned into the hands of merciless men. It is a slow death sentence. I saw these people treated like animals". He sought to give them spiritual assistance as well. He even founded a hospital for them in Marseilles. He could easily have settled in to a very comfortable life style with the noble Gondi family but, prompted by the Holy Spirit, he chose to go all out to help the poor and suffering. Back in Paris after leaving the Gondi family, he established confraternities of men and women working to bring charity to the poor and to care for the vast numbers of sick in the city. His chief source of charitable donations and concerns came from wealthy noblewomen who provided funds for the creation of hospitals and homes for orphaned and foundling children. Behind this movement, the ever-present Vincent stood as the conscience of the nation. A practical man, his work went practically unnoticed by the wealthy, who chose to ignore the problems of the time, and even the poor themselves didn't appreciate when he was doing for them.

To advance his efforts even further, Vincent founded in Paris in 1625 the Congregation of the Missions, called the Lazarists or Vincentians, a society of priests with the express task of missionary labour and training of clergy. St Vincent's, Sheffield, the parish you are in now, was the first English foundation. The Vincentians were particularly charged with preaching among the poor people in the country. The majority of the French population lived in rural areas. The ordinary secular clergy didn't live up to their vocation. On canon wrote: "the clergy are without discipline, the people without fear, the priests without either holiness or

charity, the pulpits without preachers". St Vincent decided to act. Things were so bad that even some priests stored letters and money in the tabernacle. Frequent confession was particularly emphasised by Vincent and his fledgling order. In 1633, with the remarkable St Louise de Marrillac he also established the Daughters or Sisters of Charity, the first congregation of women caring for the sick and poor outside the confines of the convent. Louise, who was illegitimate, was brought up in a loveless family and had one son who brought her a lot of grief. Her husband spent most of his time outside the family home and had little concern for her or her son. She had to cope with an awful lot of crosses but light appeared at the end of the tunnel when she met Vincent who told her that she would soon find fulfilment in helping the poor. It was God's will. Louise was to be the first 'daughter of charity. Vincent also founded the ladies of charity - a very dedicated association of women, one of which is in this Parish. Vincent also organized relief efforts for the many unfortunate victims injured and wounded during the French wars in the middle of the 17th century. And of course the Vincent de Paul society was founded Frederick Ozenham the inspiration for which sprang from the life and work of St Vincent De Paul.

Vincent was a bitter opponent of the heresy called Jansenism which was rampant in France at the time. It was akin to Calvinism which believed that human nature was totally corrupted. St Vincent's work among the poor would testify to the contrary. Vincent died in Parish on September 27th 1660 at the age of 80 and he was canonised a saint by Pope Clement X111 in 1737. St Vincent De Paul, pray for us. His motto was: "let us love God but at the price of our hands and the sweat of our brow".