Homily on Feast of St. Vincent de Paul
September 27, 2015

Readings  Is. 52.7-10, Ps. 39, 1 Cor. 1:26-2:2, Mt. 5:1-12
Theme: Let your heart, mind and will be touched by people who are suffering
Mood: Encouraging

Jesus’ Eight Beatitudes are regarded as one of the hallmarks of his teachings. He teaches, “blessed are the poor in spirit, the merciful, the peace-makers, those who suffer persecution on account of Jesus’ sake.” Jesus wants our hearts to be touched, our minds to be awakened, and our wills to be committed to helping out those suffering in our midst.

That same message Pope Francis has witnessed to throughout his life. During his six-day visit to the USA, he repeatedly has spoken about aiding the poor, welcoming the immigrants, caring for the sick, making peace and healing wounds.

Today, we celebrate the feast of St. Vincent de Paul. He was a Catholic priest who lived in the 1600s in France. He founded the religious community of the Vincentian Fathers and Brothers, who sponsor Niagara University. St. Vincent de Paul as a young priest was on the fast track to worldly success. His ministries included working as chaplain for both the Queen of France and the Chief Admiral of the royal navy. For the queen he distributed her monies to the poor and needy. For the admiral’s family, he tutored that man’s children. One day in the countryside, Vincent experienced a midlife conversion. He saw with his own eyes that the poor rural people lacked priests, and that these poor villagers were disorganized in caring for the sick and poor in their midst. His heart was touched. His mind was changed. And he committed his will to do something about this situation. He said to the queen, the admiral and other contacts among the rich and powerful, that he was going to go and serve the poor. They begged Vincent not to go. They did not want to lose him. He responded that they would not lose him because he was going to take them with him to serve the poor. He explained that the poor needed the resources of the wealthy and powerful just to survive their lives on earth. And the rich and powerful needed to serve the poor in order, by the grace of God, to save their souls and enter heaven. Vincent’s heart had been touched. His mind had been awakened. His will was committed to loving God and loving his neighbor by loving and serving the poorest of the poor.

May I share a personal experience, please. When I was a teenager, I remember lying on a couch in the living room of my family home in South Jersey. I had caught poison ivy, which covered my body from my face to my toes. My body was painted with calamine lotion, which is a pink-colored oily cream. All I could do in the August heat was to lie still. From the couch I reached out and picked up a magazine lying nearby. It was called Maryknoll Magazine. It presented stories and pictures of poor villagers from Africa, Asia and Latin America. They had next to nothing in terms of food, clothing, shelter, education and health care. Maryknoll priests and sisters and lay volunteers were providing material and spiritual assistance to these poorest of the poor. As I lay on the couch, one month before my sixteenth birthday, holding this magazine, I recall saying to myself, “I can do this. I can help these people. I don’t need much in terms of material goods.” As I prayed then and in following days, I felt that my heart was
touched, my mind was changed, and my will was moved to say, “I have the passion to serve these people, I have a good mind and organizational skills to help these people. I want to help these people.” My heart, mind and will had been moved.

And so, I invite everyone here, adults and students, to ponder today’s words of Jesus, the example of St. Vincent de Paul, the lifestyle and inspiration of Pope Francis. Filled with the love of God and love for God’s people, try your best to look realistically at the world in which you live. ... Let your heart be touched. ... Let your mind be alert. ... Let your will commit yourself to following Jesus in the Church which he founded, and which produces countless saints to emulate. The poorest of the poor need you.