

## TO ME, SIMPLY, THE SVP IS HELP

I grew up in Greenhills, South Dublin, in a parish that – as our priests liked to remind us – boasted one of the largest annual collections for the Society of St Vincent de Paul in the country. They would mention this every year, at the start of December, just before the wicker collection baskets with the distressed green-cushioned lining were passed around. It became, I suppose, a sort of annual challenge: if we had rattled the record books the previous year, then we would positively set them alight this Christmas. And we did. Every year, for as long as I lived in that parish, we bettered ourselves. And it wasn't as if we had much money.

Years later, I heard, anecdotally, that the only parish in the Dublin diocese to come close to matching our contribution was Dun Laoghaire, an area which had many pockets of affluence, all of them apparently deep. But Greenhills was very different.

By the time I reached secondary school at the start of the 1980s, the oil crisis of the 1970s had efficiently converted itself into a savage economic recession that blighted working class areas like ours. It was almost unheard of for girls in my school to have two parents working, and as we navigated our way unsteadily through that period of high unemployment, the number of my peers who had a parent working at all steadily dropped. And all the time, we kept giving more money to the St Vincent de Paul.

Sometimes, when I tell people now about that time and that place, they find it odd that people who effectively had no spare cash were such enthusiastic supporters of any charity. To outsiders, it must have been the equivalent of famine victims in Africa setting up a direct debit to Concern. But the SVP never felt like charity to us. The other organisation that thrived in our parish during those bleak years was the local credit union, and in many respects the approach to both institutions was the same. Times were hard and money was short, so everyone threw what few pence they had at both organisations in the secure knowledge that when a new school gabardine coat was needed, one or the other would provide it. It really was as simple as that.

*Fiona Looney is a writer, broadcaster and mother of three living in Dublin who, from her personal experience, writes the Foreword to the new book about the SVP - 'The Society of St.Vincent de Paul in Ireland – 170 Years of Fighting Poverty' – which has just been published.*

*The work of the Society of St.Vincent de Paul depends upon the thousands of volunteer members in every parish in Ireland who, without fail, carry it out every day, every week, of every year. This book records the Society's work through the experiences of its members and, as such, is a unique record. SVP members are supported by dedicated professional staff, necessary in modern times as they help those in need.*

*This article is an extract from the Foreword which Fiona Looney has written. The book will go on public sale this month.*

I can recall many times, especially in the weeks before Christmas, being in friends' houses when the SVP would call with an envelope or a hamper.

Once, I was at Mass with one of those friends on the day after the SVP had called, and I saw her drop fifty pence into the Society's wooden box as we left the church. So it was never really about charity; it was about investing in our community and in our own future. It was about looking after the whole parish because we never knew when ours would be the family in need of the hamper, the envelope, or even just the knock on the door. This wasn't Live Aid; this was like a very crude pension plan. It wasn't selflessness; it was self-preservation. I remember, back then, somebody in religion class in school asking a teacher about the saint who lent his name to the SVP. What did she know about him, the student wanted to know.

In those days before Wikipedia, the teacher admitted that she didn't know anything at all about who Vincent de Paul was or where he came from. At the click of a mouse, I can now tell that enquirer that Vincent was a French priest who performed many charitable works, but what fascinated me back then was that it hadn't occurred to any of us that Vincent de Paul might ever have been a real person. The society was such a cornerstone of our lives, of our local community, that it seemed almost ridiculous to think of it as anything other than a living, breathing collection of selfless individuals who quietly and without fuss appeared on your porch when times became too hard.

Even now, as an adult poking around the internet, I find it odd to imagine Frédéric Ozanam, who founded the Society in France in 1833, moving amongst the Parisian poor of the nineteenth century. To me, that is not what the SVP is.

To me, simply, the SVP is help.

When I was a child in the 1980s, it was help in Greenhills. Now, it is help in a different part of Dublin – but still always help. Right here, right now.