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St. Vincent de Paul head changes lives, stands up for poor

Tom Gallagher | Apr. 10, 2013 Mission Management

In September 2013, Roger Playwin, CEO of the St. Louis-based National Council of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, will step down after 10 years in the position. The society has approximately 700,000 men and women, known as Vincentians, located in 142 countries on five continents. In the United States, there are more than 172,000 members in 4,600 communities.

In 2010, the U.S. Vincentians provided more than $595 million in tangible and in-kind services, served more than 14 million people in need, performed more than 648,000 home visits, and delivered more than 7 million service hours to those in need or living in poverty.

Playwin, a Michigan native, is a husband and father of three adult children with four grandchildren. He has dedicated a large portion of his professional energies to leadership in mission-driven not-for-profit organizations. In the Detroit area, he has been president of the Monroe County Inter-Faith Social Action Association; president of the board of directors of Community Substance Abuse Outreach Center; and an executive for 15 years with the Catholic Youth Organization, among many other roles.

Playwin spoke with NCR *about his tenure and the work of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.*

***NCR*: Given the recent election of Pope Francis and his tenderness and love of the poor, what are your immediate impressions of the new pope?**
Playwin: I'm impressed. I like his humility and he has sensitivity to those living in poverty. His heart and mind are in the right place. He reminds me of the founder of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Blessed Frederic Ozanam, whose bicentennial of his birth we are celebrating this year, who understood poverty and who was way out in front of what we know today as Catholic social teaching. Blessed Frederic was light years ahead of everyone. Blessed Frederic is one of my heroes because he was a young adult, a lawyer, a history professor and he has a special place in my heart.

What are your aspirations for Pope Francis?
I hope that he encourages Catholics around the world to embrace Catholic social teaching because Catholic social teaching can change the world. It is something to embrace, not fear.

As you reflect on your 10 years of leadership, what achievement stands out for you?
We've created a leadership program called Invitation for Renewal. It's an intensive, four-day retreat in which we explore what it means to be a Vincentian and member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Some 500 people have been through the program. We have also executed a strategic plan that had some 100 objectives and at the end of five years, we had achieved 80 percent of our objectives. We have also made real strides in our fundraising, but we're still new kids on the block in terms of fundraising.

What is the current state of the St. Vincent de Paul Society?
We have a lot of things going on. We're now into our second strategic plan. We have the first woman president,

Sheila Gilbert ? whose vision is to end poverty by making systemic changes. This is a sea change because it implies that poverty can be eliminated. That means going forward we will continue to meet the immediate needs of the poor while working to get the poor out of poverty. In the 1970s, there were 12 million poor. Today there are 56 million. For some, all they need is a little push to get out of poverty. For others, they need a lot of mentoring. We can't put everyone in a single box.

Over the past several years, the poor have taken the brunt of the federal budget cuts proposed by Catholic House Republicans and the Republican Party. What would you say to politicians as they debate a federal budget?
I would remind them that when we have an opportunity to impact people's lives, we need to understand how we will positively change their lives. The budget cuts hurt people. We should do no harm. There has to be a larger voice from people from the grassroots. Folks living in poverty don't have a lobbyist, except the society and Catholic Charities USA. There has to be a preponderance of people who say, "Enough is enough."

To Democrats, I'd say, "Start looking at how we are spending money and see where we are doing it effectively and where we are not. We have to look at results. If a program is not working, it has to be turned around and show results. If you want a different result, change the goal.

What is your message to lay Catholics?
We need to do more reaching out at the parishes. When working with all volunteers, this takes planning. When we reach out, people are ready to grow spiritually and to do good works. We need to be able to provide them with an opportunity to touch base with people in need. When they do, it changes them. Once changed, they want to do something. It's a one-on-one effort, with a small-scale focus.

For example, if 19,000 parishes in the U.S. took just one family over the next two years and got them out of poverty, that would be 19,000 families of two to four people who would no longer be in poverty. That would make a huge difference, if we just focused.

After 10 years leading the society, what keeps you hopeful?
Every day the members of the society respond to the numerous requests from people who need help, and many have never asked for help before. Our members' empathetic ears and caring hearts respond to those in need and when you see how they respond to the needs of others, I can't help but to be hopeful.

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*'s Mission Management column. He recently joined *NCR*'s board of directors. His email address is tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

CEO praised for guidance in troubled times

Jim Dumont, a member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society's National Council, hired Roger Playwin in 1998 as the executive director for the society's Detroit office before Playwin became CEO of the national society in 2003. Dumont describes Playwin as a pivotal leader at an important time in the society's history.

The society's president, Sheila Gilbert, sees Playwin's tenure as providential.

"God raises up people with the special skills needed at critical times. Roger Playwin played a crucial role in helping the society transition to a stronger national office and an operational board of directors," Gilbert said.

"Roger's intimate understanding of both the spiritual and business elements of the society allows him to guide our course through the troubled waters of recession and into the future based on systemic change and a

commitment to end poverty in this country," she said.

Dumont told *NCR* that when the Detroit council was looking for a new executive director, Playwin impressed him. "He told me he applied [for the Detroit job] because he wanted to 'give back.' ? It was the grace of God which brought Roger to us and guided my selection," he said.

"I was extremely pleased at how Roger guided our diocesan council in Detroit and taught us how a corporate board should function. It was not long before Roger and I became good friends. ? I will always consider Roger my very good friend and an amazing gentleman."

-- *Tom Gallagher*

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