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Author Tells of Finding Saints and Spiritual Transformation in a Thrift Store

Most people think of thrift stores as places to pick up inexpensive clothes or other items, but for writer Jane Knuth, a St. Vincent de Paul thrift store in Kalamazoo, Michigan, has been the scene of profound spiritual transformation. She tells how the shop's customers and the volunteers who run it changed her life in her new book, *Thrift Store Saints: Meeting Jesus 25¢ at a Time* (Loyola Press, \$13.95 paper, October, 2010).

Knuth reluctantly volunteered to work on a temporary basis at the St. Vincent de Paul shop, unable to say no to an 82-year-old saint named Dorothy. "Right away, curious incidents that were almost like grace started to occur," she says. Thirteen years later, she's still a regular volunteer and a committed "Vincentian," following the spiritual path of St. Vincent de Paul.

Her transformation is rooted in the essence of Vincentian spirituality: when we serve the poor, they end up helping us as much as we help them. Knuth, a Catholic, supported her church's call to help the poor, but found that her middle-class, suburban background left her unprepared for the kind of frontline support offered by the St. Vincent de Paul Society. She also admits to baby-boomer hubris in assuming that whatever volunteer work she does should be world-changing—not simply working the counter at a thrift store, or cleaning its bathroom.

At the thrift store, however, she learns that they are not trying to change the world—nor are they trying to change poor people: "The only thing it seems we are trying to change is ourselves." Under the tutelage of her fellow Vincentians—a group of elderly women and men, including the tireless, saintly Dorothy who first roped Knuth into volunteering—Knuth no longer views needy people as a problem to be solved, but in true Vincentian style, recognizes them as her teachers, who will show her the way to God.

"Most days it seems as if we are going about helping the poor in the most inefficient way possible, and yet it works," she says of the store, where people can purchase inexpensive

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clothes, furniture, household items and other miscellany, but where they can also come if they need money for rent or to pay their gas bill, or help with clothes for a new job, or even a ride to the hospital.

“Our purpose is not to run the most profitable, shrewd, efficient, riffraff free store in town,” Knuth says. “Our purpose is to help the poor and to change our own way of thinking and being. The store is just our cover.”

The St. Vincent de Paul Society was founded in Paris in 1833 by a group of French college students led by Frédéric Ozanam, with the goal of “embracing the world in a network of charity.” The Society strives to assist the poor by going directly to them. There are now more than 750,000 active members in 142 countries. In addition to their familiar thrift stores, they offer a multitude of services, from food programs to emergency financial assistance, homeless shelters, assistance for victims of AIDS, substance abuse and crime, employment and job training services, prison ministry, and many more services to anyone in need.

Essential to Vincentian spirituality is the principle of helping poor people face-to-face. St. Vincent de Paul understood the loss of dignity that needy people suffer, and he instructed his followers: “Don’t make the poor ask for what God, their Father, wants them to have. We should apologize if they have to ask for what they need.”

“*Thrift Store Saints* is about recognizing God among us when the language is rough, the labor seems mindless, and everybody is wearing old clothes,” Knuth says. She likens working at the shop to talking with God “when he is not only in the room, but he smells and cries and prefers to do all the talking himself.”

Throughout the book, Knuth introduces new “saints” among the store’s clients and her fellow volunteers. Her stories make clear that it doesn’t require heroic Mother Teresa-types to make a difference, and shows that working with impoverished people is not gloomy, depressing work. Rather, they illustrate the profound joy anyone can experience when they see serving the poor not as social work, but as a spiritual path that leads to the heart of Jesus.

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About Jane Knuth
author of *Thrift Store Saints*

Jane Knuth has been volunteering at the St. Vincent de Paul thrift store in Kalamazoo, Michigan, for the last 15 years. A part-time math instructor, Jane also teaches Ukrainian Easter egg decorating, does hand bookbinding, and writes a monthly column for *The Good News*, the newspaper of the Diocese of Kalamazoo. She and her husband, Dean, live in Portage, Michigan and have two grown daughters, Ellen and Martha

Thrift Store Saints is Jane's first book. Her profits from sales of the book will go to the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

About St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Stores

There are 391 St. Vincent de Paul stores in the U.S. run by a combination of volunteers and employees. Their goal is to serve Christ in the needy by welcoming all who come into the stores with respect and affection, hoping that they leave as friends and return again and again. Gently used donations of clothing, household items, and furniture are always appreciated. Store locations can be found on the St. Vincent de Paul Society website, <http://www.svdpusa.org>.