

The Pursuit of Justice

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THE PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

SISTER GEORGIA A. BREZLER†

I am an eleventh-hour worker and at one o'clock this morning, I turned off the computer and said what will be will be. The videotape in my head started running and I was back in Professor Gregory's law school class. He asked, "Who went to mass yesterday?" I thought the question was safe to answer. Everyone in this room expected me to raise my hand. He asked, "What was the first reading?" I had no idea, but let me back up a little bit. When I raised my hand, he looked at his seating chart and said, "Ms. Brezler," at which point my classmates said, "Sister," in chorus. And he said, "Oh, an expert witness."

Three nights later, I heard, "Sister Brezler, recite the Ten Commandments." I got three of them. Well, he was thoroughly disgusted and I was totally embarrassed. If the people who invited me had known this, I might not be here today talking about religion and the practice of law.

I am a member of the Daughters of Charity, the community founded by St. Vincent de Paul and St. Luis de Mariac in Paris in 1633.¹ St. Vincent also found the Vincentian priests and the brothers here at St. John's. We are, in a very real sense, members of the same family.

I am grateful to Cardinal Bevilacqua, who gave me a good launching pad for what this House of Vincent is and should be in terms of the poor. Inspired by the teachings of Jesus, who identified himself with the poor, Vincent and Luis sent our first sisters into the streets of Paris. They advised them that their monastery would be the houses of the sick; their cell, a rented room; their chapel, the parish church; their cloister, the streets of the city; their enclosure, obedience; their grill, the fear of God, and, in the vocabulary of the day, their veil, holy modesty.²

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¹ See generally E.K. SANDERS, *VINCENT DE PAUL: PRIEST AND PHILANTHROPIST* 1576-1660 (1913).

² See LEONARD VON MATT & LOUIS COGNET, *ST. VINCENT DE PAUL* 166 (Emma Cranford trans., 1960) (noting the sisters were to be members of the community).

Our first sisters were very simple, young women and their Vincentian spirituality, our way of life, was unsophisticated. We were called in a special way to find God in the person of the poor. I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania and it was not unusual for a beggar to come to our door and ask for food. My father would bring the beggar in, sit him at our table and treat him as a guest. I know that is where the seeds of my Vincentian vocation were sewn. My ministry has been varied, but usually directed with the most marginal of society.

The thought of law school began to take shape with my work with immigrants. I worked for ten years in the diocesan office that was founded by Bishop Bevilacqua. I dealt mainly with immigration issues. I felt that I would not get the opportunity to go to law school. I also felt that nothing ventured, nothing gained. I was pleasantly surprised when Father John said go for it and further grateful to Father Harrington and St. John's for a scholarship. I, unlike many graduates of St. John's Law School, do not have to worry about the concerns of having huge debt, putting food on the table, or having a baby on the way.

For a number of years, I dreamed about hanging out my shingle in a marginal neighborhood. In January 1999, I was able to do that. With the support of my community and the parish, I opened an office in St. John's parish, where St. John's University began, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Today, Bedford-Stuyvesant is one of the most marginalized neighborhoods in the metropolitan area. Several months ago the brownstones that make up much of Bedford-Stuyvesant were discovered. We see signs on telephone poles offering to pay cash for the buildings. Although there has been property development in the area, the future of the poor in the neighborhood remains unknown.

Looking back on my law school experience, one memory stands out in my mind. Judge Neuhoff, our Torts professor, told us the practice of law is not about making money. He said it is about the pursuit of justice. I consider myself privileged to be able to serve the current population that I do and have served the immigrant community in their pursuit of justice for many years.

Last year I received a brochure from the City Bar Organization that stated eighty-six percent of the legal needs of

the poor in New York go unmet.³ It is an outrage. I know that I can only address a tiny fraction of those needs even though there is nothing I would rather do than address them all. I recently read a striking quotation that stated, “[T]he world is full of suffering it is also full of the overcoming of it.”⁴ I see this everyday in dealing with my clients.

I see women who are forced to seek political asylum, who tell brutal stories of multiple rapes, and of watching the murder of their loved ones. These women relate these stories without exhibiting emotion, as if they have none left. One mother, whose case is now pending before the Immigration Service, told me that her children, in Africa, said they had not eaten for a week. These women still hope to be able to rebuild their lives and to give their children another chance. A young mother, 25 years old, tells me how her mother abandoned her when she was fifteen years old. Somehow, she managed to finish high school and is now working as a secretary at Catholic Charities. She is struggling to regain custody of her child, the only person she has. Another mother had her children placed in foster care. She was also trying to get them back. She, herself, had been a foster child from the time she was six years old, until the time she turned eighteen years old.

There are moments when I listen to these stories and I can almost get a palpable sense of the presence of God. It is evident that grace is sustaining them and I feel privileged to accompany them in their struggle. It is satisfying to see the tremendous relief an asylum seeker receives or experiences when the judge grants her application, or the happiness of little children who are finally allowed to go home with their mother.

Several months ago I was in Immigration Court. I was handling an extremely brutal asylum case. I had prepared the applicant to give lengthy testimony. I only got through a couple of questions before she broke down emotionally. The judge noted that if we continued, we were just going to bring back a lot of bad memories. The judge also questioned why the Immigration Service had not granted the case initially. We took a break and

³ Evan A. Davis, *A Lawyer Has An Obligation: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession*, Speech at New York Law School (Apr. 10, 2001), available at <http://www.abcny.org> (last visited Jan. 27, 2002).

⁴ THE HARPER RELIGIOUS & INSPIRATIONAL QUOTATION COMPANION 406 (Margaret Pepper ed., 1989).

came back later. Fortunately, the Immigration attorney was new to the practice of law. He also had a mental health background and he was very compassionate when cross-examining my client.

I cannot tell you what the experience of being in that situation did for me. This was not the usual way that Immigration Court works. The judge was compassionate and I felt as if I had a glimpse of the way God dispenses justice—It was a very religious experience.

Of course, my practice has its comic relief. The people who walk through our doors look like they stepped right out of the pages of the Gospel. They are the lame, the mentally ill, the drug abuser, and the vulnerable elderly. I can think of one man who had a housing problem. He did not listen to a word I said to him. I later learned that he probably had ten other lawyers working on the same case. Even though we have the most vulnerable population, in times like that, you just have to realize that it goes with the territory. Right now, we have a woman who will be seventy-eight years old next week. The house she had lived in for fifty-five years was in foreclosure. She has no children. Her tenants did not pay rent. Some people, under the guise of helping her, took money out of her bank account and she does not have money to pay her mortgage. These are just a few examples of the practice of law in a marginal community.

It is said that as Vincent de Paul was dying, he told one of his priests that he needed to talk to one of our sisters because she was going to have her first visit with the poor. This was very important to him. He advised her that she will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the bowl of soup and full basket. She would keep her gentleness and her smile. It is not enough to give soup and bread. This the rich can do. She was the servant of the poor. They were her masters, terribly sensitive and exacting. The more unjust and insulting, the more love you must give them. It is only for her love, for her love alone, that the poor will forgive her the bread she gave them.⁵

⁵ HENRI LAVEDAN, *THE HEROIC LIFE OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL* 210 (Helen Younger Chase trans., 1929) (stressing how important it was to Vincent De Paul that the sisters "really consider themselves servants of the poor").