

A Legacy Celebrated: 170 Years of St Vincent de Paul Society Australia

Celebrating and commemorating 170 years of compassionate service for Victorians in need, the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria recently hosted two significant events: an inspirational and thought-provoking Frederic Ozanam Oration at the RACV Club and a special Commemorative Mass at the historic St Francis' Church, Victoria's oldest Catholic Church and the birthplace of the first conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society Australia.

These gatherings paid homage to the rich history of St Vincent de Paul Society and looked ahead to the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Ozanam Oration: Embracing Change and Courage

The Ozanam Oration on 4 March at the RACV Club was themed: "Our Founders were people of both foresight and insight. The Society's mission and Purpose are as relevant as they were 170 years ago. Our challenge is to continue that journey."

It provided plenty of opportunities for key speaker, Age Discrimination Commissioner and former NSW State St Vincent de Paul Society President Robert Fitzgerald AM, and the evening facilitator, the renowned journalist Geraldine Doogue AO, to both inspire and challenge the room.

Mr Fitzgerald didn't shy from diving into the heart of the matter, how to honour the past while navigating the uncharted territories of building a future for the Society – pondering all possible challenges along the way. His insights, drawn from his deep connection to the Society, provided ample inspiration and challenges, setting the stage for an evening of profound introspection.

The evening, MC-ed by Victoria's State President Michael Quinn, unfolded with a sense of reverence and reflection on the enduring mission of the Society.

St Vincent de Paul Society National President Mark Gaetani also addressed the around 150 guests, including National CEO Toby oConnor, Group CEO Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM, and long-term supporters of the St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria such as Vinnies CEO Sleepout participants, generous donors and dedicated volunteers, symbolising the enduring commitment of the Society's members. Bishop Martin Ashe said grace.

The Ozanam Oration's resounding call to embrace change, have courage and take risks echoed the fearless spirit of Frederic Ozanam, the St Vincent de Paul Society's founder. The event sparked meaningful discussions about the Society's identity, the evolving landscape of volunteering, and the indispensable role of members and volunteers. In the spirit of adaptability, guests left inspired, fostering a profound sense of unity and commitment to the enduring mission of the Society.

Mr Fitzgerald's reflections encapsulated the essence of the evening: "The society is an example that lay people and religious and clerics working together can achieve something extraordinary. And this 170 years is that celebration."

Mass at St Francis' Church: A Spiritual Commemoration

To further commemorate 170 years of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia, a graceful and solemn mass unfolded at St Francis' Church, Victoria's oldest Catholic Church, on Lonsdale Street on the day of our birth – 5 March. The choice of this historic venue added a layer of significance, as St Francis' Church is the birthplace of the first conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.

Archbishop Peter Andrew Comensoli led the well-attended service, which was witnessed by distinguished guests, including National President Mark Gaetani, National CEO Toby oConnor, State President Michael Quinn, and St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Group CEO Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald AM.

The mass, a heartfelt tribute to Fr Gerald Ward, unfolded the narrative of his devoted efforts to respond to the needs of Australians, leading to the establishment of the first Australian conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society 170 years ago.

Mr Gaetani, in a poignant sidenote, shared that unbeknown to Father Ward, his efforts would come full circle in 2020 with the establishment of the first UK Mini Vinnies group at St Edwards Catholic Primary School in Father Ward's hometown Runcorn, inspired by Kevin Slattery from the Hawthorn Conference in Melbourne.

The mass was not just a spiritual experience, but also an opportunity for attendees to reflect on the enduring mission of the Society and on its founder's, Frederic Ozanam's, timeless wisdom: "The poor person is a unique person, God's fashioning, with an inalienable right to respect."

A light supper afterwards provided a convivial setting for sharing stories, strengthening connections, and celebrating the spirit of compassion and service that defines the Society.

Present at the mass were also Bishop Greg Bennet, Bishop Terry Curtin, Bishop Tony Ireland, Emeritus Bishop Les Tomlinson, Fr Tony Kerin, and Fr Michael Buck. The evening was a testament to the enduring legacy of the St Vincent de Paul Society. The event resonated with gratitude for the continued legacy of compassion and charity that defines the Society's mission.

The legacy of Frederic Ozanam lives on

The Ozanam Oration and the commemorative Mass stand as symbols of the St Vincent de Paul Society's unwavering commitment to its mission. As the Society reflects on 170 years of service, the events served as a bridge between its storied past and a future filled with challenges and opportunities.

The legacy of Frederic Ozanam lives on, inspiring generations to come as the Society continues its journey guided by faith, adaptability, and a profound commitment to compassion and service. In the grand tapestry of 170 years, the threads of faith, resilience, adaptability and courage are interwoven, creating a rich legacy that will endure for generations to come.

The St Vincent de Paul Society and its wide network of members and volunteers provide practical frontline support, advocacy and friendship for the most vulnerable members of our community. Key services include home visitation; Vinnies Shops; youth programs; soup vans; assistance for asylum seekers and refugees; education and tutoring; and professional accommodation and health services through VincentCare. The St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria has more than 10,000+ members and volunteers, and more than 60,000 across Australia. Internationally, the Society operates in 149 countries and more than 950,000 members.

To find out more visit www.vinnies.org.au.