When asked by his Vincentian superiors about what kind of assignment he would like to have, Brother Leo wrote, “I joined the Vincentians rather than any other community...to imitate the charity and service to the poor which St. Vincent had.”

Prior to entering the Vincentian novitiate in 1962, Brother Leo served two years in the US Army, worked as a bank teller and IBM machine operator. While he was successful in those pursuits, he found that the plan he had for his life wasn’t working, but he believed that God had a plan for him. When asked by his Vincentian superiors about what kind of assignment he would like to have, Brother Leo wrote, “I joined the Vincentians rather than any other community...to imitate the charity and service to the poor which St. Vincent had.”

Operating from a small office near the back door of the Vincentian residence, Brother Leo sees a steady stream of homeless and poor people who come seeking everything from clean socks to help with legal problems. His mission statement reads, “To make manifest the love of God through direct services, to love my neighbor as myself, to find Christ in myself and to bring Christ to those I meet, to seek to find Christ in everyone, to attain peace by working for justice and forgiveness and in the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul, to encourage and provide a way of sharing resources to improve conditions.”

During the parish’s recent Transformation meetings, the group spoke a lot about what it means to be a Vincentian and how St. Vincent de Paul’s commitment to service defines us as a community. There are many great examples of service occurring around the parish on a daily basis but perhaps none greater than the “Backdoor Ministry” operated by Brother Leo Keigher for the past 40 years.

The supplies he distributes come from an informal network of friends and relatives who have contributed mountains of used clothing, household items and more over the years. Other parishes have heard of his work, and they contribute as well. Many people are moved to send money, which he uses to buy what is not given, to help people get to a doctor’s appointment across town or to reconnect with family across the country. He estimates that he gives away more than 1,000 aspirin and Tylenol every month.

“I’m Not Working Alone”

Relying on providence rather than fundraisers to restock the shelves, Brother Leo says he sees the hand of God at work. In a recent interview, he told the story of a man who showed up at his office one winter with no shoes. Shortly thereafter, a paper bag with a new pair of work shoes arrived at the office.

“It helps to know I’m not working alone,” Brother Leo said. “If you ask Him, God will provide.”

Everything that Brother Leo does is characterized by his highly relational one-on-one approach, “I’m not a machine man;” he said. “I like to be with people.”

He believes the greatest poverty in America is loneliness and so with every person who visits him he strives to make a personal connection, understanding that often what makes a person homeless is a lack of family and close friends nearby who can provide support and comfort in times of need.

Brother Leo says he learned how to communicate “heart to heart” while visiting a home for handicapped children years ago and interacting with a young girl who couldn’t speak.

His ability to appeal to the heart of those he serves is affirmed in a decades-old letter recommending him for an award to be given by the National Assembly of Religious Brothers. Brother Leo was noted for not only his work but “he is a gentle man and like the Lord, touches all who come in contact with him. Much of what he does is in a quiet and unassuming manner.”

The approach mirrors that of St. Vincent de Paul – a very bright man, says Brother Leo, but one who didn’t use a lot of fancy words.

Now 84, Brother Leo is showing no sign of slowing down. The “open” sign is in the window of the Backdoor Ministry, signaling that a patient man with resources to share is available to serve those in need.

May it long be so.

John Howlett reporting for the Communications Commission.

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