

# St Vincent and the galley prisoners



St Vincent de Paul was sent to be the chaplain for the galley slaves in Marseilles in 1622. The galleys were long narrow war ships which needed many men on the lower deck to row. As this was a tiring and difficult job, it was used as an alternative to prison. When the men were not on shift rowing the boats, they were chained up in horrible conditions in makeshift prisons on the docks.

Vincent was appalled when he came and saw how badly they were treated. He started to talk to people in power in the town and campaigned for them to have basic food, clothing and somewhere to rest. After much work and fundraising, he managed to build them a hospital so they would have the care of doctors and nurses when they were sick.

No matter what these prisoners had done, St Vincent saw that they needed to be treated with dignity, even in the time of imprisonment. This is one of the Vincentian values we still honor in SSVP today – no matter why someone is in need, we treat them with respect as we reach out to help them.

## Task

**Imagine you are a galley prisoner in the time of St Vincent. Write a letter to your friend telling them what conditions were like before Fr Vincent came and how he has helped everyone. You can carry out some research into life aboard the galley ships or just be creative and use your imagination. This example below may give you an idea:**

*Dear Pierre,*  
*I have some better news today to share in my letter this month. In the past I have told you how horrible it is when we finish our turn of rowing and are chained up in the dock prison. There is no bed to lie upon and the food only comes once every day. We are so hungry and thirsty all the time.*  
*Finally, we have some new hope that life may be a little better. A nice priest called Fr Vincent has been coming to visit. He is very kind and takes time to listen to our problems. He has been talking to the people who are in charge and telling them that they must do more to look after us. At first, I thought they would not listen to him, but today he has told us that the masters have agreed to feed us twice every day and will give us a mat of straw for a bed.*  
*I am so happy Pierre and thank God for sending Fr Vincent to us.*  
*Best Wishes*  
*Henri*