

## 4.

Saint Vincent de Paul:  
History of the charism of St. Vincent de Paul

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We may say that the charism of Vincent de Paul is charity, that is, affective and active love for God and the neighbor, with its multiple implications and applications. Has this work ceased? No, since the theme of this article is the history of the charism. We will find various gifts or charisms, each of which is implied in the application of charity, as conditions for or means to a better service of God and neighbor.

There are two major phases of this trajectory in Vincent's life: the appearance or acquisition of gifts or charisms, from their origin to his first engagement in spiritual and then corporal service to the poor, in the years 1613-1617. Then comes the concrete working out of these gifts or charisms in practice: the application of charity, his great charism that unifies the others.

The divisions of this history are the dates of the various steps, approximate points in his life, together with his gifts and charisms.

1. *The first appearance of his gifts: his aptitudes, without calling this a charism, but simply how the ways of Providence were active in him.*

Before presenting these steps, it would be good to become aware of what he received from those around him and who had a part to play in his development. God calls us and waits for us through several intermediaries and signs, a long time in advance, as it was for Jeremiah. This is evidently the same for each of us.

***What he received from his ancestors,  
from 1342 to 1597 at age sixteen***

From his father's side: In 990, there was a château called Paulianum in Languedoc. In 1342, a Pierre De Paul and Jean De Paul were squires in the victorious army of the inhabitants of Languedoc against the English. In 1364, Jean De Paul received from the king the property of a defeated individual, Jacotin, from Berno in Gascony, between Dax and Bordeaux. This was how the DePauls came to Gascony. In 1486, one hundred twenty years later, south of Berno at Pouy (called today Saint-Vincent de Paul), there lived a woman, Bertrande De Paul. In 1509, again in Pouy, there was a Vincentina De Paul. Still in Pouy, there are records of a Jean De Paul, the father of Vincent de Paul in 1581. It was here that Vincent was born a century later, in 1581.

There were De Pauls also around Dax, such as a royal sergeant at Poyanne in 1545, another Jean de Paul, a canon of Dax in 1564, and in the years 1580-1590, an Etienne de Paul, prior of Poymartet, and a certain Bertrande de Paul, a cloth merchant in Dax.

The migration continued toward the south, crossing the Pyrenees. A Jean De Paul, a Dominican, lived near Zaragoza in 1498, along with others. It is probably that they were all related in some way, and that the young Vincent went to visit them. The De Paul family of Pouy is found in the list of the owners of fiefs, free lands. Jean de Paul was an important figure, called a *capcazal*, that is, a master of the house. He was not necessarily rich, since the lands were not very lucrative. These farmers had only oxen, not horses, but their social rank gave them a comfortable life amid their human relations. The young Vincent quickly became aware of the work to be done in the country, as well as of the rights and duties of a peasant.

From his mother's side: She was Bertrande de Moras (or du Morar), daughter of Pierre du Morar. The Moras (or Morar) owned a large farm, Morar, some twenty kilometers south of Dax, along with the property of the "caverie de Peyrous." This land brought with it a noble title, but it did not necessarily make the owner a nobleman. Still he was responsible for local good order and security by reason of law and legalities, and he could have horses and bear arms.

2. *The second gift, which would be very useful in many circumstances, beginning with the first letter still in existence: Vincent was an excellent horseman.*

This was the motor scooter of his time. Can we speak of his charism now? No, but only of his providential way of acting. Charism came later, and this involved the art of taking advantage of opportunities, in which he was an expert. He had two uncles: Jacques du Morar, who succeeded his father, Pierre, as the owner of Peyrous; and Jean du Morar, an attorney, a lawyer and royal procurator at the law court of Dax. It was from the latter that Vincent received knowledge of law and legal procedure, noteworthy even in his first letter.<sup>1</sup>

3. *The third gift of Providence: His relatives had good relations with the nobility of the area.*

These were the Gramont, the princes of Bidache, some thirty kilometers south of Dax, who, themselves, had a good relationship with Henry, king of Navarre before he became Henri IV, king of France. In this way, we perceive bonds that were gradually woven for the young Vincent, and his relationships extended even to the high nobility.

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<sup>1</sup> Analyzed by Canon FOURNIER, "Saint Vincent canoniste," *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*, 94 (1929): 767-772.

4. *Providence's fourth gift or grace, his "charism" or his "multiple charisms."*

Before he was sixteen (i.e., 1581 to 1597) – he gave his age a dozen times – we knew few details about him, but only recollections from him and his compatriots. He led the life of a schoolboy and helped his family as best he could.

***Brilliant beginnings from age sixteen to twenty-four,  
1597 to 1605***

We perceive that he was in a big hurry, not to found a religious institute, but simply to make a living, or to secure an income. What about a vocation to priesthood? His protector, Monsieur de Comet, the attorney in Dax and judge in Pouy, pushed him to begin theological studies. Was this not to provide him with a clerical income, since this was the least burdensome and very common way of doing one's studies for people of the middle class?

Vincent answered quickly and was in such a hurry that he was tonsured at fifteen and a half, and on the same day, Friday, 20 December 1596, received the four minor orders: porter, lector, exorcist, and acolyte, although he did not have the required minimum age. Since the bishop of Dax had not yet received his bulls from Rome, the bishop of Tarbes, Salvat d'Iharse, a relative of the Gramont family, who conferred the orders on him in the church of Bidache, a residence of the Gramonts. This seems almost accidental, but it was a consequence of relationships with Vincent's mother's family. There would be others.

He then began his theological studies in Zaragoza. The Jesuits there have the tradition that Vincent stayed with them, and in his writings, one reads recollections about Spanish universities and the austerity of the Carmelite nuns in Zaragoza.

Vincent's father died around the end of 1598; his testament was dated Saturday, 7 February 1598. Vincent was then responsible for his mother and his young brothers and sisters, and, since he had no more resources for his studies, he had to work for himself and his family. Since Toulouse was closer to his family, he went there to continue his studies in 1597 or 1598, and he supported himself as the director of a small student residence.

He was ordained subdeacon in Tarbes, again by Salvat D'Iharse, on Saturday, 19 September 1598, and became pastor of Tilh, some twenty kilometers east of Dax, which still lacked a bishop. It was common enough in those days to be named a pastor of a parish before being ordained a priest, with a vicar doing the work. Vincent was only seventeen, and three months later, he was ordained a deacon on Saturday, 19 December 1598.

Now, the age required by the Council of Trent in canon twelve of its twenty-third session was twenty-one for subdiaconate, twenty-two for diaconate, and twenty-four for priesthood. He was thus a subdeacon four years early, and a deacon five years early, truly a person in a hurry!

On Monday, 13 September 1599, he received, again from the vicar general of Dax, the dimissorial letters for priesthood. This document stated that Vincent was “recognized as capable, sufficiently trained, and of legitimate age.” One year later, on Saturday, 23 September 1600, the bishop of Perigueux ordained him, only nineteen and a half, to the priesthood at Château-l’Evêque and not at his cathedral, since it had not yet been repaired after its damage by Protestants. Vincent still had four years of theology ahead of him and was five years too young to fulfill the canonical requirements. Could anyone be in a bigger hurry?

A little later, Richelieu was ordained a bishop at age twenty-two! It was literally to lie or cheat, since Vincent certainly knew his real age. In the texts that we have, he clearly stated his age a dozen times! This practice of early ordination had been quite common, undoubtedly for centuries.

Beginning in the 1650s, it was not the same. At the death of Monsieur Vincent, his confreres could not say that their superior general had been ordained a priest at nineteen instead of twenty-four. They then engaged in a deception: they claimed he was born in 1576, which thus made him ordained a priest at twenty-four. In 1660, they claimed he had died at eighty-four instead of seventy-nine. Only in the twentieth century did Father Coste establish the truth while he was publishing more texts than his predecessors had.

##### 5. *The fifth gift of Providence: his ordination.*

This was the richest gift, although he did not attain it in any direct way, but it was still a great charism, since he could now confect the sacramental body in the Eucharist, and the mystical body of Christ in confession and catechesis. He was still unaware of this, since he was in too much of a hurry to become a priest to realize it. His goal continued to be acquiring ecclesiastical benefices. We should note here that his orientations and decisions took place either through pressure from others or through the influence of events, such as the death of his father, and others. We will see that this will continue in his life.

He finished with distinction his studies for the baccalaureate in theology and the license to teach theology in October 1604, according to documents found at his death. He certainly taught in 1604-1605 on God’s grace and human freedom, the standard course for a professor’s first year in the classroom. We find traces of them throughout his writings.

6. *The sixth gift from Providence: knowledge of theology.*

This gift, not received from others but from his own work, was his knowledge of theology, along with his closeness to the people since his childhood. These gifts made him a good preacher and teacher, and stalwart in the Jansenist conflict. We still know nothing about his faith life, since he continued to focus on being able to guarantee his family's future, thanks to the clerical state. It was only later that this desire was slowly purified and matured through various failures and his contact with poverty.

He was living in a region and during a period of faith and of tragedies, with religion and politics closely intertwined. Faith was closely linked with brutality during the savage wars of religion, particularly in the large regions of Béarn and Gascony, systematically ravaged by Protestant hordes. Nonetheless, he was not bitter about this, and he always preached peaceful dialogue with the reformers.

***Tested, from age twenty-four to twenty-seven,  
1605-1608***

His first great trial was not long in coming. Vincent failed at some affair in Bordeaux that he did not reveal, and at the end of June 1605 he began to pursue a swindler who had seized an inheritance that was coming to Vincent. He went as far as Marseilles, from where he returned by sea in July to travel over to Narbonne. This was a poor choice of date, since Barbary pirates were on the lookout for ships coming from the fair at Beaucaire. His ship was captured and, instead of acquiring an inheritance, he was enslaved at Tunis, a terrible experience.

An analysis of the letter in which he mentioned this event shows that he already had exceptional knowledge of economy, law, and legal procedures, and he knew the technical terms received from his family, as noted above, and from his university studies. Nothing can therefore allow any doubt about the truth of his captivity. Since he got himself out of it, which was quite rare, this provided an argument for those who deny his captivity.

First, we should note that the Turkish government was less severe in Tunis than in Algiers. All the notices about harsh captivities come from Algiers. In addition, he had been bought by individuals, who had to maintain their slaves in a good enough condition to work, unlike those enlisted for service in the city or the galleys. Vincent's good will, his capacity for good personal relations, together with his aptitude for learning languages – in Barbary, a mixture of Arabic, Spanish, and Italian was the lingua franca – put him in good stead with his four successive masters. He learned the customs of the country,

and the advice that he would later write for his confreres sent to minister to the Christian slaves in Algiers and Tunis shows a perfect knowledge of the usages and mentalities of these countries and how to behave there.

Secondly, we should also note the agreement between the tale of his escape and real circumstances. His master, a convert to Islam from Christianity, had the wherewithal to discreetly prepare a small boat. Vincent was surprised by having to wait for ten months,<sup>2</sup> which shows that his master was looking for the right conditions, namely a favorable date. In fact, this was in June, the period when the pirates left the port, which was then under a lighter surveillance, when they were moving along the Italian coasts before moving to the mouth of the Rhone in July. June was also the time when the winds were favorable and the storms less frequent. The Barbary pirates had long taken advantage of these conditions.

After two lost years, now was the time to finally begin to accomplish his plans.

*7. His captivity was, without doubt, the first step in his discovery of what he was waiting for, a new gift of providence, its seventh gift.*

We know what happened next: the arrival at Aigues-Mortes, then Avignon, where he fell in with the nuncio who was about to complete his term, and who would bring Vincent with him to Rome. There, he hoped to be able to find from the Holy See, more easily than in France, the nomination to a lucrative post in a French diocese that would also allow him to pay off his debts.

This long letter about his captivity shows something about the state of his faith when he was twenty-six, or what he would have to learn what to say about it. The letter about the captivity has never been studied from this perspective, either to deny or affirm it. A tree was hiding the entire forest.

In this letter, he did not mention Jesus or the Holy Spirit. God the Father appears only as Providence, in which Vincent had great confidence. In fact, he used the language of the pagan Romans, Fortuna, the goddess of luck. On the other hand, the Virgin Mary had a major role in his devotion. He had a great confidence in her intercession; he could speak about her in Tunis, where Muslims also respected her.

Nonetheless, Jesus and the Trinity were living in him, as we know from two of his extant early sermons, dated five or six years after

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<sup>2</sup> *Saint Vincent de Paul. Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), 1: 10; CCD 1:9; abbreviated SV, followed by the English version, CCD.

these events. He showed a Molinist conception of the relationship between predestination and free will in the way he spoke of the death of his benefactor's brother: "He is not dead... since God had... determined the number of his days. But God had also foreseen the number of his days since he died when he died." That is, he died because of the relationship of natural causes, the "middle knowledge" of the Jesuit Molina.

The last point is this: this entire tale was motivated by his search for income, at Bordeaux and then at Marseilles. What was he looking for now when he arrived in the papal city of Avignon? Let us read his own words, dated 24 July 1607: "This same Bishop, since he knows that I am a churchman, has ordered me to send for my letters of ordination, assuring me that he will help me and provide me with a very good benefice."<sup>3</sup>

In Rome, besides some studies that he did, he went to visit the afflicted: the poor, the sick, the wounded, in conjunction with the religious of John of God, Camillus de Lellis, and the lay confraternities of charity. He would speak about this later, like a bee making honey from these events. Still, the calls or graces from God would come to him as he dealt with the afflicted.

Unfortunately, his hopes of securing a good position through the cardinals fell through. He could amuse people with experiences gained during captivity, but nothing else. This meant that he obtained nothing that he had been hoping for. Later in life, he wrote that in Rome, one must not be in a hurry; if so, you would fail. Another wasted year. The second step in his discovery was that one must know how to wait, to accept reverses.

8. *The eighth of his gifts from Providence was that he would have to adapt to circumstances.*

He had learned much and met many people who would inspire him or who would be able to help him. In learning to adapt, he would need to be supple, not contentious, but able to confront very diverse or unexpected situations. In the second letter from Rome, dated 28 February 1608 (SV 1: 15; CCD, 1: 13)<sup>4</sup>: "The means of an honorable retirement by obtaining for me, with that end in view, a suitable benefice in France. That is why I greatly need a copy of my letters of ordination." Once again we see how he was directing his life, or God's plan for him, starting with the actions of others.

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<sup>3</sup> SV 1: 11; CCD, 1: 9

<sup>4</sup> SV 1: 15; CCD, 1: 13.

*Alternatives, from twenty-seven to thirty-two years,  
1608-1613*

He left Rome for France in October or November 1608. He arrived in Paris, so we may ask why he did not go to his native Gascony, as he should have, to meet his family, to go back to teaching, and to satisfy his debts.

Louis Abelly, his first biographer, wrote that he had heard either from him or from his confreres that he is supposed to have said that he was carrying an important document that he was to send in all discretion to the king of France, Henri IV. Although some modern scholars around 1930 have cast doubt on this, Abelly could never have dreamed this up.<sup>5</sup> Vincent had the time to become known in Rome, to speak about his relationship with a man known in Rome, his bishop, a friend of Henri IV. The bishop would have been able to confide this mission to him.

Between 1940 and 1950, Joseph Guichard, C.M., a great explorer of archives and libraries, searched for this document that was supposed to have been brought to Paris around October 1608. He found a possible way, as he noted in his notes.<sup>6</sup> He discovered in Father Meurisse's history of the bishops of Metz<sup>7</sup> the mention of two papal bulls which gave the title bishop of Metz to the young Henri de Bourbon-Verneuil, only seven years old, the illegitimate son of Henry IV and the marquise of Verneuil. The boy would receive income from the property of the diocese, and the aged Cardinal Givry would become the *de facto* bishop of Metz. We suppose that these are the bulls that Vincent was to deliver.

His arrival in Paris would change his life. Had he returned to his native area, he would have had a fine career, but he would certainly not have become a national personality. He must have delivered these confidential documents directly to Henri IV. Very soon afterward, he became one of the almoners, distributors of alms, of the queen, Marguerite de Valois, probably through the bishop of Dax and friend of the king, himself the first almoner of the queen. This gave him access to that palace where he would make friends.

He shared his lodging with a friend who was passing through, in the Gascon quarter, namely the judge of Sore, Bertrand Du Lou. One day when Vincent was ill, the delivery boy from the pharmacist came to bring him some medicine and he spied Bertrand's purse and grabbed

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<sup>5</sup> PIERRE COSTE, C.M., *Monsieur Vincent, le grand saint du grand siècle* (Paris, 1931), 1: 60.

<sup>6</sup> JOSEPH GUICHARD, C.M., "Notes et Documents," 1, 12, pp. 167-175 for Henri de Bourbon and 147-188 for Cardinal de Givry.

<sup>7</sup> MARTIN MEURISSE, *Histoire des Évêques de l'Église de Metz* (Metz, 1634), pp. 654-666, 667-674.

it without Vincent's knowing it. Bertrand accused Vincent of theft, threw him out of their lodging, told Bérulle about it, and had him publicly accused in the parish church. Vincent was simply content to say that God knew the truth. Six months later the thief was accused after another theft elsewhere.

9. *The ninth gift of Providence, similar to the eighth, was that he could bear up under calumnies.*

He had suffered a terrible trial, the loss of his freedom; now, he had lost his honor because of lies. He mentioned this later in life. He then became associated with good priests such as Monsieur de Bérulle, a priest who was promoting the reform of the clergy. During his studies, he had acquired some books in Spanish, such as those by Teresa of Avila. Bérulle, who brought Teresa's Carmelites to France, led him not only to deepen his life of union with God but to live as a priest and pastor. Vincent advanced quite quickly, but he was still looking for financial resources.

In the spring of 1610, some quite complex affairs began. On 17 May 1610, the archbishop of Aix-en-Provence, who was living in Paris, handed over to Vincent the abbey of Saint Leonard de Chaumes, near La Rochelle. Pope Paul V confirmed this action on Friday, 27 August 1610, in the bull naming Vincent as abbot of Saint-Leonard. He would take it over officially on Saturday, 16 October 1610. His hope of returning home with some resources became more focused.

Did it really happen? No; his problems began again. Protestants had ruined this abbey, and it had no monks. There was only a farmer there who cultivated the lands. Vincent would have to reconstruct the abbey and recruit monks for it on the basis of the tiny income provided by the farmer. To make matters worse, on 10 November of that year, another claimant took Vincent to court to force him to share the income. He would then have to pay the court costs of the lengthy proceedings and come several times to La Rochelle.

This city, a Protestant republic, refused to obey the king and apply the Edict of Nantes, and it granted only very few rights to Catholics. Vincent would see from personal experience the life of Protestants, and he would recall their care in teaching the catechism, even to adults. In this way, he would meet an excellent Catholic pastor. From La Rochelle, also, he certainly went at least once to his native region.

10, 11. *The tenth and eleventh gifts from Providence: the discovery of the hazards in obtaining certain posts; and the first application of his knowledge of law and legal procedures, that is, the application of his third charism.*

This prepared him for future procedures to defend the property of the poor. It was only on Saturday, 29 October 1616, that he finished

with these court cases about St. Leonard de Chaumes, since he finally found a successor as the so-called abbot. After six years of legal wrangling, he finally was able to extricate himself from them to continue to deepen his spiritual life under Bérulle's guidance and no longer pursue financial security. At the end of 1611, at age thirty, he began a sort of novitiate at the Oratory of Jesus, which Bérulle had just founded on 11 November.

Very quickly, Bérulle deemed that Vincent had advanced sufficiently in his spiritual life and was zealous and capable in his ministry, and he had him appointed pastor of Clichy la Garenne, north of Paris. He began there in 1612 and he did wonders and was finally happy. He was replacing Father Bourgoing, the cofounder of the Oratory with Bérulle.

Soon after, and nearly at the same time, Bérulle perceived his gifts as a teacher, and he obtained for him at the end of 1613 the office of teacher of the children of one of the greatest families of France, the Gondis. Vincent was thirty-two years old. Monsieur Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, general of the galleys of France, was the same age as Vincent. His very pious wife, Françoise-Marguerite de Silly, was one year older. Here is Vincent now, confined in the household of one of the kingdom's greatest families, working in service of children.

*12. Vincent ended these various steps with another gift of God, or a charism.*

He had experienced poverty and hostility, plus the ability to get out of difficulties, thanks to rare aptitude: knowing how to relate to people at all levels. This is one of his great charisms.

***His first apostolic period, from age thirty-two to forty-four,  
1613-1625***

"Confined?" Being with the Gondis would be a turning point for him, the source of two others. Accompanying the Gondis through their various properties, he helped out the pastors of the villages, where both material and spiritual poverty reigned. In addition, certain parishioners had never dared to confess mortal sins to their pastor, as they were obliged to do by Church law, and they never had a way to go to confession to others. Vincent preached, catechized, and proposed general confessions of one's entire past life. He wrote drafts of his sermons, at least of several of them, but he preached without reading his papers. We have three sermons written in his own hand during these years.

*13. His thirteenth gift was that he became a living theologian of the spiritual life and with the concern of a pastor.*

In his two sermons on Communion, between 1612 at Clichy and 1616 in the Gondi villages, he related that communion led him to speak

of the incarnation, and then also of God the Father and the Holy Spirit: Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption, the three great truths of Christian faith, which he always managed to make known. He called them “the truths necessary for salvation.”

14. *His fourteenth gift was that he was an excellent teacher.*

His sermon on the catechism, dating from the end of March or the beginning of April 1616, at the request of M. de Gondi, shows him as a profound theologian, aware of the history of the Church, and a fine teacher. This was a genuine charism.

15. *The rural missions, Vincent's first great work, were a new gift of God or a charism, which came about through the woman who was the mistress of the area.*

Beginning now, we see the application of these charisms: his works, sometimes accompanied with new personal charisms. His masters, the Gondis, quickly noticed his spiritual and apostolic value. On 25 January 1617, he discovered at Folleville, near Amiens, the importance of working as a team. We know about this day. While Madame de Gondi was visiting her peasants, she was struck by what a dying man told her about the benefit he at last had by going to confession to Vincent, in which he acknowledged grave sins during his life that he had never admitted to his pastor. She then asked Vincent to deliver a sermon on general confession. This sermon attracted so many people to the parish church from neighboring parishes that Vincent had to ask for some Jesuits to help hear their confessions.

This was the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, and Vincent saw in it a providential sign, the turning point for his entire life. He would spend his life giving missions in the rural areas about general confessions; the cities had enough confessors and pastors. Vincent's work would never be done alone, but always with a group of priests.

16. *The sixteenth gift, the first major charism, was inspired by God again through a woman. This was his second great work, still alive today.*

Once again, his life would change. Quite far from Paris and Picardy, Bresse, a territory of the duchy of Savoy, conquered by Henri IV after eight years of savage war and annexed to France in 1601, remained largely in ruins. The churches were ruined as well, and the Christian life was reduced or difficult.

This situation worried the archbishop of Lyons. Only the town of Châtillon-les-Dombes (renamed Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne at the time of the Revolution), located between Lyons and Bourg-en-Bresse, was still in sufficiently good material and religious condition. It was a major commercial center, and none of the belligerents wanted to destroy it. The archbishop wrote to Bérulle in October 1616 to ask him to found

his Oratory there at Châtillon to supplement the society of priests who were then administering it. If not, at least to send Bourgoing.

Since Bourgoing was founding the Oratory at Rouen, Bérulle had Vincent come. He was installed as pastor on 1 August 1617. One Sunday at Mass, at the request of a woman parishioner, he mentioned in his sermon the condition of a poor isolated family in the countryside, all of whose members were ill. Vincent himself went in the afternoon and saw a great number of women coming and going, and he then spoke to several of them. Finally, he suggested that they form an association so that this type of service of the poor and the sick could continue.

Several months later, they organized with him and established with many practical details the first Confraternity of Charity. The women members were called "Servants of the poor," and Vincent provided them with directives about their Christian life. Their spirit, he said, would be humility, simplicity, and charity, for "the spiritual and corporal service of the sick poor." The women would be in charge; the pastor would be only their spiritual advisor. These three virtues, and the association of these two services, would always go together. This is another special point about Vincent's charism, which others would quickly adopt.

*17. His seventeenth gift or charism was to bring priests and laity, men and women, together. We will see this in the following works.*

A charism? We may suppose that the Holy Spirit inspired this woman with this project. She certainly had already practiced this and instructed her pastor. Thanks to her intervention, Vincent discovered the importance and value of working not only with priests but also with lay people, women this time, to whom he confided the direction and management of the work. This differed from other confraternities, where the pastor remained in charge.

### ***Conclusion and true beginnings, from age forty-four to seventy-nine, 1625-1660***

*18. The eighteenth gift or charism was the Congregation of the Mission, Vincent de Paul's second great work after the Confraternities of Charity.*

Once again, it was done at the initiative of a woman and her husband, since they were the seigneurs of the numerous villages where these missions began. The Gondis had not agreed to his departure. They got him back for Christmas, 1617, freed him from his responsibility toward their children, and left him completely free for the missions.

From 1618 on, he gave parish missions with groups of priests in the villages of the Gondis' vast domains, and in each one he founded a

Confraternity of Charity. The pious and generous Madame de Gondi took an active part in them since they were founded on her estates, and the minutes and rules of the majority of them, signed by her, still exist.

Monsieur de Gondi saw in Monsieur Vincent a zealous missionary whose qualities were perhaps informed by his years of slavery (although he never said anything to anyone about them). Gondi had Vincent appointed Chaplain General of the Galleys of France, beginning 8 February 1619. He would then also preach missions for the galley convicts when they were in port either in Bordeaux or Marseilles, and always with a team of priests, Jesuits or others.

This time, therefore, it was a man, Monsieur de Gondi, who was the Holy Spirit's instrument in this new application of the popular missions. To assure that these teams of priests giving missions would be long-lasting, Madame de Gondi suggested that he bring together in an association or a congregation those priests who would agree to do so. On 17 April 1625, then, she and her husband signed the Foundation Contract, granting Vincent 45,000 livres for the association of priests for the missions, to be called the Congregation of the Mission. Monsieur Vincent was then forty-four and still had thirty-five years to live.

It was a significant period of time. For one thing, Madame de Gondi, who had done so much for the confraternities, died on 24 June 1625, two months after signing the contract. Some confreres have hoped to see her beatified, and rightly so. For another thing, on 4 September 1626, the first four members of the Congregation signed the Act of Association for parish missions. It did not stop there. Vincent invited one of the women to whom he gave spiritual direction, the widow Louise de Marillac, Mademoiselle Legras, to visit the various confraternities to assure their unity of spirit.

Soon afterward, some young women from villages near Paris offered to help the Ladies of Charity, who were not always ready to go and serve the poor. Two young women joined the members of each confraternity: one for the sick, and the other for teaching children under the Ladies' direction. This time, it was Louise de Marillac, Mademoiselle Legras, who took the initiative to give them their formation. Beginning on 29 November 1633, she brought the young women together with no other name than *filles* (servants), "Servants of the Charity." After some weeks of formation, and later after a year of formation, they began to work for the Charities.

Article two of their rules of 1672, which had been gradually formulated, is typical of Vincent's spirit: "...since they have much greater contact with the world than nuns, having generally for monastery houses of the sick; for cell, a hired room; for chapel, the parish church; for cloister, the streets of the city or the wards of hospitals; for enclosure, obedience; for grate, the fear of God; for veil, holy modesty; they

are therefore obliged to lead a life as virtuous as if they were professed in a religious order.”<sup>8</sup> These young women would be prepared to serve in all kinds of situations, and to suffer rejection.

This third great work was not from Vincent de Paul alone. He foresaw only the confraternities of the ladies, and the young women joined a confraternity only two by two. He feared that if they were autonomous, they would become nuns and cloistered. By contrast, Louise de Marillac worked to form them into an autonomous organization, all the while attentive that they would remain lay women. At the end, since they were called to serve the sick in some hospitals, there were as a result more than two of them in each place. As they grew more numerous, they would have a rule and a motherhouse on property belong to her in the village of La Chapelle in the outskirts of Paris.

Vincent agreed that they could be established in 1646 as an autonomous confraternity. Then, in 1655, the archbishop of Paris approved them as a Company, which has remained their name (the Company of the Daughters of Charity). They would never be “religious,” living and praying in common. Rather, their vocation, their charism, is to go out, to go to the poor.

*19. His nineteenth gift or charism is this double institution, men and women, working in complementary activities.*

Vincent could work by bringing together not only individuals but also groups, distinct and autonomous congregations of men and women, with the same but complementary spirit, to work for the kingdom of God in the same areas, just as several other founders did. The parish missions were continuing, and Vincent still loved to participate in them when he was available. For this reason, he founded mission houses where this was requested.

*20. Providence’s twentieth gift to Vincent was the foundlings, his fourth great work.*

Abandoned children constituted a great plague in Paris and large cities. Vincent spoke about them to the Ladies of Charity, who proposed various solutions and considered possible resources. The work began on a very small scale in January 1638 at the mother house of the Daughters of Charity, and then a house was rented to accommodate twelve of the foundlings. In 1640, the work grew in extent, but Vincent did not like bringing together children in large groups. On Friday, 15 January 1644, he assembled the materials to have houses built on property that belonged to Saint Lazare. Each one would hold a dozen children and accommodate two Daughters of Charity. This was the

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<sup>8</sup> CCD 13b: 148, n. 3.

average size of families at that period. On 16 January 1645, the Thirteen Houses were completed.<sup>9</sup> Shortly afterward, the queen set aside for them the vast and empty chateau of Bicetre, south of Paris, where more than a hundred children were housed in its rooms. We should note that his care, or his charism, was to remain as much as possible on a humane scale.

The troubles of the Fronde, which devastated the Ile de France from the end of December 1648 into January 1649 led to a great famine along with the dangers of freebooters and soldiers. Louise wrote to Chancellor Séguier to procure some bread for the children.<sup>10</sup> Then there is a legend that is involved with this story. In 1827, a book by the novelist Jean-Baptiste Capefigue, *Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*, appeared. In the chapter on the origin of the work of the Foundlings, pages 66-69, and then in 1845, on pages 40-41, he invented a story that had never been printed and which was not found in any archive. "People often saw him out in the middle of winter nights in places where snow and ice covered the roads. He would wander through the most remote districts, searching for these abandoned victims and warming them against his [p. 67] chest, and, reeling under [p. 40] his burden, would arrive at the house of the Daughters of Charity to consign his precious load to their protection."

In fact, Vincent never went out at night, after evening prayer, since he followed the rule and went to bed so as to rise at 4:00 in the morning like everyone else in the house. At the age when these trips were attributed to him – he was seventy-two – he had increasing difficulty walking, since he had sores on his legs. What happened to Capefigue during the intervals between his editions? Did his now widespread legend make him fear further research? In his 1865 edition, page 57, he still recounted Vincent's supposed trips, but with notable variations, and with no mention at all of snow or ice.

The best historians let themselves be deceived and, without citing their source, published this legend, which has become the popular image of Saint Vincent de Paul. This was the theme of numerous artists, painters, and sculptors, and led to the classic representations of

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<sup>9</sup> Archives Nationales, S 6593, found and photocopied by Prof. Simone Zurawski, De Paul University, Chicago, shared with the Vincentian Archives, Paris, 2001. Coste did not mention the thirteen houses since history depends on chance discoveries. Vincent mentioned this little hospital to M. de Contarmon but he did not name it, letter of 11 May 1654 (SV, 5: 135; CCD, 5: 139); Sister Élisabeth Charpy identified it in the light of a lease of 1645, in her note to this letter reproduced in *La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines* (Paris, 1989), p. 651. Professor Zurawski discovered its source. *tre l'origine*.

<sup>10</sup> COSTE, *Monsieur Vincent*, 2: 456-478; SAINT LOUISE DE MARILLAC, *Écrits spirituels* (Paris, 1983), L. 212, p. 305.

Vincent carrying an infant in his arms. Of course, he could have done so when he went to visit the foundlings, or give bread to a child, which he could have done on the street, and thus spreading the legend.

21. *His fifth great work, the twenty-first gift or charism, developed from his care for victims of warfare, which he promoted through means of communication.*

The kings of France often made war. After many conflicts of various kinds, Louis XIII and Richelieu undertook, beginning in 1631, the conquest of Lorraine, an independent duchy. Twenty-nine years of incessant battles ensued, with allies on both sides, such as the extremely cruel Swedish Protestants on the side of the French. Everything was ruined and pillaged; planting and harvesting were impossible, distress was everywhere, and refugees fled into cities as far as Paris. The Company of the Blessed Sacrament, a group to which Vincent belonged, sent help to the Lorrainers from the beginning, and then he did so directly from 1635.

Some of his first priests, deacons, and brothers brought clothing, food, and money. They did so on foot so as not to be discovered, thus avoiding the armies and armed bands. Brother Matthieu Regnard wrote about his trips and his stratagems to accomplish his mission. The confreres wrote about what they had seen and done, and Vincent had copies made for distribution to obtain charitable help. The Sisters would be also sent to the armies to care for the wounded.

22. *During the same time, he made his first foundation outside of France, his next great gift or charism.*

In October 1641, he founded a mission house and staffed the major seminary of Annecy in Savoy, at the time an independent duchy, at the request of Mother Jeanne de Chantal and the bishop, Francis de Sales. In February 1642, he purchased a house in Rome, since it was important to have a permanent residence there to handle his business with the Holy See, and also to give parish missions.

23. *Another gift or charism was his thought for his confreres and their future.*

In 1642, he held his first general assembly. The congregation's houses had become more numerous and widespread, and he had to watch over what was happening and maintain unity.

24. *His sixth great work, doctrinal this time, was his part in the Jansenist affair. Since he did not want to crush the ordinary people under too many demands, this was his next gift or charism.*

In 1640, a Flemish theologian, Cornelius Jansen (called Jansenius) published his *Augustinus*, an enormous synthesis of the works of Saint

Augustine on questions of original sin, the relationships between divine grace and human freedom, and on predestination, where he adopted the extreme positions of Saint Augustine. The French translation, likewise called *Augustinus*, appeared the following year, and the debates began among the theologians. They added the rigorist positions about Christian life espoused by Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, the abbot of Saint-Cyran, according to whom everyone had to be perfect. Antoine Arnauld, a disciple of Saint-Cyran, published *On frequent communion* (*De la fréquente communion*) which insisted so much on the perfection that one had to have to receive communion that it was no longer possible to receive often.

Some “Propositions” exposing the points worthy of condemnation in the new teaching were published by those who rejected them. They were reduced to five, such as that grace is irresistible, and thus those who do not follow the commandments of God have not received grace. They referenced the words of Jesus: “Many are called, but few are chosen,” and concluded that Jesus did not die for everyone.

These excesses grew and led to a campaign to petition Rome to condemn the five propositions. Monsieur Vincent supported this campaign. On 6 March 1642, Urban VIII, in the bull *In eminenti*, renewed the ancient prohibition about publishing anything about controversies on the subject of grace, but discussions continued nevertheless.

Monsieur Vincent wrote a theological study, *De la grâce* (On grace), where one can recognize the former professor of the years 1604-1605. He neatly attacked the teaching but never the teachers, and kept his Jansenist friends.

25. *His seventh work, the twenty-fifth of his gifts and charisms, developed from his being Chaplain General of the galleys since 1619.*

Monsieur Vincent never stopped thinking about them, and even went to give them missions in Bordeaux and Marseilles when they were free from other work. Neither did he forget those enslaved by the Turks. He surely spoke about them to the queen or to the Duchess of Aiguillon, Richelieu’s niece, since in July 1643 he opened, with her financial help, a house in Marseilles for his confreres who were helping, both corporally and spiritually, the French galley convicts, and from where they could go to Barbary (North Africa) to help the slaves.

Now, France had a consulate in Algiers and Tunis. To ensure greater stability to the Lazarist missionaries, the duchess managed to have the Lazarists installed in the consulates, with the title of French chaplains of the consulate and of the slaves. The first arrived in Tunis in 1645, followed by Algiers. Finally, she had the Lazarists named as consuls. The crowning of this work would be Madagascar in 1648, with the help of the Company of the Indies. Their behavior as conquerors sometimes did not help the evangelization either of the French or of the Malagasy.

26. *In the face of wars and poverty, Vincent's fifth great work for the relief of war victims continued.*

France wanted to conquer not only Lorraine but also Flanders, at the time attached to Spain. From 1649, the war and its disasters grew worse, and the confreres, such as Brother Jean Parre, wrote about what was happening, as happened earlier in Lorraine. This time, however, Vincent sent a copy to his friend Charles Maignart de Bernières, who had the accounts printed in four small pages, called the *Relations*. They appeared monthly and sought to raise funds for the victims. This development of broadcasting information about the needs of the poor was a gift, an aptitude, a charism.

27. *A further charism was his fundraising and managerial abilities.*

All the help he provided needed much more than just gifts alone. Vincent had been prepared for this from his early years with his family in the management of their property and goods. He was prodigious in the exploitation of lands, such as adding farms to his farms, in his management of the transportation companies on land or water, and his ability to defend the property of the poor in the face of lawsuits begun by competitors.

28. *Another gift: His political daring.*

In December 1648 - January 1649, the Fronde broke out, a revolt in Paris against the politics of war promoted by the royalty and Mazarin after Richelieu. Saint Lazare was at the time outside the walls of Paris. Monsieur Vincent went on horseback with Brother Ducournau to see the queen and Mazarin at Saint-Germain and to ask them for peace, and for Mazarin to retire temporarily. The Queen and Mazarin refused. Vincent did not return to Saint Lazare for fear that his business would become known and that the Parisians would suspect him of having taken Mazarin's side. As a result, this sixty-eight year old man had a long horseback ride in a snowstorm as far as the city of Richelieu.

Very quickly, the Fronde of the Princes in several provinces joined up with the Fronde of the Parlements of Paris. Because of the foreign wars in Lorraine and Flanders, and the civil wars found almost everywhere, the misery deepened. Saint Lazare and its farms were pillaged, and epidemics spread. During the terrible winter of 1651-1652, the religious congregations, many without great resources, collaborated in providing food for ten thousand poor persons in Paris.

29. *Another gift or charism: encountering persecutions.*

During this period, English Protestants engaged in cruel persecutions against Catholics in Scotland and Ireland. Still, Monsieur Vincent sent his priests and brothers there. In March 1652, Brother Thaddee

Lee was, in his mother's presence, martyred in Ireland, with his hands cut off and his skull crushed.

*At this same period, Vincent and several confreres held the second general assembly in 1651.*

Their purpose was to continue to prepare a definitive edition of the Common Rules of the Congregation. This all happened while the wars continued. In 1654, assistance given in Picardy and the Ile de France took place, while simultaneously he was making foundations in Italy, in Turin, and Agde. He increasingly had to manage several matters at the same time.

Faithful to his principle about not sheltering beggars in great numbers but rather in humane groups, he, together with Mademoiselle Legras, opened a small establishment, the Hospice of the Name of Jesus, for twelve poor persons, men and women living separately, to whom the workers in the neighborhood taught some skills.

30. *He also had to handle numerous other difficulties.*

In 1655, new trials began concerning him and his coworkers, such as calumnies spread by the Jansenists. Then there were the deaths of several confreres, and the plague at Genoa, the deaths of Sisters, and the shipwrecks of those leaving for Madagascar. In addition, the government was preparing what was called a General Hospital to forcibly enclose the city's beggars. Vincent, who wanted to maintain a humane scale for his establishment, refused to provide chaplains for this great enclosure of the poor. These would be diocesan priests.

31. *His last years, with trials and deaths.*

On Friday, 17 May 1658, he distributed at last the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission during a conference on the rules.<sup>11</sup> However, he grew increasingly ill. Because of problems with his legs and his urinary tract, he could no longer leave his room, except by being carried in a chair by the brothers. Still, he continued to follow matters, opening Montpellier and Narbonne. He gave his conferences on his own floor, and the Daughters of Charity came up there for their conferences.

In 1660, his first and greatest coworkers died. On 14 February, M. Portail, his first companion, died; followed on 15 March by Louise de Marillac. Vincent grew worse and often had to sleep not in his bed but in a chair. In September, some confreres began a journal of his last days, and on 27 September, he died in his chair. Shortly after, the secretary opened the envelope and found that Vincent had proposed René Almérás as superior general, and he was at length elected to this post.

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<sup>11</sup> SV 12: 1-14; CCD 12: 1-12.

**APPENDIX:**  
**The truth of the letter about his captivity  
 and of the second letter**

M. Grandchamp cast doubt on the letter with arguments that he invented. He was employed at the consulate of Tunis, and the Lazarist Pierre Coste, who did not believe in the letter, asked him about them. A specialist in Maghreb studies in Bordeaux, Pierre Turbet-Delof, found them to be false. Besides, the presence of a technical term in this letter, unknown to the public, and which Vincent did not invent, shows that he had understood it correctly. Instead of the current term *métairie* (a farm property), Vincent used the Arabic term *temat*, which Grandchamp did not know, although it appeared in a specialized dictionary: *t'omet*, which Vincent transcribed as he heard it.

In addition, the letter, different from Vincent's other letters, was written in an extremely careful hand, and it was sent not only to his protector, the judge and attorney, Monsieur de Comet, but also to the secretariat of the diocese and to his mother. It was written in Avignon before he went to Rome. Its purpose was not to tell the story of his enslavement but to request his ordination documents, which he needed to prove in Rome that he was a genuine priest.

At the same time, he admitted that he had contracted some debts, and the purpose of his letter was also to explain why he waited two years without paying his debts, but now promised to do so. This was standard practice in dealing with a notary to obtain a delay in repayment, and he correctly noted that he had sent a copy to the notary of Dax.

Analysis of his letters shows that he already had exceptional knowledge of economy, law, and legal processes. Only well-informed readers understood this and published it, such as Father J.B. Boudignon, in his *Saint Vincent de Paul, Modèle des Hommes d'Action et d'Œuvres* (Paris, 1886; English tr., 1925); Canon Fournier, *Saint Vincent the canonist*, a panegyric on Saint Vincent given 19 July 1929. He deplored that Vincent's biographers had referred only to his prudence and patience, etc., but not to his important technical competencies.<sup>12</sup>

These proofs have had little effect, and people continue to repeat Grandchamp without carefully tackling the analysis of the texts or of new documents.

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<sup>12</sup> See *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 94 (1929): 763-774, especially 767-772.