

## **Saint Vincent, the “Mystic of Charity”**

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### **1. A Happy Rediscovery**

One of the greatest and most beautiful surprises of the last General Assembly was the definition of Saint Vincent as a “Mystic of Charity.” On 6 July, during his first homily after his election, the new Superior General presented him, by that phrase, as model for our life as Missionaries, citing expressly the studies of Father Giuseppe Toscani, followed by Father Hugh O’Donnell. I believe that it was the first time that Saint Vincent was called “mystic” during a General Assembly.

It was not expected to be done! It is much easier to talk about Saint Vincent as a “spiritual person,” or as a contemplative. In fact, few among the scholars, have had the courage to place the spiritual experience of Saint Vincent as “mystical.” There are two fundamental reasons.

The first reason is found in the restricted use in which often times the category “mystic” is used even in the theological-spiritual literature, reserving the word to an extreme experience accompanied by some extraordinary “phenomena” (visions, ecstasies, raptures, etc.). In effect, Saint Vincent seems, from the witnesses that we have, not to have enjoyed special “gifts” from God, except the episode of the vision of the globes on the occasion of the death of Chantal.

Whereas, the second reason is to be found in the common use of the term “mystic,” which has become synonymous with “un-incarnated spirituality,” far from the world, a clairvoyant without a practical common sense. This is wholly opposite to Saint Vincent, whose gifts as a great organizer have always been emphasized; a man with his feet planted on the earth, concrete, realist, and pragmatic. In this sense, “mystic” is opposed to the man of action!

Therefore, it is difficult to consider Saint Vincent as a mystic if one starts from these premises. I thus would wish, in the short space of this

article, to map out the great lines of the evolution that the term “mystic” underwent in religious studies and the richness of the application to Saint Vincent of such a category to interpret his and our action.

## 2. The mystical dimension of faith

“Mysticism” entered fully into contemporary theological reflections, after having been reevaluated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the movements of renewal of theology, which, in the need for a return to the sources, led to a renewed interest in Patristic Studies and which, in the need for overcoming the “Manuals,” has drawn attention again to the spiritual sources. Furthermore, “Mysticism” (the mystical phenomenon at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was known as such) underwent a reevaluation even around the studies of religious literature, of philosophy, and attained attention and recognition even in the field of linguistics and the humanities. Thus from the long road initiated by Henri Brémond and Jean Baruzi, it continued afterwards with Giovanni Getto and his school, Massimo Petrocchi and Giovanni Pozzi, arriving at Michel de Certeau and those inspired by him. Mysticism has given way to the “mystical” regarded as the “science of the saint.”<sup>1</sup>

Interdisciplinary studies multiplied in the last decades, which, of course, deepen and complement each other: historical-patristic, theological-spiritual, anthropological-psychological, phenomenological-linguistic.<sup>2</sup> But as happens often, the ever-increasing use of the word and its vast utilization within the diverse

<sup>1</sup> See the bibliography and historiographical reconstruction of this cultural journey in Carlo Ossola, “La parola mistica” [“The Mystic Word”], introduction to *Mistici italiani dell’età moderna* [Italian Mystics of the Modern Age], (edited by Giacomo Jori), Einaudi, Turin 2007, VII-LIII.

<sup>2</sup> To navigate this very varied and complex panorama, see the following collections of studies: *Spiritualità: fisionomia e compiti* [Spirituality: Features and Tasks], Rome 1981; *Vita cristiana ed esperienza mistica* [Christian Life and Mystical Experience], Rome 1982; *La spiritualità. Ispirazione-ricerca-formazione*, [Spirituality. Inspiration-Research-Formation], Rome 1984; *La mistica. Fenomenologia e riflessione teologica* [The Mystique. Phenomenology and Theological Reflection], (2 vols.) Rome 1984; *Alle radici della mistica cristiana* [The Roots of Christian Mysticism], Palermo 1989; *Filosofia e mistica. Itinerari di ricerca* [Philosophy and Mysticism. Research Routes], Rome 1997; *Les enjeux philosophiques de la mystique* [The Philosophical Stakes of Mysticism], Grenoble 2007.

fields of knowledge have favored its semantic variation: the term has thus lost so much of its unique significance by being enriched with further meanings. The risk that always looms in these cases is a simplistic use of the term that ends up trivializing a category and use of it in an inappropriate way. Therefore, it is necessary to make clear in what sense the term is being used and what is the meaning being attributed to it.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, one has to distinguish the “mystical phenomenon” that is a particular “grace,” special, extraordinary, which God gives to a determinate person, from the “mystical dimension of faith,” which, on the contrary, pertains to all. That can be described as a kind of immediate perception of God understood as He who exercises an action in relation to humans and who wants to assert himself in their personal and collective history. The immediate perception determines a “mystic state” (an ecstatic condition given by the attraction that God exercises on the subject) and generates an “experience,” which comes to be defined as “mystic” by the global and all-absorbing character that it possesses, investing and transforming all the dimensions of the human experience: its thought, its feeling, and its action.<sup>4</sup>

The word “mystic” is, therefore, understood as an immediate

<sup>3</sup> The rediscovery of the mystical dimension in Vincentian spirituality has been amply illustrated by Father Giuseppe Toscani in all his work, in particular: *Rinnovarsi per ricreare la Carità [Innovate to Recreate Charity]*, Turin 1981; *Contemplare a viso scoperto [Contemplate with Unveiled Face]*, Turin 1982; *La mistica dei poveri [The Mystique of the Poor]*, Pinerolo 1986. The latter is the most successful book, a real gem for the original perspective and compelling language. His other contributions on the theme are: “L’incarnazione: cuore della spiritualità vincenziana” [“The Incarnation: Heart of Vincentian Spirituality”], “L’aderenza: modellati sull’amore” [“Adherence: Modeled on Love”], “La missione: servizio di chiesa per i poveri” [“The Mission: Service of the Church for the Poor”] in *Annali della Missione* 91 (1984), 134-144; “Il Cristo di S. Vincenzo” [“The Christ of Saint Vincent”] in *Vincenziana* XXX (1986) 357-405, taken up again and expanded upon in the volume, *Amore, contemplazione, teologia. Gesù Cristo visto da S. Vincenzo [Love, Contemplation, Theology. Jesus Christ as Seen by Saint Vincent]*, Alzani, Pinerolo, 1987, his final contribution on his research methodology for the reconstruction of the contemplation of the mystery of Christ of Saint Vincent.

<sup>4</sup> For a phenomenology of mystical experience, see: Toscani, G., *Amore, contemplazione, teologia [Love, Contemplation, Theology]*, Turin 1987, 57-84.

consciousness of the presence of God<sup>5</sup> determined by his action. The foundation is the faith which opens to the perception of God, of his personal properties and his modes of acting. The scope of the affirmation is the experience of the person, where it is rooted and manifested. Moreover, it gives origin to a “new” language in an attempt to express in an adequate way one’s own perception of the divine.

From all the abridged readings of Saint Vincent, from all the deformations, as Father Giuseppe Toscani has shown, the worst would be that of ignoring the mystical dimension of his thought and action. Beyond all the cataloguing, Saint Vincent is a believer who lived an exciting experience of the mystery of Christ. In virtue of this experience, he became a real master, not only of thought, but of life.<sup>6</sup> Reading his writings, one can see clearly that what he says is fruit of a knowledge that does not come only from a cultural tradition. Only a mystic, who has lived a transforming experience of Christ, is capable of speaking about God, about the world of the Spirit, about his own interior experience, with a surprising linguistic singularity.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This is the definition that Elmar Salmann gives it in several of his essays, in particular: Salmann E., “Presenza e critica. Sulle affinità elettive tra filosofia e mistica” [“Presence and Criticism. The Elective Affinities Between Philosophy and Mysticism”] in Collection; *Filosofia e mistica. Itinerari di ricerca [Philosophy and Mysticism. Research Routes]*, Rome 1997, 29-60; “Mistica: esperienza e teoria – storie e figure” [“Mysticism: Experience and Theory – Stories and Figures”], in idem; *Presenza di spirito. Il cristianesimo come gesto e pensiero [Presence of Spirit. Christianity as Gesture and Thought]*, Padua 2000, 193-208.

<sup>6</sup> J.-P. Renouard, *Saint Vincent de Paul maitre de sagesse. Initiation à l'esprit vincentien [Saint Vincent de Paul: Master of Wisdom. Initiation into the Vincentian Spirit]*, Nouvelle Cité, Bruyères-le-Chatel 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the mystical dimension of his thought has not met the attention it deserved from criticism. There are few monographic contributions of value to this theme: we recall the works of Henri Brémond, Jean Calvet, Pierre Defrennes (extensively presented in L. Mezzadri, *La sete e la sorgente II. Alla ricerca delle origini [The Thirst and the Source II. Searching for the Origins]*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1993; *Dizionario storico spirituale vincenziano [Vincenzian Historical Spiritual Dictionary]*, edited by L. Mezzadri, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2003), which were followed by the works of André Dodin, José María Ibañez Burgos, Luigi Mezzadri, Jean-Pierre Renouard, Giuseppe Toscani (analyzed in L. Mezzadri, *La sete e la sorgente I. Introduzione agli studi vincenziani [The Thirst and the Source I. Introduction to Vincenzian Studies]*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1992). The most extensive studies on the mystical experience of Saint Vincent placed within an overall reconstruction of his spirituality are those of Ibañez and Toscani; in particular, the volumes: J. M. Ibañez, *Vicente de Paul. Realismo y encarnación [Vincent de Paul. Realism and Incarnation]*, Ediciones Sigueme, Salamanca 1982; G. Toscani, *La mistica dei poveri [The Mystique of the Poor]*, Alzani, Pinerolo, 1986.

### 3. An Opportune Correction

It happened quite often in the past to present Saint Vincent as an organizer totally separated from Saint Vincent the mystic, as if he were two different persons. It went even further by presenting undeniable "practical" attitudes separate from his "faith vision."

Saint Vincent was not an ordinary priest of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to be enclosed in a rigid cultural framework. What appears evident in his accomplishments is originality. The problem is to verify if this originality could be attributed only to human evolution, which he experienced in his life, or does it reveal something else. Basically, among the spiritual masters of his time, he is the one who has had the greatest spiritual posterity. What was the origin of his fecundity? Is it to be attributed to his ingenious ability to transform the environment or is it the result of an exceptional faith?

When looking for the principle that moves throughout the life journey that Saint Vincent traveled and the people who were affected by his way of living the Gospel, one cannot not find it in God. Access to the mystery of God can never be an "achievement," but only a "gift," a "grace" received, to be desired, requested, inherited.

Saint Vincent united in himself the quality of organizer and the graces of spirituality. In him the realistic man of action coincided with the mystical man of faith. In the authentic Christian experience there is no rift between the life of faith and real life. God help us if that were the case. It would be the cause of serious distortions of the Christian experience. A good administrator can be a charismatic and an authentic mystic is always a realist. Proust used to say that "despites" are always the hidden "because." Applying this maxim to Saint Vincent: is it not "despite" being a mystic that Saint Vincent was a great organizer. He was a brilliant organizer because he was an authentic mystic. The spiritual posterity of Saint Vincent was not deceived when it learned to recognize, behind the father of organized charity, the man of God guided by the Spirit, the passionate follower of Christ and friend of the poor.

#### 4. A Spirituality of Interiority in Action

The ideal of spirituality, until the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, was completely centered on the theme of the “presence of God.” Whereas, with the French School, a language, according to which the summit of Christian life is not to live in the presence of God, but to follow the “Will of God,” begins to prevail. Doing the will of God means to practice the love of God.<sup>8</sup>

There is a radical criticism in Saint Vincent, even if not altogether conscious, about intellectualism and de-incardinated spiritualism of a certain Christian spirituality. Only the practice of charity provides protection from intellectual and spiritual deformations. Saint Vincent was profoundly convinced that charity is everything. He was fascinated by it. He was transformed by it. That is why his words and actions still remain persuasive to this day.

Charity has an external dimension, which is manifested in gestures, in caring, and in service. But, we know that authentic charity possesses also an interior dimension, which is shown in the “heart,” in sentiments,

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<sup>8</sup> In recent decades, research on French spirituality has experienced new impulses and developments: M. Bergamo, *La scienza dei santi. Studi sul misticismo seicentesco [The Science of the Saints. Studies on 17th Century Mysticism]*, Sansoni, Florence 1984; B. Papisogli, *La lettera e lo spirito. Temi e figure del seicento francese [The Letter and the Spirit. Themes and Figures of 17th-Century France]*, Goliardica, Pisa 1986; Idem, *Il fondo del cuore. Figure dello spazio interiore nel Seicento francese [The Depth of the Heart. Figures of Interior Space in 17th-Century France]*, Goliardica, Pisa 1991; Collection, *Il Dio nascosto. I grandi maestri Francesi del Seicento e l'immagine di Dio [The Hidden God. The Great French Masters of the 17th Century and the Image of God]*, De Luca, Rome 2001; Collection, *Pour un vocabulaire mystique au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle [For a Mystical Vocabulary in the 17th Century]*. Seminar of Professeur C. Ossola, Texts collected by F. Trémolières, Aragno, Turin 2004; M. de Certeau, *Le lieu de l'autre. Histoire religieuse et mystique [The Place of the Other: Religious and Mystical History]*, Gallimard-Le Seuil, Paris, 2005; R. Deville, *L'école française de spiritualité [The French School of Spirituality]*, Desclée, Paris 2008 [This is a new edition, revised and augmented. This time the author dedicates a separate chapter to Saint Vincent, the 7<sup>th</sup>, entitled, “Vincent de Paul, un Gascon qui marque son siècle (1581-1660)” [“Vincent de Paul, a Gascon Who Marked his Century (1581-1660)”], pp. 141-156].

in affections, in the measure of love that is put into the concrete things we do. In the “Augustinian century,” Saint Vincent, as all his contemporaries, experienced the fascination of the return to interiority. More than speaking of spirituality *of action*, I believe it is preferable to speak about the spirituality of “*interiority in action.*”<sup>9</sup>

In the spiritual language of 17<sup>th</sup>-century France, the interior man is not a man closed within himself and in his private, passive way confined to his own intimate space. In this context, interior is not opposed to exterior, interiority to exteriority, passivity to activity. That is true in our ordinary language, but not in the spiritual language of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. To speak about interiority does not mean to fall into intimism. On the contrary, the return to the internal is like a catapult which throws one to the external; its curvature on itself and its own interior motions project, paradoxically, outside itself. To live in one’s own interior space is the condition of possibility for ecstasy; that is, the place where the ecstasy movement is realized, which puts the subject into action, precisely, outside himself. The internal and the external, in a certain sense, coincide. The internal “is” the external, the place where the self is positioned in God. One enters into oneself in order to encounter God and then to find him again outside of oneself. In other words, one can get out outside oneself only if one has entered into oneself, one can leave God for God only if one has found Him. For this reason, Saint Vincent insists much on the cultivation of the interior life,

<sup>9</sup> “One cannot not be struck – says Mino Bergamo – when one turns one’s mind to consider religious publications in 17<sup>th</sup>-century France, by the frequency of which, in their titles, the word *intérieur* [interior] recurs ... These recurring appearances are the indication of the fascination exerted, on 17<sup>th</sup>-century religious thought, by the world of the inner being ... Now, I think we can say that interest in the inner life, the question on its impulses, and on the states of the interior life, reached, in the French culture of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, one of its peaks of greatest development. The extraordinary success of the word *intérieur* – used as both an adjective and a noun, becomes one of the key words of the era’s religious language – allows one to sense already what was the breadth and historical significance of this phenomenon” (M. Bergamo, *L’anatomia dell’anima. Da François de Sales a Fénelon* [The Anatomy of the Soul. From Francis de Sales to Fenelon], Il Mulino, Bologna 1991, 13).

on interior attitudes, on the need to purify one's intention, on the virtues to be practiced. From this point of view, one can better understand the famous phrase of Brémond: "It was not the poor who gave him to God, but it is God who gave him to the poor." Saint Vincent was given to the poor. Working for them he consumed himself for God! In this there is all the diversity and all the originality of Saint Vincent de Paul."<sup>10</sup>

In this legacy, entire generations of Missionaries, Daughters of Charity, and members of various associations of Charity have found inspiration to incarnate the Vincentian charism in the changing circumstances in which they found themselves. Even today, defying the wear and tear of time, it can serve as a point of sure reference not only for the Vincentian Family, but also for those who are so easily tempted by the suggestions of present-day theology (or, to express it better, of ideology) of charity that is too anthropocentric and social. "It is mysticism that gave us the greatest of the men of action ..."! (Brémond).

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<sup>10</sup> The Riccardi note can clarify better in what sense we can speak of mysticism. "Vincent is a mystic, a genuine mystic, more authentic even than those who lived the mystical life as a quest for loving union with the divinity, happy to contemplate, love, and enjoy intimacy with God. The union that Vincent sought with the divinity was the search for union with his divine will, not only to contemplate but to do. Because this divine will manifested itself in Christ, who dedicated himself especially to serving the poor, in the same way Vincent tried to do so throughout his life ... Saint Vincent is called to 'consume himself for God' and not to 'lose himself in God' according to the conception of classical and abstract mysticism" (*Perfezione Evangelica [Evangelical Perfection]*). All the thought of Saint Vincent de Paul explained in his own words, edited by C. Riccardi, third edition, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1983, note, XVII-XVIII).