

# *The Mission and Vocation of the Priest According to St. Vincent de Paul*

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## **1. The Christ of St. Vincent**

I had been unaware of it. Then, with as much sincerity and conviction as St. Peter at Caesarea Philippi,<sup>1</sup> I went back to the Church's Profession of Faith which I recite by heart. This is what I discovered. There is in our Creed an anomaly as it were: from the birth of Jesus we move straight away to his suffering and his cross... as if nothing had taken place between these two points of time, these two events. Thirty years of the Gospel passed over in silence. The whole ministry of Jesus left in the dark, or rather summed up in one word: the Cross. Is the cross of Jesus to be the epicentre of our faith which is constantly jolted by the tremors of life? Is it to be the hallmark of an incarnation which redeems?

Simon Peter, speaking for all, passes the test of faith brilliantly. To the question: "Who do you say I am?" he recognises and proclaims the true identity of Jesus: Messiah, Son of the living God, the equivalent of saying that in Jesus God comes as Liberator, as Saviour. Thanks to the Father's revelation Simon Peter is right on target in his reply. Jesus congratulates Peter. Jesus speaks well of Peter. Jesus gives a blessing to Peter who is a rock, solid and dependable for the construction of his Church. But then as the formation stage of the apostles is beginning, Jesus's first lesson concerning the passion and the cross encounters difficulties. Peter reacts immediately, like a bodyguard. Peter moves in front of Jesus, as a barrier. But this generous Peter gets himself smartly put back in his place: "Get behind me!" So Peter is out of alignment. He has overstepped his role. Like a stumbling block he is an obstacle in the way of the cross. In human eyes the cross is a hellish scandal. That is something which we, like Peter, are able to work out. Flesh and blood arrive at that conclusion. The Father does not reveal that. Our ideas about cross and suffering are not those of God. God's ideas are impenetrable. But the Father gives up Jesus his Son for our liberation and our salvation. These come about through death, death on the cross.<sup>2</sup> The liberating and saving action of God is powerfully deployed and is revealed spectacularly from the depths of human degradation.<sup>3</sup> God is absolute love. He

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mt 16:13 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Phil 2:1-11.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ps 68:21; 1 Sm 2:6

gives his life in Jesus Christ in order to save us. Paradox spells mystery — and so the way to come back to God the Father is Jesus Christ, the truth and the life, because that is the way taken by God to come to us.

I have given a lot of attention to this. I am struck when reading and re-reading the writings of St. Vincent both in his letters which have come down to us, the conferences he gave to the Missioners and to the Daughters of Charity as well as the Common Rules which he gave to them, indeed I am fascinated, not so much by St. Vincent's understanding of the poor but by his approach to Jesus Christ. Who more than he is involved in the world of his day? For, like Teresa of Avila, St. Vincent lives in the *milieu divin*. He is in permanent familiarity with him whom he calls "Our Lord," but also "Jesus Christ."

"Remember, Father, that we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

The name of Jesus occurs eight times in that sentence. All his letters begin with the formula: "The grace of our Lord be with you." Even in the course of a letter or a conference, in reference to anything or nothing, he recalls a gospel phrase, an example from the life of Jesus, or one of his sayings. Christ is at the centre of the life, the thinking, and the actions of St. Vincent.

This is not unique. It could be said of many saints or canonised Christians. What is specific about St. Vincent and of the Vincentian identity is the way St. Vincent approaches Jesus Christ, the angle from which he sees and contemplates Jesus Christ. Let us listen to him:

"If Our Lord is asked what did you come on earth to do? To assist the poor... anything else? To assist the poor" and to quote Lk 4:13-18, that is to say the first homily of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth on a Sabbath day. He is given the book of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolls the book, finds the passage where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has consecrated me: he has sent me to bring the Good News to the Poor" and he continues the quotation: the lame walk, etc., and rolling up the scroll, Christ concludes: "This text is being fulfilled today even as you are listening" (which is the proper definition of a homily).

The Christ of St. Vincent is the Christ of Luke. He is the Christ who evangelises the poor. When St. Vincent says "assist" and uses the word "charity"

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<sup>4</sup> SV I, 295. Cf. Letter 197 of St. Vincent in Vol.1 of *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* (1985, Vincentian Conference, New York) (= CCD 1).

he is not speaking in 19th or 20th century language with its whiff of paternalism or materialism: in the 17th century “assistance” implied an active presence. For St. Vincent it meant a concern to see that the Good News should come to the poor not just through words but through deeds.

“Evangelising means making the Gospel effective.” Christ therefore is at the heart of the faith of St. Vincent because Christ is at the heart of his life. In continuity with the apostles St. Vincent gave himself to God in order to follow Jesus, Our Lord. All he seeks is to be a disciple who follows Jesus. When St. Vincent says “Jesus Christ” he is referring to his humanity. Jesus born of Mary in Bethlehem who went around doing good. When St. Vincent says “Our Lord,” he is proclaiming the mystery of faith in the Son of God, the Saviour, the Risen One.<sup>5</sup> St. Vincent was astonished at the divine behaviour of the man Jesus. This is, it seems to me, the key to our deeper understanding of St. Vincent’s conception of the priesthood. He does not separate the priesthood and the spirituality of the priest from the priesthood and the spirituality of the baptised. Here is a more striking fact: he speaks less about priests than do other founders of institutes belonging to the French School. Monsieur Vincent, without using the expression “priesthood of the baptised” or “priesthood of the laity” galvanises his troops into following Christ the Evangeliser of the poor. So, missionaries — both priests and brothers — Daughters of Charity, and members of confraternities of charity are for him, first of all, baptised Christians. The spirituality of Christians is what he proposes to all, “the religion of St. Peter.”

## **2. The common priesthood of the baptised**

It is therefore necessary to distinguish baptismal priesthood from ministerial priesthood (sacrament of Order), which is also called presbyteral priesthood. In the time of St. Vincent, in the years after the Council of Trent, when there was debate between Protestants and Catholics about the sacrament of Order, Protestants denied the sacrament and made the ministries of the pastor simply a role delegated by the community.

“After the great theologians of the Council, Bérulle, St. Vincent, then Jean Jacques Olier, and St. John Eudes were the first in France to approach this problem both at the theological level — however briefly — and at the practical level. To restore the credibility of the priestly ministry, both as regards doctrine and their manner of living, was one of their principal preoccupations: the matter was urgent! And that was part of their spiritual life.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hb 13:8.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bernard KOCH *La spiritualité sacerdotale de Saint Vincent de Paul*, European Session, Le Berceau, 1995.

The spiritual associates of Bérulle or those more or less influenced by him, produced treatises — something not done by Monsieur Vincent — but they wrote little about the presbyteral priesthood. It is especially in their actions and in a few texts that their vision of the priesthood can be seen. The preoccupation of this group, called the French School, is noticeable in some of the main lines of thought about the priesthood.

1. Jesus Christ in our unique High Priest. He is the perfect adorer of the Father, and at same time perfect offerer of sacrifice and perfect victim.<sup>7</sup>
2. All the baptised participate in the priesthood of Christ and in his priestly mission.
3. This priestly mission is exercised through three functions:
  - *Consecrating* the eucharistic body of Christ and *unifying* his mystical body in order to build it up especially through the sacrament of reconciliation. This is a function proper to the ordained ministerial priesthood, acting under the headship of Christ. Union and reconciliation are graces to be received, tasks to be accomplished. This working towards unity and reconciliation belongs to all the baptised.
  - *Offering* both his life and the eucharistic sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> This is a function belonging to all who have been baptised: men, women, those consecrated, those ordained. The Eucharist's connection with life in the concrete is one of the characteristics of the French School. Vatican II expresses this with full authority and insistence.
  - *Teaching*, that is to say speaking out and proclaiming the Good News, evangelising like Christ. This ministry of teaching “through works and through words,” says St. Vincent, belongs to all the baptised and therefore also to ordained ministers, on several counts and in various ways according to one's personal vocation and the mission received at ordination, Laity, both men and women, have a recognised spiritual and corporal ministry exercised in their activities especially through works of charity.

These main lines of thought in the French School are expressed in these three functions of the priestly mission of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. SV XII, 224-225; Hb 10:5-7.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. SV XII, 368, 371-372, 376-377; IX, 5. Conference of St. Vincent *On the Vows* (7 November 1659); *On the Rules of the Daughters of Charity* (3 July 1634) in Joseph Leonard *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, vol. 1 (1938, London; Burns, Oates, Washbourne), 4.

<sup>9</sup> The members of this group of spiritual men of the French School are: Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629), founder of the French Oratory; St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660); Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657), founder

Among those reformers of the clergy and formators of priests in France of the 17th century, St. Vincent has a foremost role. He is not a theoretician and he has not left any dogmatic expose. The work of St. Vincent consisted in activity in the service of the baptised and of those who were also ordained.

The Tuesday Conferences, retreats for ordinands, retreats for priests, seminaries, assistance given to the bishops and to the episcopacy these are clearly specific activities of his on behalf of the ministerial priesthood. But his action is just as outstanding in his other enterprises: confraternities of charity, missions, animation of the Daughters of Charity, etc. St. Vincent does not develop a doctrine of the priesthood of the clergy, nor of the sacrament of Order. He concentrates on showing priests the practical demands of their priesthood and helping them to live these out. From the traditional doctrine of the Church he draws forth every possible consequence on the pastoral and missionary plan. St. Vincent, through his involvement in mission and in charitable works, is a witness who speaks from experience: “this is my belief, this is my experience,” he readily affirms. Unlike de Bérulle and Olier, whose thoughts continually return to the eternal states of the Word incarnate, Monsiuer Vincent places particular stress on the “redeemer” aspect of the Incarnation and the priesthood. For him Jesus is above all the “Redeemer at work,” the “Saviour.” It is under this last title that he invokes him spontaneously in the course of his conferences. Because he is at heart “a missionary,” it is not the virtue of religion which is in the forefront of his conception of priesthood. Rather it is charity, the zeal of the Good Shepherd. And the first task to which his love of God brings him and which is the soul of his activity is the salvation of his brothers and sisters. He therefore insists on the concrete and historical character of the mission of Jesus Christ. And he keeps coming back to the redemptive work of Jesus among people as to a living historical reality, an activity which is today prolonged through the priesthood.

### **3. The apostolic and missionary aspect of the priesthood according to the experience of St. Vincent**

When history catches up with Monsieur Vincent he makes this admission: “If I had known what it was (the priesthood) when I had the temerity to enter it — as I have come to know since then — I would have preferred to till the soil than to commit myself to such a formidable state of life.”<sup>10</sup> St. Vincent recalls the stages of his life. He knows how much he owes to his native soil and to his family. He recalls his days of study at Dax and Toulouse. He sees again the

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of the Society of Saint-Sulpice; St. John Eudes (1601-1680), founder of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (Eudists).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. SV V, 568. Letter 2027 of St Vincent (1658) in CCD 5, 569.

rather “careerist” path he took and his moving up to Paris. How he had lived through the experience of being shunned because of an unjust accusation of theft; how he had endured the dark night of doubts against the faith. How after a journey full of torment he had found peace. Having thought he could make an honest retirement out of life, was it not life which was going to burn him up? He gives himself to God and decides to devote his life to the poor. In 1617, with the experiences of Gannes-Folleville and Châtillon-les-Dombes, liberation comes. At Folleville, he experiences the extent of the spiritual barrenness of the countryside and the ignorance of the clergy. His reflex is that of a priest; thanks to Madam de Gondi, he throws himself along with others into the mission. At Châtillon, he experiences the shock of poverty. St. Vincent’s reflex is that of a “layman”; thanks to female backing, he launches the Confraternity of Charity. Mission and Charity from then on are going to be the two complementary expressions of his human and spiritual experience. They find concrete expression in his institutions: Congregation of the Mission (1625), and the Company of the Daughters of Charity (1633). It is time of achievement.

It was concrete experiences as a missionary that directed his thoughts about priesthood. This was an experience which St. Vincent lived out with the baptised and in particular with lay men and women and with the poor. Mission is the concern of all the baptised, and obviously of priests.

a) Through baptism the faithful are clothed in Jesus Christ who consecrates them and identifies them with Jesus. He makes his life flow through them so that his mystical body builds itself up.<sup>11</sup>

b) Through their identification with Jesus the baptised are also consecrated to the work of Jesus. Following him and like him they make a offering of their life. In their own limited way they reproduce the action of Jesus the unique priest.<sup>12</sup> All the baptised are priests with Jesus Christ. This baptismal priesthood is expressed through a total consecration of oneself. Thus the vows of the brothers and priests of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity concretise this baptismal priesthood. The offering of oneself and of one’s life is a total gift to God.

c) If it is the ordained priest alone who consecrates the bread and the wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, all the baptised offer not only their life but the Eucharist, along with the priest and with Christ.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. SV XII, 224-225, Conference 204 *Mortification* (2 May 1659) in Burns, Oates, Washbourne, 118.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. SV XII, 368; Rm 12:1; Hb 5:1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. SV IX, 5; XII, 376-377. Conference I, *Explanation of Rule* (31 July 1634), J. Leonard, *Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, London 1938, 4.

d) Baptism, being the result of a choice by God constitutes a source of vocations and of mission and also therefore of ministries both non-ordained and ordained. St. Vincent constantly recalls to his missionaries both brothers and priests as well as to the Daughters of Charity that the service of Christ in the person of the most deprived makes the Gospel effective. That is to say that the baptised are apostles, prophets, witnesses who proclaim through their lives and their various works that, like Christ, they belong to God and not to themselves. The driving force and the purpose of their existence and their life is Jesus Christ, Crucified and Resurrected.

“Vincentians” respond to a personal appeal of Christ, seeking to welcome him into themselves and to let him live in them and to serve him in the person of the poor. They nourish themselves intensely, assiduously on Jesus Christ through prayer, meditation, study and reflexion on the Word of God, regular frequentation of the sacraments especially Eucharist and Reconciliation, in order to be sure that their only motive is to welcome him and meet him.

#### **4. The Ministerial Priesthood according to St. Vincent**

The word which St. Vincent uses to define the priest is “instrument”:  
*“God has sent out priests as he sent his son for the salvation of souls.”<sup>14</sup> “We are used for this like instruments through which the Son of God continues throughout all time to do from heaven what he has done during his life on earth.”<sup>15</sup>*

This “instrument” of Jesus Christ is by no means inert, interchangeable, irresponsible. It is an instrument chosen by the Lord and intended by him to be intelligent, free, responsible. And Vincent was to stress that *“priests are irreplaceable in their role with the souls to whom God has given them.”<sup>16</sup>*

He becomes more explicit: *“We have been chosen by God as instrument of his boundless charity which to establish it in hearts and with it to dilate souls... Our vocation therefore is to enflame the hearts of men, to do what the Son of God has done, he who came to cast fire on the earth.... It is true then that I have been sent not only to love God but to procure that he be loved. It is not enough that I love God if my neighbour does not also love him”.*<sup>17</sup>

The condition required for being an instrument of Jesus Christ? To put oneself, like Christ, into the hand of God, to be intimately united with him in the

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<sup>14</sup> SV VIII, 33; Letter 2910, CCD 8, 41.

<sup>15</sup> SV XII, 80.

<sup>16</sup> SV XI, 134.

<sup>17</sup> Cf SV XII, 262; Conference 207 *Charity* (30 May 1659), Burns, Oates, Washbourne, 160-1.

course of pastoral action. This docility in order to remain constant needs to be kept disciplined relentlessly and daily at Mass. Through the celebration of the Eucharist and communion we are located at the heart of the Covenant with the Lord who was obedient unto death through love of us and for our salvation.

Without this docility, without this obedience, the priest fails in his mission which is to “make” the Eucharistic Body of Christ by the consecration, and the Mystical Body by animation.

Priestly spirituality and sanctification result from these two inseparable aspects. So much so that according to St. Vincent the way to priestly sanctity, and the example they must follow, is not so much Christ Evangeliser of the Poor but Christ the Priest. Priests must be conformed to him, imitating his religious attitude towards his Father and his charity towards people.<sup>18</sup> Here can be seen the influence of Bérulle who links adoration and mission; but also and especially St. Vincent’s meditation on the Mass. At the very beginning of the eucharistic prayer the priest invites the faithful to be united in their prayers as they offer the sacrifice of the whole Church. The response of the faithful is: “For the glory of God and the salvation of the world.”

Mission and charity are at the heart of the prayer and the life of priests as they are at the heart of the sacrifice of the Unique High Priest, Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd.

## **5. Conclusion**

It is with Baptism as its basis that St. Vincent founds the mission. Brothers, priests, Daughters of Charity, laity in the confraternities and others are through baptism rooted in the life of God and are called to follow Jesus Christ.

It is from Christ the High Priest for the “making,” by the consecration of his eucharistic body and the up-building of his mystical body that St. Vincent sees the fulfilment of the ordained priest’s baptismal vocation. The way in which the priest must put on Jesus Christ is to conform his life to that of Christ who is totally given over to God, and totally given over to people. St. Vincent stressed the redemptive aspect of the incarnation and hence the presbyteral priesthood.

Priests are therefore, in the midst of the baptised “the instruments through whom the Son of God continues to carry out from heaven throughout every century what he himself has done on earth during his life.”<sup>19</sup> In that capacity they

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Abelly, III, VIII, 72

<sup>19</sup> Cf. SV XII, 80.

unite mission and charity. It is a matter of extending the kingdom of Christ, of broadening it, of thinking out and living out the Gospel on a worldwide scale.<sup>20</sup>

I now have a better understanding why the Christian Confession of Faith (our Creed) moves from the incarnation of Jesus to his redemptive sacrifice. I also understand Peter who finds the mystery of the cross a stumbling block. The Church — a mother who teaches joy and hope to the world — has given us an identity sign for both the mystery of God’s “inventive” love and of our vocation and mission: the Sign of the Cross.

*The Sign of the Cross:* which is a gesture and a prayer.

- *A gesture:* I trace over myself the Sign of the Cross from the forehead to the breast, from one shoulder to the other. I associate my body with an action which is an affirmation and at the same time a message. An affirmation of what I am and a message which signifies this. I affirm publicly, because physically, that I am a Christian. My body, my life, “me” understood in all their dimensions.

This sign is also the recalling of the cross of Jesus. It is the first sign which was traced on me as I entered the Church at my baptism. I mark myself thus because I have been marked. The Cross is the sign *par excellence* of the redemptive Incarnation.

This Sign of the Cross is inscribed onto time and space. It comes down from the Christians of the early Church. It has been transmitted to me. Today it is actualised in the space where I live. It has a spatial symbolism. I trace on myself the sign of the Cross, on me who am situated in the world of today. It indicates the North, the South, the East and the West. It reminds me of the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of my being. It takes hold of my person, my individual existence with persons and the existences of all my fellow men in a “cosmic” totality. I belong, as is indicated by the four cardinal points, to the universe, to creation; I affirm myself along with all the other brothers as an actor in their creation for its integral development right to its ultimate destiny. Without a word being spoken I am already proclaiming the universality of salvation which is acquired in Jesus Christ.

- *A word:* I make the Sign of the Cross while pronouncing these words: “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” Thus I inscribe on myself the sign of Christ with a trinitarian formula which leads me into the very mystery of God. I am held into this mystery of God as I affirm his Unity of Nature and Trinity of Persons. I proclaim that I belong to the one God in three persons. Christian Faith is trinitarian. My vocation is therefore divine. I

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<sup>20</sup> Frederick Ozanam in the 19th century yearned to see the world embraced in a network of charity.

am inserted into the divine milieu. This profession of faith indicates both that I am created in the image and likeness of God but also thanks to Jesus Christ, eternal Son of God, my human condition, marked by death, takes on a God-like condition. I become, says Paul, son in the Son. I am with Christ in Christ, through the Christ who is the bearer of this mystery of God among my brothers.

- *A gestured prayer:* The Sign of the Cross is a prayer of body and spirit. I associate my body in my profession of faith. I believe with all my being. I affirm physically my adherence to the mystery of God. Paul stated it very well in his letter to the Christians of Ephesus: “Kneeling before the Father... in the abundance of his glory may he through his Spirit, enable you to grow firm in power with regard to your inner self, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith and then planted in love and built on love, with all God’s holy people you will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; so that knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God.”<sup>21</sup> Might I make bold to say that Paul is expressing a trinitarian theology (the mystery of the love of God) with a spacial geometry? St. Vincent says to the sisters “they are gathered in the name of the Most Holy Trinity to honour Our Lord and serve him in the person of the poor. For Our Lord is the perfect expression of the love relationship which God is. To the missionaries, brothers and priests, he said:

*“We have been chosen by God as instruments of his boundless charity, to establish it in hearts, and with it to dilate souls... Our vocation therefore is to go... through the entire earth... to inflame the hearts of men, to do what the Son of God has done....”*<sup>22</sup> To the priests he recalls: *“There is nothing greater than a priest, to whom he has given full power over both his individual and mystical Body, the power of forgiving sins.”*

The Spirit of the Father and of the Son consecrates us to adoration and to mission for the glory of God and the salvation of the world, most of all the poor. Great is this mystery of Faith!

(STANISLAUS BRINDLEY, C.M., translator)

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<sup>21</sup> Cf Eph 3:14-19.

<sup>22</sup> Cf SV XII, 262; Conference 207 *Charity* (30 May 1659); Burns, Oates, Washbourne, 160-161. Cf. Jacques Delarue, *L’ideal missionnaire du prêtre, d’après Saint Vincent de Paul*, Paris 1946; Cf. Jean Pierre Renouard, *Prier 15 jours avec Saint Vincent de Paul*, Paris, Nouvelle Cité.