

Saint Vincent, Priest of Charity
at the Service of the Poor
Caring for Spiritual and Temporal Needs

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Vincent, a member of the French school, sees the priest as a ‘person of cult,’ who has to be holy in order to deal with holy things. One’s priesthood is a participation in the priesthood of the Son of God, characterized by grandeur and dignity. However, the experience of serving Christ in the person of the poor (above all, from the time of Gannes-Folleville and Châtillon-les-Dombes) brought Monsieur Vincent to another line of theological understanding, rooted in the incarnation of the Son of God. In this thought, ministry and service, charity and self-denial are more important than dignity. For Vincent, “the grandeur and dignity” of his priesthood came to be defined as effective charity in favor of the needy: “To go to God is to serve the poor.” This is what Vincent’s faith and experience taught him.

When Vincent emptied himself and let himself be invaded by God, he began to see the world in a whole different manner than he had up until then. He acquired the “*gospel meaning of the poor.*”

Vincent “turned over the medal, and in the light of faith, contemplated the poor as ‘icons’ of Jesus Christ, images of the Lord, who chose to be poor and to manifest himself through the poor...” The poor person is in Christ, and Christ is in the poor person. The poor are the privileged place for the encounter with God and with Jesus Christ. In this sacrament of the poor, Christ questions us and demands answers. The path of God, for Vincent, by necessity passes by way of the one hungering for justice and solidarity, thus restoring one’s dignity.

Vincent, out of his faith and experience, and in the light of the incarnation of God’s Son, discovered a new meaning of ‘the poor.’ Thanks to his gospel experience of the poor person as sacrament of Christ, he lived a priestly spirituality of union with God. This life was centered not in contemplation or adoration, and not in dignities or privileges, but in personal service of the needy, in social commitment, in effective charity.

The experience of the poor had become primordial in his priestly ministry, and in it he found the meaning of his priesthood and of his life: to follow Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor, to serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. This discovery made it more evident to him that “poor people are dying of hunger and are condemned,” and that he would dedicate all his life to help ease

their miseries by an evangelization that today we would call “liberating” and “integral promotion of human life.” From that time on the poor are for Vincent “his burden and his suffering.”

Vincent, missionary of the poor, brings a message of liberation, just as Jesus proclaimed in Nazareth (Lk 4:18-19). But Vincent is also the “good Samaritan” (Lk 10:25-38), who drew close to those wounded by so many injustices in his society, thus giving them the tenderness of his heart and Christian hope, as well as corporal remedies. Vincent wants “to make the gospel effective,” looking out “for both body and soul.”

Vincent practiced this work with love and asked that it be done that way, since “we have been chosen by God as instruments of his immense and fatherly charity, which desires to reign in souls and enlarge them” (SV XII, 262). And it is a work that has to go on forever, since “charity cannot remain idle, but must move us to salvation and to the consolation of others” (SV XII, 265). “It is certain that I have been sent, not only to love God, but to make God loved” (SV XII, 262).

The evangelization that Vincent practiced embraced the totality of the person, “in such a way that, if there are some among us who believe that they are in the Mission to evangelize the poor and not to take care of them, to help heal their spiritual needs but not their temporal needs, I will tell you clearly: we have to assist them and to make sure they are cared for in any way, we and others. To do this is to evangelize by word and by work. It is the most perfect way. That is what our Lord practiced, and it is the same way of evangelizing that those who represent him on earth, the priests, must practice. And I have heard it said that which helps bishops become holy is giving alms.” (SV XII, 87-88).

Vincent did nothing else but follow the example of Jesus Christ, who was concerned for every person and for all persons, Not only by preaching and teaching, but also by providing food for the hungry, curing the sick, and above all, defending the dignity of the human person, even on the Sabbath.

1. “It seems to me that I would offend God if I did not everything possible for the poor country people.” (SV IV, 586-587).

Perhaps Vincent did not realize that his activity on behalf of the poor was a “pioneer work” in the Church, and that his “effective charity” would have left such a profound imprint on our Christian society. However, Vincent de Paul really was a revolutionary of charity. He sowed the seeds of love and justice that have since borne abundant fruit in the Church, thanks to the spirit which he left in his “sons and daughters” and in all who are inspired by his charism.

Charity, with which the Church identifies the charism of St. Vincent, cannot be reduced to a solely interior and spiritual phenomenon. Rather, his charity is a social public response as to how Christianity might humanize society. The charity of Vincent is a charity that engenders justice. Charity does not consist for him in “ecstasy,” but in using the strength of his arms, in order to reestablish a little more justice in the world each day.

Vincent always felt he owed something to the poor: “It seems to me that I would offend God if I did not do everything possible for the poor country people” (SV IV, 586-587).

Vincent’s whole life was full of “social actions,” but there are some that have special meaning. It is impossible to present them all here in detail. Here is a brief list of some of the efforts well known to all Vincentians: accomplishments like Châtillon-les-Dombes, Mâcon, his work with the galley slaves and with the abandoned babies, the Hospital of the Name of Jesus, the education and promotion of women, the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Daughters of Charity. All of these works bring back to mind the prodigious activity of Vincent on behalf of the poor.

2. With the Poor, to Save the Poor.

The good news essentially is an announcement of liberation. The Lucan passage, (4:18-19), is considered by St. Vincent as the founding text of his Congregation. He often refers to it in order to explain how our vocation is a continuation of Jesus’ vocation. (SV XI, 135; XII, 79, 367).

Good news for the poor? What a program! To go and announce that they are free, when they are chained by ignorance, by evil, by misery. St. Vincent, guided by the reality around him, proposed concrete social actions of liberation. With his “Mission and Charity,” he brought light to the blind and heralded their freedom.

Vincent suffered with the suffering poor. He wore himself out to liberate them by finding solutions for their disgrace through organized charity, by tending to the great multitude of the hungry due to wars, by bringing consolation to prisoners and galley slaves by means of an interior liberation born of faith.

Vincent enjoyed presenting Sr. Jeanne Dalmagne as a model of prophetic action. “She had a great freedom of spirit, in anything that refers to the glory of God.... One day, when she learned that some rich persons had been exempted from paying taxes and thus were now overburdening the poor, she boldly

informed them that this was contrary to justice and that God would judge them for their abuses. And when I asked her where all this courage came from, she responded that when we are dealing with God's glory and the good of the poor, we never have to be afraid to speak the truth" (SV IX, 192).

Sr. Jeanne certainly learned from Vincent this freedom of spirit to defend the poor, even in facing the powerful.

Jean Anouilh, who wrote the script for the dialogues in the film, *Monsieur Vincent*, has him say the following, after his meeting with Sr. Marguerite Naseau. "Thank you, my God, for having sent this poor girl to me. She has understood in her simplicity what I not had comprehended. It is with the poor that I will save the poor."

The liberating work of St. Vincent asks the following of us: read what is happening now as "signs of the times"; help the poor evangelize the poor; live in real company with each other, in fraternity; the work of liberation embraces every one; it is a common undertaking, like the Church; it is done with sensitivity, with attention to every person., with prudence, with care for details, with patience, and willingness to take risks; always keep an eye on the spirituality; enable the poor to get work; give alms only for those who are not able to work. All of these values constitute the basis of Vincentian social action.

3. We are working for justive, not for mercy.

The true thinking of St. Vincent about justice in synthesized in one phrase, truly surprising for a man of the 16th century: "May God grant us the grace to move our hearts in favor of the miserable and to believe that, in giving them relief, we are doing justice and not mercy!" (SV VII, 98).

"You cannot have charity if it is not accompanied by justice" (SV II, 54).

Vincent, motivated by Jesus Christ, made a radical option for the poor, which was for life. Vincent would not have understood that which today is called "preferential option" or "non-exclusive option." The option of Vincent was serious and real: he opted for the poor. If we look closely at his writings and examine his life in the context of his social reality, we can see that he was a great defender of justice. This was so true that some people would say that social justice would not be so developed today if not for Vincent's inventive genius in his specific form of charity.

Vincent was poor, and saw first hand the injustices suffered by his fellow countrymen of Landes. Granting this presumption, some conclude that

Vincentian charity is organized not only for the poor, but also by a poor person. Vincent, a poor person from among the poor, knew well that the meaning of human dignity remains alive even in the midst of poverty. Moreover, in the poor one there is a secret dignity and a certain pride that one has to respect and to make respected. That is why there is need to be very sensitive and respectful with them, above all when giving them the financial help they need.

“I know by experience and by birth, since I am the son of a poor farmer and lived in the country until I was 15 years old” (SV IX, 81).

Vincentian charity, then, even before it is for the poor, is by the poor. Vincent, a poor person, perceived sadly the injustice done the poor, as well as the merits, values, pride, and dignity of the poor, although their dignity was not acknowledged by others.

The young man Vincent was one of those privileged of his time, since he was able to rise up from his condition of being illiterate and was able to advance to what other families of his town could only dream of for their children. Vincent saw that the simple act of studying, in order to arrive at a certain level of knowledge and of culture, would open doors for him, earn him respect, and restore his dignity. He often speaks, in his conferences and correspondence, of the time when he was a “worthless object.” He knew that, without his studies, he would have had to pass all his life in the hard conditions of the country people, like the great majority of his friends in Puoy.

Is the saint of charity also the saint of justice? Apparently St. Vincent insists more on charity than on justice., But in reality he places justice in the first place. He asks us to believe that when we give relief to the poor we are doing justice and not mercy. And he says this two years before his death, when he has more clarity in everything, thanks to his faith and his experience. Justice stands first as Vincent looks back at the meaning of his life.

4. The rights of the poor

Vincent was accustomed to look at poverty head on, searching for its causes and proposing appropriate remedies. In the midst of the calamities oppressing France, Vincent becomes the real “Father of the Fatherland,” by all that he did on behalf of humanity in the multiple areas of his prodigious activity.

The famous human rights that the revolutionaries bragged about having invented, but which they did not respect, Monsieur Vincent quietly brought about “from his faith and experience.” He gradually introduced them into his

social plans and proposals as the goal of everyone's charity, making human rights become recognized as obvious and evident. Some examples follow.

- The right to life is, among all rights, the fundamental right for Vincent. Because he believed in the God of life, he himself fought untiringly, and sought collaborators who would commit themselves to the same fight for life, combating the death that besieged children of his time, finding remedies for the hunger of beggars and immigrants, alleviating galley slaves and prisoners of the torments and jeers heaped on them, providing education and work where possible, etc.
- We know very well of the work of Vincent in relation to abandoned babies. We know his work with the field workers as well as the occupational therapy he created for senior citizens, the organization and attention on behalf of the sick, the defense of prisoners and galley slaves, the respect for all the poor, especially the most miserable. We can affirm that every work of his was pro-life and for the dignity of the poor.
- The poor have the right to their daily bread. But they were dying of hunger because of the wars. Vincent organized the distribution of soup and other necessary provisions for them.
- The poor have the right to health. But their lives were tossed between two epidemics, the pestilence and multiple sicknesses. Vincent organized hospitals, and care for them at home.
- The poor have the right to a place to live. But they were driven from their lands and homes by the ongoing wars, and became immigrants and wanderers. Vincent organized welcome and placement for the incoming masses of refugees.
- The poor have the right to a decent old age. But just like the babies, the elderly were abandoned to make their own way. Vincent organized hospices and little hostels, where the elderly were cared for with tenderness by the Daughters of Charity.
- The poor have the right to work. The wars laid waste to the fields and left the people without any recourse. All that was left was hunger, unemployment, and pillaging. Vincent tried to work on all these fronts, giving immediate response to those cases that could not wait, and providing the means so that fieldworkers would be able to cultivate their lands and earn their own sustenance. Vincent sent his missionaries to distribute seeds, plows, tools, distaffs for spinning, and utensils for weaving, with the result that the country people could stand on their own

again.

- The poor have the right to education. But in those times illiteracy had grown in France to 80% of the population. Vincent and Louise de Marillac established schools for poor children. We remember that Marguerite Naseau learned to read and write by herself and then dedicated herself to teach others what she had learned. Since the majority of the Daughters of Charity were simply country girls and neither knew how to read nor write, they were sent to the Ursuline Sisters to learn and then to teach the orphaned children. Consequently, in a country that was mainly illiterate, the children called “cursed by God” by society came to learn to read and to write, thanks to the inventive love of Vincent and the solidarity and support of his Daughters. And Vincent told them that they should feel unworthy of this work, since the teachers of these children should really be the angels of God, such was their dignity!

The creation of literacy workshops became the norm for the Ladies of Charity. We know this by reading the rules of the Charities of Folleville, Paillart, Servillers, Mâcon and others. Moreover, the children who received this help were asked to swear, with their parents agreeing, that they would teach others the skills which they had learned. It was really a community effort with a lot of participation.

5. Alms are not for those who are able to work.

Vincent insisted on a holistic approach, trying to enable the poor to take care of themselves, with the help of their own jobs.

“On the 26th of April, 1651, Vincent writes from Paris to Marc Coglée, superior of Sedan. “While waiting to be able to share your letters with the ladies who are helping the people in the ruined border areas and to find out from them whether you might extend your distribution to Huguenots, as well as to Catholics, and to the poor people who can work on the fortifications, as well as to the sick and infirm, I can tell you that their original intention was to assist only those who cannot work nor earn their living and would be in danger of dying of starvation if someone did not assist them. In fact, as soon as anyone is strong enough to work, tools of his trade are bought for him and nothing more is given to him. And so, the alms are not for those able to work on the fortifications or to do something else, but only for seriously ill sick persons, orphans and the elderly” (SV IV, 182-183).

Vincent recommends that the “distribution of goods has to be organized” and, in a show of confidence for his missionaries who were close to the people,

he said to them: “I approve whatever you decide together.”

It must be emphasized that for Vincent the poor had to be cared for because they were poor, “whether Huguenot or Catholic.” This is what the documents of Puebla reaffirm: “For this reason alone, the poor merit preferential care, whatever the moral or personal situation they might be in when you meet them. Made in the image and likeness of God to be his children, in them God’s image is reflected and enfolded. This is why God defends them and loves them. This is also why the poor are to be the first destination of the Church’s mission and why their evangelization is above all the sign and proof of the mission of Jesus” (Doc. Puebla, 1142).

Vincent emphasizes that we have to know very well who are the most poor, “who can neither work or seek out their sustenance.” For charity to be effective, it must know the exact needs of each place and of each person. Goods should never be given to those who can work. To them tools should be given that will enable them to work: to the men, tools to cultivate the earth; to the women, distaffs, burlap and wool for weaving. He also asks them to save some of what they earn, so that they can keep going once they have reached some equilibrium. A very interesting note: Vincent asks that the records and news of what they accomplish be spread about as positive publicity and fund-raisers.

Vincent worked very hard not only to make sure that alms went to those who really needed them and to organize the human advancement of the working poor, but he also took on an important role for his time that today we call structure change.

6. War and peace

In general we can call St. Vincent’s century a century of wars: religious wars, civil wars, foreign wars, and the ongoing threat of Islam against Christianity.

Vincent, who had consecrated his life to the poor, had to concern himself with those whom the wars left in great misfortune. He collaborated with others and even organized collections himself that he would send off to towns that were most harmed by the war. We have written accounts of his companions being sent to these places. Their work also included evangelization and celebration of the sacraments, burying the dead, caring for the survivors, and providing what was necessary to get people back to work, thanks to the seeds and implements sent by Vincent. In Paris, Vincent gave shelter to refugees, to noblemen, to religious women, and to girls in danger.

It was not that Vincent was looking for ways to get involved in politics and social structures. The poor kept bringing him into their reality, which was undoubtedly political. Vincent could not remain passive while the people were dying on all sides.

Vincent did try to go a step further to put an end to these horrible situations. He went to Cardinal Richelieu for help. Students of St. Vincent consider this episode to be Vincent's first intentional participation in politics.

During the war of *The Fronde* (1648-1653), a war of rivals struggling for power, St. Vincent is bolder than ever. As the people experience all sorts of suffering, Vincent approaches the "cordially detested" Prime Minister Mazarin, and asks him to resign in order to save the poor people. For J. Mauduit, this solution that Vincent proposed was "one of the greatest political acts of the century."

Seeing that the negotiations were not going anywhere, Vincent went to Pope Innocent X (August 16, 1652). He described for him the pathetic calamities of the divided kingdom: the provinces laid waste, everything destroyed and burned, the violence of the soldiers, the workers unable to plant crops, the dishonored virgins, the rapes, the torture, the lack of moral restraint. Of course, all of this simply intensified the suffering of the poor.

Another of Vincent's "political" interventions came about in 1653 when the fiery Cardinal de Retz, escaping from Mazarin, sought asylum at the Vincentian house in Rome. Mazarin wanted to get revenge and ordered the Priests of the Mission in Rome to abandon their house. St. Vincent approached Mazarin. He spoke to him long and hard and the cardinal conceded, allowing the Roman house to remain open.

Vincent's desire for peace had nothing to do with a blind pacifism. We see this in his dealings with Islam. One must not be surprised that Vincent might have a warlike project in mind at the end of his life, after having fought for peace in so many ways.

In 1658, Brother Barreau, a consul from Algiers, was taken prisoner by the Turks once again. The youngest brother of Le Vacher brothers, Philippe, returned to France to take up a collection to free Brother Barreau. Vincent did the publicity and printed a flyer asking for the collaboration of people of Paris. But the collection was not only for Brother Barreau. In Algiers there were thousands of French captives. The plight of these countrymen saddened Vincent, but it was impossible to ransom them all.

It was at this time that a gentleman named de Paul offered to go with an

armed expedition to free the French captives. Vincent looked at this project as the only means to solve the problem of slavery in Algiers. Various distractions delayed the expedition. Vincent did not lose hope, and he worried about the situation of the prisoners in Algiers. His last letter concerning this is dated September 17, 1660, only ten days before his death. The plans for the expedition broke up, but Vincent was not to know this, and he died taking with him the illusion of freeing the slaves of Algiers. Vincent thus left undone this last enterprise of his life. We ask ourselves “what drove the gentle and charitable Vincent to support this armed expedition?” The response would be the fruit of the experience he had lived because he had learned that the Turks did not value diplomacy, nor money, and so the only way could be an armed expedition.

7. Vincentian characteristics

In his social work on behalf of the needy, Vincent has left his imprint and so there comes into being ‘a Vincentian way’ to do charity and to offer service to the poor.

- ***Start from the reality:*** hear in the cries of the poor the voice of God and interpret happenings as “signs of the times.”

- ***Compassion and solidarity*** are two principal attitudes that Vincent demands of all those who wish to live out their faith in ☐social action,☐ that is, in ☐effective charity.☐ Vincent is a practical theologian, and from the theology of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, Vincent draws the obvious consequence of solidarity.

- ***Happiness, tenderness, respect, cordiality, and devotion*** are traits asked of those in service of the poor, because ☐they are our masters.☐ ☐Yes, my sisters, they are our masters. For this reason you are to treat them with gentleness and kindness☐ (SV IX, 119).

- ***Personal contact with the poor*** was definitive in Vincent’s life. Such contact is irreplaceable for in the meeting with the poor person there is a sacramental meeting with Jesus himself. This is why Vincent puts his missionaries and all their followers in contact with the poor. Remember the visitation of the houses.

- ***Affective love and effective love.*** Vincent has a sixth sense for the poor which moves affective love to effective love. Vincent sees the poor person in a fresh and singular manner, as if each one were the only poor

person he has to attend to. In this he follows the example of his teacher, Jesus Christ.

8. Conclusion

It is profitable for us today to make this quick journey through Vincent's life and see him as a priest who evangelizes in a unique way: by being concerned not only with "the spiritual" but also with "the material needs" of persons; by trying to bestow on the poor in a practical way those rights which were theirs in theory; and by becoming very involved in the affairs of his day as an artisan of peace.

If only we sons of Vincent, in this Jubilee Year of justice and solidarity, might follow the example, spirit, and incredible consistency of our founder, by working together not only to alleviate the evils provoked by injustice, selfishness, and wars, but also by dedicating ourselves to search out and attack the causes of the multiple poverties of our times.

What is lacking among Christians and also among us Vincentians is a solid "political formation." We have to convince ourselves that our faith has a social dimension, that it urges us to be a part of the search for the common good, in the defense of the rights of the poor masses.

Using a mistaken concept of what holiness is, one could ask: "Why should saints get mixed up in the temporal affairs of human rights, justice, wars, and peace? This is the business of kings, the military and politicians, but not of saints." There is no better way to correct this false vision of holiness than to recall the message of the Synod of Bishops of 1985, addressed to the whole People of God: "*Today, the Spirit leads us to discover clearly that holiness is not possible without a commitment to justice, without solidarity with the poor and oppressed.*"

- If this is so, and Jesus himself confirms this when he says that "what we do to the poor we do to him, and what we do not do to the poor, we do not do to him" (Mt 25:40-45), then the holiness of Vincent, the saint of solidarity with human misery and the servant of the poor, his "Lords and Masters," must be very great. Justice and solidarity are inseparable from Christian charity, which is the fountain of all holiness.

- Vincent was involved in the problems of his time, and because of

his faith he acted not only on an individual level, but also worked at what today we call “political charity” or “the politics of charity.” This is why he continually worked for peace and justice, for the common good of society.

- Today, thanks to a better knowledge of Vincent and history and sociology, Vincent can be recognized as more than one who gave assistance well. His work also promoted structural changes. Something is very clear in Vincent. Everything he did was for the poor, who were “his burden and his sorrow.” He spent his life for the poor, and for them he knocked on doors and begged. Vincent knew from his faith and experience that the priest plays a fundamental role in the advancement of human development. Evangelization must be integral, liberating, with a powerful presence of social action and justice. The priest who follows St. Vincent will confront whatever evil afflicts God’s people. He will be an agent of social change. This is what Vincent tried to be in the troubled times he lived in.

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