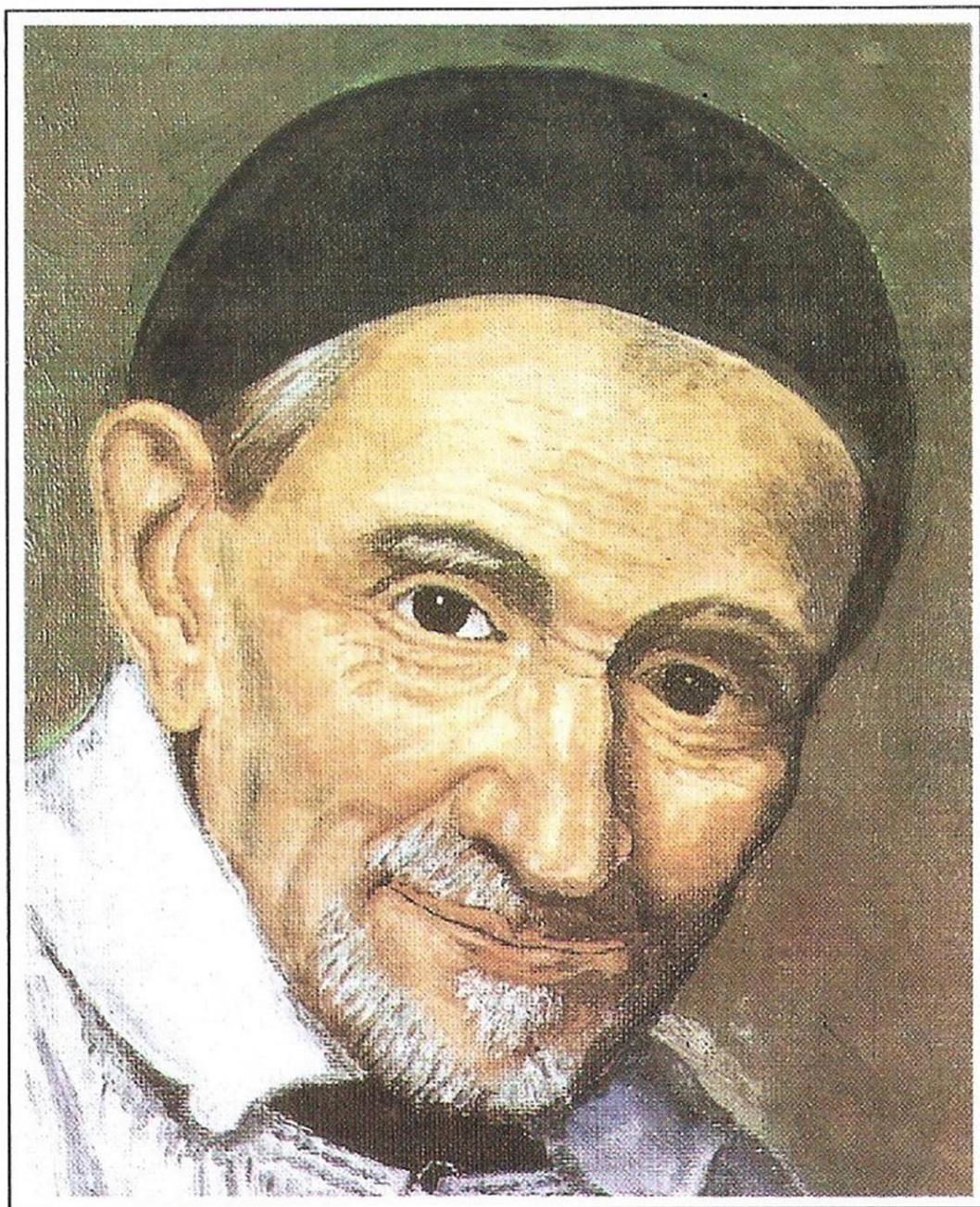


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FEATURE:

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The Clergy in the France of St. Vincent

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For a serious look at the state of the clergy at the beginning of the seventeenth century, at the time that St. Vincent began his pastoral ministry, we must consider two things: the juridical situation and the situation as it actually existed.

The clergy, as the Assembly of the Estates General of 1615 recognized it, was the “first order” of the kingdom of France. It thereby enjoyed prestige and privileges. It was autonomous in the juridical and fiscal spheres, it could act freely in the spiritual ambit, and the laws of the Church were protected by the state.

The situation in fact was different. To get an idea we must put aside the indignation of the moralists, (“all” priests were ignorant, drunkards, undisciplined). We ignore, too, the lashes of the preachers, the criticisms of the religious, the interesting judgements of Protestants, the amusing stories of novelists.

The time frame that we will deal in is from the end of the Middle Ages to the first years of St. Vincent. In our examination we will ignore the facile reliance on anecdotes and generalizations, and will look rather for objective causes and judgments on which we can base some conclusions.¹

1. The Bishops

At the beginning of the 17th century there were in France 14 archdioceses and 105 dioceses. There were very small dioceses (Grasse had 23 parishes) and very large ones (Rouen has 1380 parishes). The standards used to determine the selection of bishops² in the order of their importance were the following: political, intellectual, moral.

¹ M. Aubrun, *La paroisse en France des origines au XV^e siècle*, Paris 1986; J. Chelini, *Histoire religieuse de l'Occident médiéval*, Paris 1991; AA.VV., *Le clerc séculier au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1993; F. Rapp, “Réformes et inerties,” in AA.VV., *Histoire du christianisme*, VII: *De la réforme à la Réformation (1450-1530)*, Paris 1994, 143-207.

² For what concerns the role of St. Vincent in the reform of the episcopate: P. Blet, “Vincent de Paul et l'épiscopat de France,” in *Vincent de Paul. Actes du colloque international d'études vincentiennes*, Paris 25-26 September 1981, Rome 1983, 81-114.

Very many dioceses were awarded as prizes by the King as a recompense for services rendered to the family or to the person. The *customary approval* came before the “sweet and well-disposed prayers” for the election of the candidate. So the son of the King’s attorney was chosen for Rouen, evidently as a reward for all that he did for the monarchy.

For this reason the dioceses often became the prerogatives of important families. As the Amboises had control of Rouen, Langres, Albi and Clermont from the 1400’s to the beginning of the 1500’s, so from the end of the century to the start of the new, the Gondi’s had Paris as their heritage. Other dynasties established in various dioceses were those of La Rochefoucauld, Béthune, Poitiers, Estrées, and Fouquières. The majority of the bishops were therefore, of the nobility, given that the “virtuous nobility” was considered by Richelieu the requisite for a good bishop.³

Many of them accumulated benefices. Cardinal d’Estouteville was from 1440-1450 Bishop of Couserans, Mirepoix, Nîmes, Béziers, Lodève, from which he could reap substantial returns in order to maintain a luxurious way of life and to pay for the expenses connected with acquiring the cardinal’s hat. There were others, but none like the ten dioceses of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese. The wealth of Mazarin was legendary, the obvious fruits of his hoarding of benefices.

The second standard was the *intellectual*. University studies were an important map for the road to a career. Étienne Poncher, Bishop of Paris, was connected to the intellectuals of his time. Aleandro was his secretary and had a close rapport with Budé, Lefèvre d’Étaples, Erasmus. Guillaume Briçonnet transformed Saint-Germain-des-Près, where he had been abbot, into a cultural center, before founding the “Cenacle of Meaux.” Of the French episcopate one observes that two-thirds had been advisers to the King, and so had a very sound juridical foundation.

The third standard was the *moral*. It would demean this discussion to reduce the episcopacy of that period just to colorful figures of immoral prelates living in luxury. A high profile figure at the end of the 1400’s was that of Claude de Seyssel (1450-1520). He had a good education in both juridical and humanistic studies in Pavia and Turin.

He entered the service of Louis XII, King of France, and near the age of 50, he entered the clerical state. He served his sovereign and Church faithfully and well. In 1507 the King informed the chapter of Marseille that he wished “his

³ Richelieu, *Testament politique*, Amsterdam 1688, 54.

friend and devoted counselor” to be named Master of Appeals at the Council of State, and bishop of that city.

Then he moved to Turin where he died a saintly death. He wrote many historical works – he was Louis XII’s historian – the most important being the *Treatise on the Threefold State of the Pilgrim* which is one of the first works on the pastoral character of a bishop.⁴

In the century of St. Vincent, we call to mind St. Francis de Sales, François de La Rochefoucauld, Bishop of Clermont, Blessed Alain de Solminihac, the saintly Bishop of Marseille, Jean-Baptiste Gault. By now the number of bishops who were alien to religious life, profligate and men of pleasure were in inexorable decline. Naturally they were not all models. What changed was the fact that most of the bishops resumed the role of rulers. There were then in the 1600’s a generation of authoritative bishops, strict in their demands for reform, men who were feared. The pastoral role was not only symbolic, but also a threat. In unsettled times even this is useful.

2. The Lower Clergy

a) Recruitment

We cannot speak of “vocations” at least up to the time of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. One entered the clerical state by way of the “tonsure” (from age seven upwards), which was generally conferred at confirmation. The decision to enter the clerical state came from the family. There were three models by which parents arrived at that decision⁵:

- *the sacrificial model*: the family selected one of its sons in order to “offer” him to God;
- *the cultural model*: one would enter the clerical state in order to devote oneself to studies;
- *the social model*: one or more sons were sent into the clerical state because of the social prestige it afforded.

This last model was chosen by young Vincent’s family for his priestly vocation.

Many of the tonsured in fact remained so, a state that afforded several privileges. Such a one was recognized by the style of the hair, by the sober and

⁴ Analysis in P. Broutin-H. Jedin, *L'Evêque dans la tradition pastorale du XVI^e siècle*, Paris 1953.

⁵ V. Tabbagh, “Effectifs et recrutement du Clergé séculier français,” in AA.VV., *Le clerc séculier au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1993, 181-202.

long cut of his clothing, by his marriage to “one virginal woman.” The number of tonsured was imposing. From September 1506 to April of the following year there were 1028 in tonsure in Agen; on April 10, 1520, 411 were tonsured in Mende. In Paris 400 seminarians a year were tonsured in the middle of the 15th century, a figure falling to 360 ten years later. In Rouen the number of the tonsured dropped from 3000 in 1410 to 1300 a century later. These represented one-third of the total population.⁶

How many of these reached priesthood? In Paris in the 1660’s we are told that there were from one to fifteen. Nonetheless it was a strange phenomenon that the tonsured diminished in absolute numbers, while priestly ordinations increased. In Rouen ordinations tripled until they reached 200 per year at the end of the century. In Paris in the mid-1400’s 20 priests a year were ordained, and the number grew to 27 in 1465. In Toulouse annual priestly ordinations reached the notable number of 50.

Of course, many priests came from outside to be ordained. In 1506-7, some 690 were ordained in Agen, but only half of them were originally from that diocese. It is as if each parish supplied one priest each year. If we consider the other half of those ordained in Agen, we know that 96 came from Cahors, 66 from Sarlat, 31 from Bazas, and 22 from Rodez. In 1521-22, 417 were ordained priests at Angers. At Poitiers around 1480, 1600 clerics a year were ordained priests. Therefore, secular priests alone made up 5% of the population.

All this resulted in an enormous concentration of priests and tonsured clerics. It is calculated that 10,000 priests lived in the Limousin region, some villages having 30 or 40 of them. One reform set out to control the number of ordinations. Avignon, which had a multitude of ordinands, applied the brakes. But in 1600 the Bishop of Béziers wrote to Rome that he could not offer the competitive exam for the placement to parishes “because of the ignorance of the priests.”

b) Formation

How were those being prepared for orders formed? The greater number of those tonsured received orders after a kind of apprenticeship with a pastor. Those who went no further served Mass, worked as sacristans, chanted the office of the dead, or even worked as schoolteachers. For these there can be no talk of formation.

One who aspired to the presbytery had to show above all that he had a minimum annual income of about 15 to 20 lire from a benefice, from family real estate, or from a generous donor.

⁶ Ibid., 183.

The candidate then had to learn the rites well and to read the missal. Nothing more. In the end the goal of these priests was not pastoral ministry, but the celebration of Mass and the office of the dead. There were then two grades of priests: “Mass priests” and “parish priests.”⁷ The former lived with their families, helped with farm work, or at most a less rewarding material activity. To reach orders it was enough to be of legitimate birth (this being the era of the “bastards”), to be able to read and to sing.

According to the statutes of Tournai in 1366, an exam had to be taken given by the archdeacon two days before ordinations. The candidate had to know the formulas for the sacraments, the fourth book of the *Summa* of Peter the Lombard, books two and four of the *Decretali*, besides naturally, the rights and duties of the ecclesiastical state.⁸

A particular model of formation involved the boy singers.⁹ Small schools were set up in many cathedrals for those boys who guaranteed the music ministry of the cathedral. At the beginning they were supported by the canons, but later many of the schools became self-supporting, thanks to the rents received from some chapels or vacant benefices. But these were in no way able to resolve the problem of the formation of the secular clergy.

In the mid-1400’s several conscientious bishops confronted the problem of priestly formation. The Bishop of Utrecht, having submitted his clergy to testing, found that of 300 candidates, only three were suitable. For “ongoing formation” there was a series of books, such as anthologies of sermons, manuals for confession and pastoral duties, of modest level, but useful nonetheless.¹⁰

Before the establishment of seminaries, there were a number of colleges. Paris had the famous college of Montaigu. It was a university college founded in 1344, a place of drudgery, the direction of which was entrusted to John Standonck (1450-1504).¹¹ He first of all restored discipline. He then founded near the college the *domus pauperum* (house for the poor), a kind of seminary *ad erigendum gentem novam* (to build up a new people), which received 80 young men who aspired to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. They were maintained by board paid by the more affluent students. They were given a room,

⁷ Later they would be called: *Mass priests* and *confessional priests*.

⁸ M. Aubrun, *La paroisse en France des origines au XV^e siècle*, Paris 1986, 162.

⁹ P. Demouy, “Les Pueri chori de Notre-Dame de Reims. Contribution à l’histoire des clerges au Moyen Âge,” in AA.VV. , *Le clerc séculier au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1993, 135-149.

¹⁰ A. Prosperi, “Di alcuni testi per il clero nell’Italia del primo Cinquecento”, in *Critica storica* 7 (1968) 137-168.

¹¹ R.G. Villoslada, *La Universidad de Paris durante los estudios de Francisco de Vitoria*, Roma 1938.

a candle and some white bread each day. The studies were intense, but the planning was defective insofar as it gave space to nominalism, with no opening either to St. Thomas or to the humanities.

The realization, of a monastic and conservative system, was successful. Standonck founded four other colleges along the same model, at Cambrai and Valenciennes (1499) and at Malines and Louvain (1500), foreshadowing a possible congregation. Every house had at its head a “minister of the poor.” New candidates did not take vows, but only a promise of obedience. They were garbed in outfits of course cloth of various colors, black for the theologians, and gray for those who studied in the school of the arts. There was no meat at meals, nor wine, except for a small amount for the theologians, which was diluted with water. It was a poor life, the fasts were very rigorous, the discipline severe. They rose at night by turns for matins. Daily Mass was obligatory, plus a half-hour of meditation; in his free moments each one had to note in a small book the spiritual phrases that struck him most.

If we examine this initiative over the short term, we can observe that it was successful. Some 300 of these students became religious in a great variety of communities, such as the Carthusians, Carmelites and Franciscans. Nevertheless this type of operation had no future. It was medieval and monastic. It was adequate for one who sought certitude, not for those undertaking the risky road of the new century.

The Council of Trent wanted a seminary established in every diocese.¹² A seminary had been established at Reims in 1567. Other dioceses founded their seminaries a few years after, for example Pont-à-Mousson (1579); Carpentras (1581), Aix (1582), Bordeaux, Embrun and Valence (1583), Sarlat (1584), Avignon and Cavaillon (1586), Toulouse (1590) Vaison (1594), Agen (1597), Auch (1609), Mâcon (1613), Rouen (1615), Luçon (1617). In fact, in 1644 only Bordeaux, Reims and Rouen existed. All the other seminaries had disappeared and their work came to naught.

c) Defects

Lacking seminaries, the quality of the clergy was diminished. Bourdoise recalled what was said to him in 1607: “You must learn well how to read so that

¹² A. Degert, *Histoire des séminaires en France jusqu'à la Révolution*, 2 vol., Paris 1912; M. Venard, “Les séminaires en France avant Saint Vincent de Paul,” in AA.VV., *Vincent Depaul*. Actes du colloque international d'études vincentiennes. Paris 25-26 September 1981, Rome 1983, 1-7; E. Préclin-E. Jarry, *Le lotte politiche e dottrinali nei secoli XVII e XVIII (1648-1789)*, edited by L. Mezzadri (Storia della Chiesa di Fliche-Martin XIX/1), Torino 1974; *La Chiesa nell'età dell'assolutismo e dell'illuminismo* (Storia della Chiesa di H. Jedin VII), Milano 1978; R. Taveneaux, *Le Catholicisme dans la France classique 1610-1715*, 2 vol., Paris 1980; “Histoire de la France religieuse,” edited by J. Le Goff and R. Rémond, II: Du christianisme flamboyant à l'aube des Lumières, Paris 1988.

you sing well in church, because it is good when a priest knows how to read and write.”¹³

If there is something that can be documented it is the ignorance of the clergy, since the pastoral visits offer us abundant documentation. Many made themselves popular thanks to their weaknesses. A priest who knew how to give a hand to the work and participate in the drinking of his parishioners, in some places like La Rochelle or Auvergne, was looked on with favor. Such a priest, however, did not preach or hear confessions, or if he did, he did not know the formula for absolution. The catechism was neglected. At Tréguier, for instance, in 1624, the priests simply did not bother with it.

One of the reasons for founding the Congregation of the Mission was the abandonment of the country areas. The explanation is simple. In the Toulouse Region, half of the clergy before 1631 did not reside there. In 1624 the Bishop of Tréguier found that the priests did a poor job of maintaining their churches. Based on the pastoral visitations in the diocese of Chartres between 1628-30, it was found that tabernacles either did not exist, or if they did, they were dirty. Often the pastors did not know if the hosts in the ciborium were consecrated. Worse, the canonical visitors in many cases saw the ciboria full of worms.

d) Pastoral Life

Parish personnel was very numerous. It consisted of the pastor, some chaplains, also chaplains of chaplaincies, priests who were in possession of benefices, and those who performed funeral rites.

The pastor had care of the parish. He often had other parishes or benefices and therefore did not reside in a specific parish. In his place another priest lived, exercising the service and being compensated in a very small way in comparison to the actual revenue. Then there were parochial chaplains, who in some way helped out in pastoral ministry. These are not to be confused with the chaplains of chaplaincies, who were not involved with the care of souls, insofar as their duties were exclusively liturgical. Not included in the last named are the “funeral rite priests,” whose duty it was to celebrate Masses for the deceased, for which they were remunerated.

In some places there were communities of priests who had benefices.¹⁴ These were formed within the parishes, grouped priests who were born there, and

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Cited by E. Labrousse-R. Sauzet, “La lente mise en place de la réforme tridentine (1598-1661),” in *Histoire de la France religieuse*, 390.

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who received a pension from the sum total of the revenues. In the diocese of Clermont such communities existed from the end of the 12th century. In 1535 there were in that diocese some 104 such communities, the greater part of which were founded in the 15th century. They gathered together a varying number of priests. A third of them were made up of no more than two priests. But there also existed communities much more numerous. Aurillac, for example, had 30 priests in 1344, 48 in 1439, and 100 in 1508, who received an income of about 45 lire per year. They themselves were administrators of the revenues. The pastor could choose his collaborators from among them. The city councillors entrusted to them the school and works of charity.

To examine pastoral life concretely, we rely on a specific case, which has the advantage of having been studied very carefully. It concerns the Diocese of Clermont, in France, and allows us to look at parochial life in microcosm, using the issue of income as the starting point.¹⁵ Parishes were supported by two types of income. The first came from real estate, which was very little, because it varied between two and four lire in mountain parishes, to 35-40 lire in lowland parishes. Then there were also the uncertainties, which included the altar and church fees.

The administration of the sacraments (altar fees) assured a definite income. The administration of baptism was three *denarii* in Villeneuve. In one parish there is mention of a fee for Easter confessions, which was two *denarii* for the head of the family, and one for the other members.

For weddings the spouses had to pay five *soldi* at the door of the church, a fourth of the wedding bread, a quarter-liter of wine, a leg of pork, a piece of beef and a hen. In Bourgogne the rule was that at the occasion of a marriage they had to provide the celebrant's meal for the day of the wedding and for the next day. If the groom wished to be married elsewhere, if he was a property owner he had to pay ten *soldi* and a hen; if he was not, he had to pay five *soldi* and also bring a hen as a gift.

The stipend for a funeral was very carefully calculated. At the beginning of the 1500's, a rooming house proprietor could pay up to 16 *soldi*, while for the other adults one would be content with five *soldi*, and for children two *soldi* and six *denarii*. Church fees included various types of taxes, generally in kind. For Sunday pastoral services, i.e., for celebrating a "low" and a sung Mass, a measure of oats was due the pastor. At Longpré, at the end of the 14th century, each parishioner owed the pastor a measure of rye for annual services, plus a large pork sausage for the Passion gospel. In some cases the taxation consisted of Christmas

R. Germain, "Revenus et actions pastorales des prêtres paroissiaux dans le diocèse de Clermont," in AA.VV., *Le clerc séculier au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1993, 109-111.

¹⁵ Ibid. 101-119.

dinner for the pastor, his chaplain, his cleric and the church sexton. In addition, for the same occasion, they had to feed the parish priest's three dogs and horse.

In short, what did a parish yield? For Pierrefitte-sur-Loire, a parish of 109 households, we know that it had an annual income of 25 lire from the administration of the sacraments and 30 from Church fees. The greater the income, the higher the taxes. Among these there was the "free gift," a tax imposed on the church by the monarchy, but which was considered not "owed," but "a gift... free," even though it was obligatory.¹⁶ The bishops naturally divided this figure among the various parishes. For the "gift" of 1535, the sum requested varied from seven *soldi* and six *denarii* to 50 lire for the better off parishes. Then there were the fees of charitable institutions which varied from five *soldi* at Vilplaix to ten lire for Theil.

At the time of a synod the bishop requested a tax ("parée synodale"), as he did for a pastoral visitation ("droit de procuration"). The first fluctuated between six *denarii* and five *soldi*, while for the second, documents note a variation between four and 48 *soldi*.

In return for his income, a pastor was held to carry out the "officium" of caring for souls. At Monétay-sur-Allier, an agreement in force was initialed between the parishioners and the pastor by which the pastor had to say a low Mass and a solemn Mass every Sunday and feast day. In addition, the pastor was held to officiate at weddings and funerals, and to administer baptisms. He further had to deliver a sermon on the gospel of the Feast of the Holy Cross in May, as well as the similar one in September.¹⁷ In bad weather for agriculture (on the occasion of storms, freezing...) he had to announce processions and prayers. Finally the pastor was held to provide a "good and sufficient" paschal candle, incense for the feasts and blessed bread for the feast of the Circumcision.

At Molinet the pastor had to chant a *Libera me* before and after the Mass every Sunday, sprinkling the graves with holy water.¹⁸ In another parish, there was absolution for the deceased before and after Mass. As can be seen, ministry on behalf of the deceased was very intense, so much so that on the occasion of a

¹⁶The French clergy expected to be exempt by divine right from all monetary contributions to the kingdom. If it gave something, it was not out of obligation but by a spontaneous decision, through a spirit of reconciliation and courtesy toward the sovereign. It was a theoretical liberty. Every so often, the clergy or a part refused and was called to order. The "free gift" varied depending on whether there was war or peace.

¹⁷ The Feast of the Holy Cross in May was the feast of the Invention of the Cross (3 May); that in September was the feast of the Exaltation (14 September). On this subject see the "Glossario di date" in A. Cappelli, *Cronologia, cronografia e calendario perpetuo*, Milan 1930, 109-124.

¹⁸ The practice of burying the dead in the church is known. This explains the abundance and richness of numerous chapels in the churches, especially those of the mendicant orders.

synod, the priests of one parish asked the bishop that four of them be excused from taking part in the synod because so much of their time was taken up by services for the dead.

The celebration of the Eucharist was at the center of the parish life. Those who arrived at the church had to wait before the start of the celebration, which began only at the arrival of the lord of the place and his family. If he was very late, it could happen that the pastor was impeded from saying the Mass.¹⁹

For parishioners at a distance there were chapels. When these did not have their own chaplains, the celebration was provided for at least once a year. Then there were processions. These took place nearly every Sunday, and sometimes were useful for reaching distant parishioners.

Conclusion

When St. Vincent was converted,²⁰ that is, around 1608-1612, the situation of the clergy and the Church of France was still uncertain. The Nuncio Ubaldini wrote in 1611 that the clergy was asleep and no one knew how to awaken it. The difference between the times of Calvin and Francis I was that now there were laws (those of Trent²¹), but the men to implement them were lacking. Resistance was still huge. The canons claimed their “legitimate rights” and “good customs.” Many bishops were absent from their dioceses. Those few who did reside in their dioceses were unable to act, hindered by jurists and magistrates who opposed every episcopal decision “appel comme d’abus.” The Estates General of 1615 did not recognize the Tridentine reform which was “accepted” unilaterally by the clergy. It is said that reform is the work of saints. In reality it was brought about by many factors.

The first factor was the end of the religious wars, which making cease the reasons for weapons opened up the age of the weapons of reason. The Edict of Nantes (1598) was a useful compromise because it allowed the Church to resume her pastoral activities. The monarchy arrayed itself openly on the side of the Church, and then with Richelieu in power, it began to erode the power and the autonomy of the Huguenots. If up to Henry IV the passage to Calvinism was a hemorrhage, after Nantes a reverse movement began. The ecclesial body began to take on vigor again, to be respected, to reacquire credibility.

¹⁹ M. Aubrun, *La paroisse*, 173.

²⁰ L. Mezzadri, “La conversione di S. Vincenzo de Paoli. Realtà storica e proiezione attuale,” in *Annali della Missione* 84 (1977) 176-182.

²¹ On this subject, see the excellent work of A. Tallon, *La France et le concile de Trente (1518-1563)*, Rome 1997.

Contributing to this were actions by the Holy See through its nuncios, by the government which selected austere and serious bishops, the renewal of religious orders, the establishment of new religious communities (Jesuits, Capuchins, Theatines), and the “mystical invasion.” A decisive factor was the declaration of priestly doctrine by the so-called “French School.”²²

Priestly spirituality ranged between two different theologies, which give rise to different ways of understanding the same image and ministry of a priest. On one hand there is the theology of the Pseudo-Dionysius by which the priest, taken from among men, is set above them, being inserted into that celestial-terrestrial hierarchical complex, from which comes the sanctification of men and the glorification of God. On the other hand is the Augustinian vision, in which the emphasis is not placed on being the head, but on service. The priest, taken from among men, is not above them, but is for them in fraternal service. More than the head, he is a brother. Rather than commanding, he helps from within.

In the Augustinian understanding, the priest is a man for the mission, while in the opposing view he is rather a man for the cult. They are clearly two very schematic polarizations, more able to define a tendency, than to lock up an author’s thinking. In any case, these are helpful in grasping the various facets of the so-called French School of Spirituality.²³

The great reformers of the French clergy in the 1600’s (Bérulle, Condren, Vincent de Paul, Olier, Eudes), put into the empty lamps the oil of prayer, and then these lamps were carried to illuminate the footsteps of man. The consequences for spirituality were exciting. It highlighted firstly the need for holiness.

St. Vincent de Paul said: “There is nothing greater than a priest, to whom God gives all power over his natural and mystical body, the power to forgive sins, etc. Oh God, what power! Oh, what dignity!”²⁴ And he added “One doubts if all the disorders that we see in the world must not be attributed to priests. This may scandalize some, but the subject requires that I show, by the greatness of the evil,

22 On the *French School*: Y. Krumenacher, *L'école française de spiritualité. Des mystiques, des fondateurs, des courants et leurs interprètes*. Paris 1998; “École française de spiritualité,” in *Théophilyon* 4 (1999) 1-225.

23 L. Mezzadri, “La spiritualità dell’ecclesiastico seicentesco in alcune fonti letterarie,” in AA.VV., *Problemi di storia della Chiesa nei secoli XVII-XVIII*, Napoli 1982, 45-89; id., “Jésus Christ, figure du Prêtre-Missionnaire, dans l’œuvre de Monsieur Vincent,” in *Vincentiana* 30 (1986) 323-356; id., *A lode della gloria. Il sacerdozio nell’école française XVII-XX secolo*, Milan 1989; id., “Adorazione, sacrificio e missione. Le dimensioni del presbiterato nella Scuola francese del ‘600,” in *Communio* n. 150 (1996) 32-46.

24 SV XII, 85.

the importance of the remedy. Several conferences were held on this question, which was treated thoroughly, in order to discover the sources of all those disasters, with the result that it was decided that the Church had no worse enemies than priests. It is from them that heresies have originated; take, for instance, those two heresiarchs, Luther and Calvin, who were priests; and it is by priests that heretics have prevailed, that vice has reigned, and ignorance has set up its throne among the poor people. This is due to the disorders of priests and to the fact that they have failed to oppose with all their strength, according to their obligations, those three torrents which have deluged the world.”²⁵

There took place the “terrorizing of the souls” of those who aspired to the priesthood, holding open before them the greatness of what they were to receive. “One who is not a saint is an erring priest.” Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629)²⁶ had recourse to the Pseudo-Dionysius to prove that necessity. In the Areopagitic pyramidal vision, the bishops and priests must purify, illuminate, and ignite the fire of their inferiors. But to achieve this goal, the priests must be “instruments joined” to the Son of God, and must act in the spirit of Jesus.²⁷ United sacramentally to Christ, the priest must find in the Word his spiritual “sustenance,” he must be “pure emptiness for him, which is filled with him and tends toward him.” Just as the humanity of Christ is the instrument personally joined to the divinity, so priests are organs of his grace, and God’s living instruments on earth. It is as if they assumed a humanity, which makes the priest the place to adore the Word. For him “the priestly state is at the origin of all sanctity, which must be present in the Church of God.”²⁸ Priests must make a “solemn profession of piety.”²⁹

Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657) confided in his *Mémoires* that he received this order from Christ “I want you to live in perennial contemplation... and... I want you to bring contemplation into the midst of the clergy.”³⁰ It was not only a

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Works: *Œuvres complètes*, Paris 1644 (n. ed. Paris 1960); *Opuscules de piété*, edited by G. Rotureau, Paris 1944; *Correspondance*, edited by J. Dagens, 3 vol., Paris-Louvain 1937-39. Fundamental works: A. Molien, *Le Cardinal de Bérulle*, 2 vol., Paris 1947; J. Dagens, *Bérulle et les origines de la restauration catholique (1575-1610)*, Paris 1952; P. Cochois, *Bérulle et l'École française*, Paris 1963; M. Dupuy, *Une spiritualité de l'adoration*, Paris 1964; G. Moïoli, *Teologia della devozione berulliana al Verbo incarnato*, Varese 1964; J. Orcibal, *Le Cardinal de Bérulle: évolution d'une spiritualité*, Paris 1965; M. Dupuy, *Bérulle et le sacerdoce. Etude historique et doctrinale. Textes inédits*, Paris 1969; F.G. Preckler, “Etat” chez le Cardinal de Bérulle, Roma 1974; id. *Bérulle aujourd'hui. 1575-1975. Pour une spiritualité de l'humanité du Christ*, Paris 1978.

²⁷ P. Cochois, *Bérulle et l'École française*, Paris 1963, 31.

²⁸ M. Dupuy, *Bérulle et le sacerdoce*, 410ff.

²⁹ Ibid., 348ff. Piety is the same as perfection.

³⁰ R. Deville, “Jean-Jacques Olier maître d'oraison,” in *Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657): Bulletin de Saint Sulpice* 14 (1988) 98. On his *Mémoires* (8 handwritten volumes conserved in the archives of Saint Sulpice in Paris): M. Dupuy, *Se laisser à l'Esprit. Itinéraire spirituel de Jean-Jacques Olier*, Paris 1982.

matter of teaching how to pray, which would be almost enough for transforming priests into men of ritual, but to make them “experts in the mysteries of Christ.” The idea that is subject to is that the Word of God wanted to “deny himself as God,” to assume a human appearance wrapped in fragility, clothed in sorrows and human limitations in order to reignite in the world the groaning of prayer.

From here is born that priestly school of prayer which, soaked with grace, gave new life to the French Church. The priest must live in a “spirit of prayer,” do everything as if led by it. “Nothing can be gotten from God and from the neighbor if not by virtue of the Holy Spirit activated in prayer.” Further it “is in prayer that the priest draws life for himself and for the people . In it is his peace and his joy.... Finally, it is in prayer that the priest, filled with charity, finds himself clothed with all God’s magnificent riches. Through it one does not only enter into the knowledge of the mysteries of God the Father and of his Son, but in enjoying and participating in their ‘state.’ One enters into the power of the Father, into the splendor of the Son, and into the ardor of the Holy Spirit.”³¹

St. John Eudes (1601-1680), who in his numerous writings³² always had pastoral aims, starts with a grand vision of baptism, which he calls “covenant contract” in which God makes us sons in the Son, gives us his own life, and inaugurates a mystery of universal communion. He desires that “we continue and that we contemplate” his earthly life based on Mary’s example. The summit of communion is fulfilled in Jesus, God and man, unique and eternal priest, host and sacrificer.

With the strength of baptism, all the faithful “offer” and are “offered.” They are victims and priests. The ministerial priesthood, however, is not “something more,” but is an existence changed from “within,” in order to realize to the fullest the role of pastor. The priest is a being made into “Church,” who exists “for the Church.” One who signs himself “missionary priest” teaches that

On Olier: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Migne, Paris 1856; the *Mémoires* up to the present in manuscript are accessible thanks to M. Dupuy, *Se laisser à l’Esprit. L’itinéraire spirituel de Jean-Jacques Olier*, Paris 1982; *Traité des saints ordres (1676) comparés aux écrits authentiques de Jean-Jacques Olier (+1657)*, edited by G. Chaillot, P. Cochois, I. Noye, Paris 1984; *Lettres*, edited by E. Levesque, 2 vol., Paris 1935. Among the biographies to recall are those of E. M. Faillon (3 vol., 1873), P. Pourrat (1932), A. Portaluppi (1947). Very dense synthesis in DS (Dictionary of Spirituality).

³¹ R. Deville, *Jean-Jacques Olier maître d’oraison*, 99ff.

³² Works: *Œuvres complètes*, 12 vol. , Vannes 1905-11; *Œuvres choisies*, 8 vol., Paris 1931-37; *Il Cuore di Gesù fornace d’amore*, Roma 1965. Among the works on priesthood: *Mémorial de la vie ecclésiastique* (1681), *Le prédicateur apostolique*, and that entitled *Du bon confesseur*. J. Arragain, *Le cœur du Seigneur. Etudes sur les écrits et l’influence de saint Jean Eudes*, Paris 1955; J. M. Alonso, *El Corazón de María en san Juan Eudes*, 2 vol., Madrid 1958; P. Milcent, *Saint Jean Eudes. Introduction et choix de textes*, Paris 1964; id., “Pasteur dans le Christ pasteur; le prêtre selon saint Jean Eudes,” in *Vocation* 240 (1967) 501-14; id., *Un artisan du renouveau chrétien au XVII^e siècle. Saint Jean Eudes*, Paris 1985; C. Berthelot Du Chesnay, *Les missions de saint Jean Eudes*, Paris 1967; DS 8 (1974), 488-501.

“the principal exercise is that of making known without fear, publicly and privately, in work and in word, the gospel of Jesus Christ.”³³ In another passage he writes: “You are in the priesthood of the living Jesus Christ, who walking on this earth, represent his person, act then in his place.”³⁴ The priest, after the Virgin, is the most precious thing in the hands of Christ. “You are the saviors of the world who the Savior has left in his place here below to continue and to complete the work of universal redemption.”³⁵

This role of “added” humanity and “extended” existence is translated into these very attractive images: “You are the most noble part of the mystical body of the Son of God. You are the eyes, the mouth, the tongue and the heart of the Church of Jesus; or to say it better, you are the eyes, the mouth, the tongue, and the heart of Jesus himself. You are his heart because it is through you that he gives true life, the life of grace on earth, and the life of glory in heaven to all the true members of his body.”³⁶

(STEPHEN J. INDIA, C.M., translator)

33 DS 8 (1974) 497.

34 Ibid, 30.

35 Ibid., 29.

36 Ibid., 26ff.

The Priestly Journey of St. Vincent de Paul The Beginnings: 1600-1612

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On the 23 of September of 1600 he (Vincent) was advanced to the holy order of priesthood. Since he lived until the 27 of September of 1660, one can deduce he was a priest of the church of Jesus Christ for 60 years. God knows what the dispositions and feelings of his heart were when he received the sacred character. If trees can be known by their fruits and causes by their effects, when one sees the perfection and sanctity with which this most worthy priest exercised his priestly functions, then one can believe with complete certainty that, in the moment in which he was consecrated a priest, our Lord Jesus Christ, eternal priest and prince of priests, poured out abundantly upon him (Vincent) the fullness of his priestly spirit, and that spirit gave him such lofty thoughts about that sacred character that he could always speak about it with wonder as something that could never be appreciated enough.¹

Few readers today subscribe to this idyllic Abellyan version of Vincent de Paul's accession to the priesthood. Nevertheless, one must grant to the good bishop of Rodez, despite his lack of critical judgement, that his vision possesses a quality which other writings on this topic frequently lack: it makes sense. At bottom, what Abelly does from the first pages of his biography is trace in his own way the profile or outline of the priestly journey of Vincent de Paul.

Our knowledge of the saint has advanced greatly since 1664. Because of that, in order to discover to what degree Abelly's description of his feelings at the moment of priestly ordination corresponds to reality or not, one must deal previously with some difficulties.

An Ordination under a Cloud

Curiously, the first of these problems arises from Abelly's narrative itself. Through it we know the idea of guiding the child Vincent towards the priesthood came from his father; and he did it for the purpose of gaining for him and, indirectly, for his other children, a social position that would better the precarious family economy.²

¹ L. Abelly, *La Vie du venerable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul, Instituteur et premier Supérieur Général de la Congrégation de la Mission*, 3 books, Paris, 1664. L. 1, c. 3, p. 25.

² L. ABELLY, *ibid.* L. I, c. 2, p. 32.

Here we have a sure fact to indicate the point of departure of St. Vincent's priestly journey: it was not begun because of a mystic or even, stretching the analysis, a strictly religious impulse. What motivated those who guided the young villager of the Landes towards the priesthood was a human — all too human — consideration of the benefits of the priestly state. This situation was not unusual either in that epoch or in succeeding ones: until well into the twentieth century, all over Catholic Europe, entering the ecclesiastical state was for many poor adolescents — and their families — almost the only way of rising above poverty. To reject as unworthy all these vocations begun because of a self-serving family consideration would be to condemn whole generations of priests. What we must ask ourselves is whether these same motives were the only ones that interested Vincent. Of course, we cannot know with certainty whether at the early age of twelve or fifteen the young Vincent was capable of his own thoughts on the subject. But neither do we have any idea of the evolution the young aspirant must have undergone in the course of his years of preparation and study in Dax, Toulouse and Saragossa.³ What seems most probable is that years later, after his father's death, when Vincent was on the threshold of sacred orders, he was conscious of the responsibilities he was assuming and quite aware of his motives. And there is no reason to doubt that his feelings had been purified in an ever more spiritual sense, without, however, discarding material aspirations and expectations. As Pierre Defrennes writes: "without trying to be subtle it can be said with all likelihood that he (Vincent) obeyed the promptings of fortune as well as those of the Holy Spirit."⁴

Next we must face the problem of the irregularity of Vincent's ordination at nineteen or twenty years of age. In 1922 Coste showed Vincent had not been born in 1576, but rather, as he believed, in 1581; and therefore he had been ordained at the age of nineteen, an irregular age according to the canons of Trent.⁵ This fact changed drastically the generally held perspective about St. Vincent's priestly ordination. The idea quickly took root that the young Vincent de Paul was a long way from being from the beginning the ideal priest his devoted first biographer painted.⁶

The problem of this irregularity must be judged in the light of the customs of that time and the juridic-ecclesiastic reality of the moment. We know, on the one hand, that in France at the beginning of the 17th century early ordinations were frequent; and on the other hand, that in 1600 the canons of Trent had not been promulgated in France, nor would they be until 1615. In these circumstances being ordained before the

³ Vincent's stay and studies in Saragossa, which we have always defended, have gained acceptance among recent authors, including Frenchmen, such as BERNARD PUJO: *Vincent de Paul, le précurseur*, Paris, 1998, 30-31; 314, notes 6 and 7. See also BERNARD KOCH, *La Bibliothèque de Saint Vincent vers 1611-1616*, 3.

⁴ PIERRE DEFRENNES, "La vocation de Saint Vincent de Paul : Étude de psychologie surnaturelle," Paris: *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* XIII, (1932), 391.

⁵ PIERRE COSTE, *La vraie date de la naissance de Saint Vincent de Paul, Dax, 1922*. In this case it makes no difference whether St. Vincent was born, as I think, in 1581 or in 1580. Cf. JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, "El nacimiento de San Vicente de Paúl: Preguntas en torno a una fecha," *En Semana Vicenciana de Salamanca* (10^o), Salamanca, 1981, 147-174. Both 19 and 20 years of age are irregular.

⁶ ANTOINE REDIER, *La vraie vie de Saint Vincent de Paul, Paris, 1927*. There is a Spanish translation: *Vicente de Paúl, todo un carácter*; trans. from the 2nd French Edition by Luis Huerga, Santa Marta de Tormes, Salamanca, 1977.

age of 24 could perfectly well be understood as an act authorized by custom, and not as a transgression or a sin. Moreover there is the fact, still without a satisfactory explanation, that the dimissorial letters of both subdiaconate and diaconate, as well as those of priesthood expressly state that the candidate had the legal age.⁷ A conscious deception by the interested party before the authorities? A deliberate falsification by the signers of the documents? But could not one as well think about a hypothetical dispensation for age obtained from Rome? In reality, there is no evidence that allows us to favor one explanation over another. All the hypotheses elaborated to explain the fact, including the most favorable one we just mentioned, are no more than conjectures without documentary support. From Vincent's personal point of view, was not the authorization by legitimate authorities enough for his peace of conscience?

The third problem comes from the place of his ordination. We know for a fact the young deacon was promoted to priesthood in Château-l'Évêque by Bishop François de Bourdeille, Bishop of Périgueux who had his residence there.⁸ There has been much speculation about this fact. Why did Vincent go to be ordained in a place relatively far from his native Diocese of Dax, and from his then place of residence in Toulouse? A novelistic biographer, Antonio Redier, went so far as to affirm he had done so to better hide his irregular situation, and precisely before a "blind and dying" bishop. The allegation of blindness is no more than an exaggeration, and that of dying is just a manner of speaking. In fact Bishop Bourdeille would die a month after ordaining Vincent, on the 24th of October of the same year. But we have no reason to believe he was considered moribund a month before. The facts are: 1) Vincent's dimissorial letters were emitted a year earlier on the 13th of September of 1599, and they authorize him to be ordained by the bishop of his choice. There is no hint of a precipitous ordination. 2) The ordination did not take place in the bishop's private chapel, but rather in the Church of St. Julian, which served as the de facto cathedral, all of which gives the lie to a almost hidden ordination. 3) It was not a private ceremony, but rather a general and pontifical ordination with the presence of assistants to the bishop, canons, etc.

It would seem difficult to deceive so many witnesses simultaneously. Another well intentioned hypothesis points to a more or less close relationship between ordinand and bishop by means of students of the former related to the latter. More recently a thesis diametrically opposed to Redier's has become established — that Vincent sought out François de Bourdeille as a model bishop "of the group of irreproachable and combative prelates," the best patron for a young man in need of acquiring the reputation of an exemplary priest.⁹ We will continue to be uncertain of

⁷ SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL: Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents; Ed. published and annotated by Pierre Coste, Prêtre de la Mission, Paris, 1920-1925, 14 v. Cited from here on as SVP XIII, 3, 5 and 6.

⁸ SVP XIII, 7: The ordination in Château-l'Évêque has been studied from different points of view by various authors, to whom we refer for the lines which follow. ABBE GRANGER: Ordination de Saint Vincent de Paul dans l'église de Château-l'Évêque, New edition, Périgueux, 1884. The 1st edition is from 1872. F. CONTASSOT, "Saint Vincent de Paul et le Périgord," *Annales* (1949-1950) 161-203. JOSEPH DEFOS DU RAU: "Le jeune Vincent de Paul, s'est-il fait ordonner prêtre par surprise?" *Dax: Bulletin de la Société de Borda*, 3rd trimestre 1959.

⁹ PIERRE MIQUEL, *Vincent de Paul*, Paris, 1996, 80.

the reasons why Vincent went to Périgueux for ordination as long as we have no new data. But we can discount the possibility of his going there to hide or take advantage of the good faith of an old man.

Another circumstance we must take into account to evaluate Vincent's dispositions at the time of his ordination is his first Mass. Both Abelly and Collet inform us that before celebrating it, Vincent imposed a waiting period upon himself, thus complying with the norms the most reform-minded bishops of the time were dictating; and he sought out for the event a devout and recollected spot: the hermitage of the Virgin in Buzet-sur-Tarn on a mountain in the middle of a forest. He celebrated his first Mass with no other witnesses than the acolyte and the accompanying priest: the presbyterial assistant for liturgical language.¹⁰ All of this leads us to believe Vincent celebrated his first Mass with fervor, as tradition attests and the most serious contemporary study is inclined to believe. All of this goes against the idea of receiving ordination solely for human interests of ambition and gain.¹¹

In order to formulate a definitive judgement about Vincent's dispositions upon receiving the priesthood we must examine a final, but not less important, element: Vincent's own declarations referring, at least indirectly, to his ordination. Let us read the essential paragraphs: *"As for myself, if I had known what it was, when I had the temerity to enter into this state, as I found out later on, I would have preferred to remain working the land before committing myself to such a terrible state."*¹² *"This feeling is so much a part of me that, if I were not already a priest, I would never be one. This is what I frequently tell those who aspire to the priesthood."*¹³

It has been thought that these two texts clearly demonstrate that Vincent thought he had been ordained without having a vocation. The context of both citations allows us to evaluate them with some assurance. In both cases, the saint is trying to dissuade others (his nephew, the lawyer Fournier) from becoming priests. For this he has recourse to an argument from personal experience which may impress his hearers: if Vincent, whom everyone considers a saint already, thinks that about himself, how would I dare to enter into this state?

On the one hand, what the saint emphasizes above all, even more than his unworthiness, is the temerity which becoming a priest supposes in the face of the greatness of the priestly condition.

On the other hand, in 1639 Vincent had written to a young deacon of the Congregation, Jean Duhamel who was afraid to take the decisive step of priestly

¹⁰ L. ABELLY, op. cit., L.1 c.3 p. 11; P. COLLET, La vie de St. Vincent de Paul, instituteur de la Congrégation de la Mission et des Filles de la Charité. Nancy, 1748, 2 vol, Vol.1, 14.

¹¹ E. DIEBOLD, "La première messe de Saint Vincent (1600)," Annales (1957) 488-492.

¹² SVP, V, 568. Letter to the Canon of Saint-Martin, March 1656.

¹³ SVP, VII, 463. To the lawyer Dupont-Fournier, father of P. Fournier, C.M., who thought of becoming a priest at an advanced age, 1659.

ordination: *“I beg you by these lines not to give into the temptation that wishes to prevent you from receiving the holy order of priesthood, to arrive at which you have done almost everything you have done since you have been in the world. So, dispose yourself, please, to receive this ordination.... If you say you are not fit and that you never will be, I confess to you, sir, that is the way it is in relation to the infinite holiness of the work; but in relation to our misery, you may expect, sir, that Our Lord will be your fitness, as he will also be the sacrificer along with you.”*¹⁴ These lines also have the flavor of personal confession.

Reading together these and other texts that could be adduced brings us, by convergence, to the conclusion that, even as a twenty-year old, the young Vincent de Paul confronted the priesthood with sufficient consciousness of its excellence and of the dispositions necessary to receive it, no matter how much, from the vantage point of his old age — and his sanctity — it seemed to him an act of temerity. The utilitarian vision of the clerical state more than of the priesthood is not incompatible with the natural honesty, with the sense of duty and the will to fulfill the obligations acquired, nor with a true fervor, perhaps superficial, but nonetheless sincere. Untangling these two elements is going to be, as I see it, the constant task of the first twelve years of Vincent’s priesthood.

Twelve Years of Searching

Vincent’s priestly ordination signals the beginning of a new stage in his life, his youth, his years of pilgrimage and learning. It is also, naturally, a new stage in his priestly journey.

And here a new question presents itself: journey or career? We must keep the distinction in mind. A journey is the moving forward in the living out of a vocation. A career, “making a career,” is an understanding of priesthood as the occasion for personal advancement, for prosperity and achievement. In order to answer the question we must analyze the information we possess regarding his priestly activity during the twelve years between his ordination and his installation as pastor of Clichy.

The first thing we know about Vincent the priest is that he was named by the Vicar General of Dax as pastor of Tilh, a small village of the diocese not far from his native Pouy.¹⁵ Let us bear in mind that this first benefice obtained by Vincent ended in failure. The parish had been conceded in Rome to another aspirant, a certain Mr. Saint-Soubé, and Vincent, either willingly or perforce, had to renounce it. Abelly thinks it

¹⁴ SVP XV, 22.

¹⁵ L. ABELLY (op. cit., L.1 c.3 p. 11) says that the great vicars of Dax, vacant see, were the ones who provided Vincent with the parish at Tilh. COSTE (Monsieur Vincent, vol.1, 40), who discovered Abelly’s error about the situation of the See, considers himself authorized to interpret that the appointment was made by the bishop. This is not at all certain. Recently the hypothesis has been advanced that perhaps the assignment to Tilh was made before Vincent’s priestly ordination. (BERNARD PUJO, op. cit., p. 24), in which case Abelly would not be in error, since the diocese was in fact vacant.

was willingly, so as not to enter into litigation, given his repugnance for these processes. But this is to project on the young Vincent an attitude of his later years that nothing indicates to us that Vincent possessed in his earlier years. In fact he will soon become involved in a lawsuit over a less important matter. The most likely scenario is that Vincent saw it as a lost cause and gave up pursuing it. To confront Rome and perhaps his own bishop, now installed in his see and with no interest in upholding a decision made by others, was clearly a useless enterprise. What must be kept in mind from this episode is, above all, the idea that Vincent's first attempt to establish himself in his new priestly condition was to become pastor, that is, attain the only situation which would guarantee the full exercise of his priestly functions. This may seem natural in our days. But it was not so natural in an era in which very many ecclesiastics used their priesthood as a mere springboard to attain privileges that had little to do with priesthood. Of course a parish was, at the same time, a sure source of rents and incomes. We have no reason to suppose that Vincent did not aspire to both things at the same time; i.e., his priestly journey was at the same time for him the pursuit of a career.

The second episode we know about is of a different stamp. In the same year as his ordination or the following one, in 1600 or 1601, Vincent made a trip to Rome. There can be no doubt about this trip even though his first biographers know nothing about it. We know of it because on several occasions Vincent himself says he "had the honor of seeing" Pope Clement VIII.¹⁶ Now then: Clement died in 1605. Another reference helps us to be more precise about the date: in the letter of July 20, 1631 to Fr. Du Coudray then stationed in Rome, Vincent tells him he himself had been there "thirty years ago." It must have been, then, around 1601. On the other hand, we have no information at all as to the reasons for this trip. Various hypotheses have been put forth: that he went there to obtain a dispensation for his irregular ordination or to defend his cause in the dispute about the parish of Tilh, or simply to gain (the indulgence for) the Jubilee Year of 1600. All of these theories lack documentary support. What we do know fairly well are Vincent's interior dispositions during his stay in the eternal city. Such knowledge is of great value at the moment of reconstructing his priestly journey. What were these dispositions?

Let us listen to Vincent himself: "*At last you have arrived in Rome where the visible head of the Church militant resides, where are found the bodies of St. Peter and St. Paul and of so many other martyrs who in another time gave their blood and used their lives for Jesus Christ. How fortunate you are, Sir, to be able to walk that same land where so many great and holy figures have walked. This thought moved me so much when I was in Rome thirty years ago that, although I was weighed down with sins, I could not but be moved to tears, as it seems to me.*"¹⁷

These words are a long way from describing an excitable young man. They speak, on the contrary, of a pious youth, capable even of weeping for emotion at the

¹⁶ SVP, IX, 316-317, 468; X, 365 593; XII, 347.

¹⁷ SVP, I, 114.

vivid recollection of the saints. This is the image that the mature St. Vincent has of the youthful Vincent.

Back in Toulouse, Vincent again takes up his studies and finishes seven years of theology in 1604, obtaining a bachelor's degree with the right to explain the second book of Pierre Lombard's *Sentences*,¹⁸ and he renews his activity in the small school he directed while he continues to wait for a definitive placement.

He even seems inclined to expedite as far as he is able the gaining of this placement. This is the meaning of another action of Vincent's which we know of only by his allusion to it: his trip to Bordeaux to see to a matter whose "temerity" does not allow him to name it, and for which he needed a good deal of money.¹⁹ It has always been supposed that this matter would be Vincent's naming to the episcopal see. This hypothesis, formulated by Collet,²⁰ has in its favor a particular expression Vincent uses: the matter was a "temerity." The same "temerity" it would seem that was needed to be ordained a priest. Supposing the hypothesis to be correct, this anecdote once again reveals to us a Vincent who was looking for his "way" as well as trying to make a career.

Whatever they might have been, Vincent's aspirations were cut short by a chance occurrence. In July of 1605, on his way back from a trip to Marseille to claim an inheritance — the litigation we alluded to above — Vincent falls prisoner to a Turkish brigantine which carries him to Tunis where he is sold as a slave, a situation in which he will remain for two years.

We are not now going to enter into the polemic regarding the historicity of the captivity.²¹ What interests us here is what the account of the captivity can teach us about Vincent's priestly journey. What did St. Vincent learn about the priesthood during his two years in captivity? To respond to this question we have at hand a dozen Vincentian texts which have not received excessive attention from his biographers: his allusions to the behavior of the enslaved priests in Barbary. St. Vincent has some very clear ideas about this which do not come from his missionaries sent to Algiers and Tunis. Taken as a whole these ideas are unfavorable. Among the enslaved priests arise frequent scandalous dissensions;²² grave moral disorders occur which should be

¹⁸ L. ABELLY, op. cit., L.1 c.3 p. 12; P. COLLET, op. cit., vol 1, 11.

¹⁹ SVP I, 3.

²⁰ P. COLLET, op. cit. I, 15.

²¹ For a systematic exposition of this problem, see chapters IV and V of my biography of St. Vincent. The most recent historiography inclines in favor of the substantial truthfulness of Vincent's narration. Cf. PIERRE MIQUEL, Vincent de Paul, Paris, 1996, 90-91; BERNARD PUJO, Vincent de Paul, le précurseur, Paris, 1998, 39-48; and above all, the most recent study of BERNARD KOCH, C.M., "Un regard neuf sur Saint Vincent. L'expert en Droit et procédure. Nouvelle lecture des lettres de la captivité," in the Bulletin des Lazaristes de France, n° 168 (April 1999), 93- 104. This article restates on entirely new foundations the study of the historicity of the captivity and stands as a milestone as regards the solution of the problem.

²² SVP, IV, 22-23. Request to Fide for licenses for Le Vacher, May 1650.

corrected more with goodness than severity;²³ licentiousness reigns;²⁴ they do not worry about strengthening the faith of the other slaves; in fact they themselves are so dissipated that the validity of the sacraments celebrated by some to them could be called into doubt;²⁵ they need the authority of the Vicars General in order to gain their due respect.²⁶ Clearly the Tunisian experience gave Vincent many ideas about the greatness as well as the misery of the priesthood.

Did Vincent, during his captivity, fall into the disorders which he would later reproach in the enslaved priests? We have no authority for supposing he did. On the contrary, through the very letter about the captivity we know that up to the moment of his trip to Marseille he enjoyed an irreproachable reputation.²⁷ Only the sale of the rented horse — confessed by Vincent himself — and his repeated references to his debts throw the shadow of reasonable doubt on his conduct. But the first matter was a trick often played by needy travelers and the second was a constant worry of Vincent's which the very letter to M. de Comet was supposed to remedy.²⁸

From the moment of his return from captivity all we know about Vincent's priestly preoccupations center on his search for a placement. Thus his following Msgr. Montorio to Rome, his installation in Paris, his entrance into the service of Marguerite de Valois. Vincent himself will recognize all this in a letter to his mother, dated February 1610, in which he is hopeful of soon gaining a worthy employment and manifests his desire that one of his nephews study, just as he did, to escape from poverty.²⁹ Modern biographers unanimously censure this attitude of Vincent's as ambitious. Perhaps it was; but in any case they were small and, of course, legitimate ambitions. At bottom he seeks no more than what he proposed to himself from the beginning — a small ecclesiastical benefice which would allow him to see to his own and his family's needs.

In a certain sense he was going to achieve all of this in that very year of 1610. It was the year of his being named to the abbey of St. Leonard of Chaumes, which could be considered the "honorable retirement" to which he aspired. But, aside from the fact that the acquisition of the abbey resulted in failure, it was also true that a change was beginning to take place in Vincent's heart. To his search for a placement is going to be added with ever increasing intensity the search for a way of life in keeping with his priestly condition: "the purpose," says Abelly, "of leading a truly ecclesiastical life and

²³ SVP IV, 120-121, letter to Philippe Le Vacher, priest of the Mission, in Algeria, 1652.

²⁴ SVP, V, 82. Letter to Monsieur de la Haye-Vantelay, 25 February 1654

²⁵ SVP, VII, 117, Letter to Firmin Get, superior in Marseille, April or May of 1658

²⁶ SVP, XIII, 307, St. Vincent's advice to Fr. Nouelly and to Br. Barreau before their departure for Algeria [about the month of May 1646].

²⁷ "A copy of my title of ordination signed and sealed by the bishop of Dax is extremely necessary for me, along with his testimony, which he may obtain from an investigation among some of our friends, that I have always been known as a good man" SVP, I, 15.

²⁸ Cf. B. KOCH, *op. cit.*, 96.

²⁹ SVP I, 18-19.

of complying perfectly with its obligations.”³⁰ The idea of priesthood as a “journey” is taking over the idea of priesthood as a career. It is the beginning of St. Vincent’s conversion and it consists in this: the passage from a life of very mediocre spiritual aspirations to a life of Christian and priestly authenticity, more than the reform of depraved and sinful conduct which no one has ever been able to prove. Undoubtedly the accusation of robbery plays an important but not unique role in his conversion. It seems it was this, finally, which moved Vincent to change his residence and move into the residence of the Priests of the Oratory for a time. God had inspired in him, explains Abelly, the desire to place himself on a truly ecclesiastical path.³¹ It was precisely the path Pierre de Bérulle, founder of the Oratory, had marked out for his disciples. Along with more or less decisive external factors in the process of Vincent’s priestly growth, one must grant primary importance to his interior evolution which, unfortunately, we know only partially. In this evolution the meeting between Vincent and his first (spiritual) master plays a determining role.

This is not the place to comment upon the figure of the founder of the Oratory. What interests us above all is to recall that Bérulle is, in great measure, the restorer of priestly spirituality, and that the concern for priests was a key point in his pastoral activity, his doctrine and his life.³² In his school Vincent finds the direction to which the compass of his soul was more or less consciously pointing ever since his ordination. He untangles at last the intricate skein of noble aspirations and low interests with which he struggled since his ordination. With Bérulle Vincent enters definitively on his priestly journey.

The spiritual reality has almost immediately a material reflection. A couple of years after his meeting with Bérulle Vincent finally obtains, through him, his first specifically priestly employment: on May 2, 1612 he takes possession as pastor of Clichy.

In Clichy, where he will be pastor for fourteen years, Vincent lives out for the first time a wholly satisfying priestly experience. He senses himself in communion with his people whom he admires for their docility, their devotion, and even their artistic sense. He tries out a series of pastoral projects which will have their full development in the successes of his later life. In a word, he feels, lives and acts like a priest. And as a result he thinks not even the Archbishop of Paris nor the Pope himself are as happy as he.³³

³⁰ L. ABELLY, *op. cit.*, L.1, c.6, p. 24.

³¹ L. Abelly (*op. cit.*, L. 1, c. 6, p. 24) assures us Vincent lived in Bérulle’s house for two years. COSTE considers such a long stay impossible, based on Vincent’s known documented residences and on the fact that the Oratory was founded on November 11, 1611, and Vincent de Paul took possession of Clichy on May 2, 1612.

³² Yves Krumenacker, *L’école française de spiritualité : Des mystiques, des fondateurs, des courants et leurs interprètes*, Paris, 1998. Cf. especially 199-210; 350-369.

³³ SVP IX, 646.

But on Vincent's priestly journey, opposed to what he himself might think at some moments, Clichy was not, in any sense, the final stop. In reality, it was going to be the starting point. To the extent he discovers other elements in his full vocation, especially the call of the poor, which even then made itself felt in his visits to the Charity hospital and other encounters, he will take further steps on the journey he has mapped out for himself. It is therefore significant that Vincent will only give up the parish of Clichy at the moment in which, after the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission and the constitution of the community, he feels the need to break his ties with the past.

(JOSEPH V. CUMMINS, C.M., translator)

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

*by Raymond Facelina C.M.
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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,¹ 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.² The liberating and saving action of God is powerfully deployed and is revealed spectacularly from the depths of human degradation.³ God is absolute love. He

¹ Cf. Mt 16:13 ff.

² Cf. Phil 2:1-11.

³ 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."⁴

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"

⁴ 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.⁵ 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.”⁶

⁵ Cf. Hb 13:8.

⁶ 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.⁷
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.⁸ 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.⁹

⁷ Cf. SV XII, 224-225; Hb 10:5-7.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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

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

¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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.¹³

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

¹² Cf. SV XII, 368; Rm 12:1; Hb 5:1.

¹³ 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.”¹⁴ “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.”¹⁵

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.”¹⁶*

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”.*¹⁷

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

¹⁴ SV VIII, 33; Letter 2910, CCD 8, 41.

¹⁵ SV XII, 80.

¹⁶ SV XI, 134.

¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ In that capacity they

¹⁸ Cf. Abelly, III, VIII, 72

¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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

²⁰ 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.”²¹ 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....”*²² 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)

²¹ Cf Eph 3:14-19.

²² 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.

St. Vincent de Paul, Formator of Priests

by Stanisław Wypych, C.M.
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Introduction

The example of life and the words of St. Vincent have influenced well-known persons in the Church and in society, as well as different groups, in a notable way — his closest collaborators, candidates for the Congregation of the Mission, and even lay people who asked him for spiritual direction. It would be interesting to see what influence he had on the formation of different groups and communities: for example, the Charities, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, and the Visitation nuns.¹ We are convinced that Vincent was one of the masters of the spiritual life, and one of the most noted formators. The character of this article, however, obliges us to limit our reflection and present the saint as a formator of the clergy. This reflection takes its place among, and must be considered within the context of, all the articles presented in this particular issue of *Vincentiana*.

As we begin, it is important to remember the profound conviction of Vincent that the Spirit of the Lord is the first and principal formator of persons. The Spirit calls, gives grace and strength, and continues to unfold his role as Spiritual Director whether in persons or in communities.² To this task, so noble a one that St. Gregory the Great refers to it as *ars atrium regimen animarum* [the art of arts, the care of souls], Divine Providence, in its profound charity, calls unworthy missionaries, who first should take on themselves the Spirit of Christ and continually ask themselves what Christ would do in a similar situation.³

1. Formation by Example and Counsel

We recall here the influence of the example of Vincent on Catholic priests and on Protestants at Châtillon-les-Dombes: he got up at five in the morning, spent a half-hour in prayer, spent many hours in the confessional, in visits to the sick, especially of those poor and in need of help, all in a well-organized way.

¹ Cf. J. Corea, “San Vicente de Paul, Formador,” in *Vincentiana* 28 (1984), 667-678; “La Formation,” in *Au temps de St.-Vincent-de-Paul . . . et aujourd’hui*, Cahier 38, Bordeaux, 1986; L. Mezzadri, *La sete e la sorgente*, Roma 1992, I, 69-71.

² Cf. SV I, 26; II, 356; VII, 613.

³ Cf. SV XI, 348.

His manner reawaked the consciences of Catholic priests and was a challenge for Protestants.⁴

We wish to mention a very significant activity: the spiritual exercises run at the house of *Saint-Lazare*. Beginning in 1635, the Vincentians welcomed into their house those who desired to discover in a serious manner their vocation and to grow in it. The poor and the rich, young and the old, students and doctors, priests, those who worked in the Parlement and in the court system, businessmen, artisans, soldiers and servants, all sought to stay there for a while. From 1635 until 1660 we calculate that about 20,000 people took part in what the house offered. These were not retreats organized and directed by someone, however, each participant could ask some counsel from the confreres, or from the candidates to the priestly state. The presence of the saint created an ambience of peace and trust. One of the participants confessed that he remained under the spell of the personality of Vincent, and could not express with what love he welcomed him into the house.⁵ In fact, Vincent received numerous signs of gratitude whether from priests or from lay people who had experienced his hospitality.⁶

We should remember here Vincent's concern for the nomination of worthy persons to the responsible tasks of the Church during the period that he was part of the Council of Conscience, from 1643 until the death of Louis XIII. His influence on the choice of worthy candidates for nomination as bishops contributed much to the reform of the Church in France during the 17th century, even though the not easy relations with Cardinal Mazarin did not make this task easier.

2. Motives to Commit Oneself to the Work of Formation

Now we shall describe the organizational methods of the formation of the clergy, which had great influence in the renewal of religious life in France during the period of time that concerns us. Vincent followed divine Providence step by step, wishing neither to retard nor hasten the steps indicated by it.⁷ Seeing the state of the religious life of country people, he was convinced that divine Providence was calling him to the evangelization of the poor country people, abandoned, and without the knowledge of the fundamental truths of faith necessary for salvation. Very quickly he arrived at the conclusion that, to maintain the good fruits of the missions that were preached, there was a need for priests who were well prepared and full of zeal. He was equally convinced that

⁴ Cf. J.M. Román, *San Vincenzo de' Paoli. Biografia* (trad. Italiana) Milano 1986, 108.

⁵ Cf. SV XIII, 134.

⁶ For a very detailed description cf. J.M. Román, op. cit., 310-315.

⁷ Cf. SV I, 68.

the renewal of religious life in the Church had to begin with the reform of the clergy. The reform of priests, in fact, begins in their formation. After years of rich experience, he confessed: *At the beginning, we thought of nothing less than of serving ecclesiastics, we only thought of ourselves and the poor.... At the beginning, as well, the Company only occupied itself of its own life and the work with the poor.... God permitted that it only seem this way to us, but, in the fullness of time, he called us to contribute to the formation of good priests, to give good pastors to parishes, and to show them what they must know and practice* (SV XII, 83-84).

In view of this need, three means of formation were created: retreats to ordinands, the Tuesday Conferences, and seminaries.⁸ These activities entered rather quickly among the principal ends of the Congregation. The saint wrote that our institute has two principal ends: the teaching of the poor people of the countryside and the formation of the clergy.⁹ Both the one and the other have equal importance, and we are obliged to both.¹⁰ Thus, if some confrere were to say that he was charged only with the evangelization of the poor country people — affirms the saint — and were not ready to take upon the task of the formation of the clergy, he would only be half a missionary, since he is charged for both tasks.¹¹

3. Retreats for Ordinands

A. Poirier, Bishop of Beauvais, asked St. Vincent to preach a retreat to the ordinands of the above-named diocese in September 1628. Having seen the excellent results of these retreats being lived out, the practice of organizing them was introduced in Paris, and then in the other dioceses of France, and even outside the borders of this country, that is, at Genoa and Rome. In the bull *Salvatoris nostri* these retreats are listed as one of the principal activities of the Congregation. Vincent was profoundly convinced that divine Providence had given this work to the community to prepare well the candidates to the priestly state. Well-prepared priests will preach the Gospel as agents of pastoral care, pastors and even bishops. The saint accepted this work in the spirit of humility. He wanted the confreres to preach the conferences in a spirit of simplicity, without the researched elements of rhetoric, convinced that simplicity edified the candidates, and that truths presented in a simple form were received willingly.¹²

⁸ On this theme much has been written, e.g., M. A. Roche, *Saint Vincent de Paul and the Formation of Clerics*, Fribourg 1984; J.M. Román, “La formation de clergé dans la tradition vinctienne,” *Vincentiana* 27 (1983), 136-153; C. Sens, “La formation du clergé,” *Vincentiana* 31 (1987) 751-762; and J.M. Román, *op. cit.*, 317-336; R. McCullen, “Ministry to Priests and the Vincentian Charism of Service to Clergy, Yesterday and Today,” *Vincentiana* 34 (1990) 220-229.

⁹ Cf. SV III, 273.

¹⁰ Cf. SV V, 489.

¹¹ Cf. SV VII, 561.

¹² Cf. SV II, 339.

During the retreat, which lasted from 10 days to 2 weeks, Vincent did not wish to give a synthesis of theology, since he was convinced that the candidates were already well instructed by our confreres: “they are not impressed by the learning, or by the beautiful things that are said to them, because they are wiser than we are... that which touches them: the virtues which they must practice” (SV XI, 11). The purpose of the retreats was thus the immediate and practical preparation for the sacrament of the priesthood. During the sessions, the candidates, in an atmosphere of prayer, of the sacrament of Penance, and of dialogue, must assure themselves of their vocation to the ecclesiastical state, and enter this service with a pure intention, that is, for the glory of God and for their own salvation.¹³ Vincent helped them to deepen their spirit of prayer, to take note of practical theology, to learn how to administer the sacraments. He taught them with words, but above all with the example of prayer and the exemplary manner of the celebration of the Eucharist. In the formation of candidates, all confreres took part, including the brothers.

At the beginning, Vincent prepared the plan of the retreat. Then (in 1634-1635), four confreres prepared a well-elaborated plan. One confrere, nominated as director, organized the retreat, and the other confreres collaborated with him. On the day of the arrival of the candidates, the confreres of the community welcomed them, showed them their rooms, and explained to them the program of the day.¹⁴

In the morning, the fundamental principals of moral theology, the Decalogue, Canon law, sacramentology and the Apostles’ Creed were explained. The program foresaw as well the explanation of the ceremonies of the seven sacraments, above all the celebration of Mass. Since there were 75-90 participants at each retreat, they were divided into groups of 12-15 persons after each explanation and, guided by a confrere, they discussed the themes presented during the presentation, be it a lesson or a conference. The program provided for the celebration of Office in common and community prayer. From the first day, the candidates prepared themselves for a general confession of their whole lives, or, at least, from their last general confession.

Vincent gave witness that God blessed this work. The priests, prepared for ordination in this manner, remained faithful to meditation, to the exemplary celebration of Mass and the other sacraments, and even to the practice of the examination of conscience, to the visits to the sick in hospitals, in the prisons where they taught the truths of faith, the conferences, and where they heard the confessions of prisoners. The participants in the retreats lived in an exemplary

¹³ Cf. SV XIII, 141-141.

¹⁴ Cf. J.M. Román, *op. cit.*, 320-322.

manner, and many of them took up posts of notable responsibility in the Church.¹⁵

4. Tuesday Conferences

This was the fine continuation of the positive experience during the retreats and is a very interesting example of how to do ongoing formation. Vincent confessed to having known the existence of meetings in which the participants made reflections on theological themes, above all on moral theology; in others they discussed cases of conscience; but he did not have any knowledge of meetings in which the virtues of the ecclesiastical state were discussed, the exemplary life of a priest and the solid realization of priestly duties. In the meetings organized by the saint the participants reflected on motivations for acquiring the virtues linked to the ecclesiastical state, to their essence, their manifestations, and on the necessary means to practice them. They also reflected on the duties of the clergy, both toward God and toward the neighbor.

In the rule for the Tuesday Conferences we read: *The Company of gentlemen who are ecclesiastics... has for its purpose to honor Our Lord Jesus Christ, its eternal priest, his holy family, and his love for the poor. Thus, each of them must try to conform his life to Jesus, to procure the glory of God in the ecclesiastical state, in his family and among the poor, even among those of the country, according to the office and the talents that God has given him* (SV XIII, 128). Thus, the end of the Conferences was the formation of the participants in the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Family, and also in his love for the poor. The participants made themselves aware of the needs of the poor, whom they had to serve; they also prepared themselves to preach missions.

The group of coordinators was composed of: a director, a prefect, two assistants, and a secretary. In the meetings priests, deacons, and subdeacons took part. Before accepting a member, those who were in charge asked for information about him. After being accepted, a candidate made an eight-day retreat and a general confession. The members met every Tuesday at the house of Saint-Lazare or in the College de Bons-Enfants. All were obliged to participate in all the meetings. The praying of the “Veni, Creator” began each meeting, which ended with the Marian antiphon. The theme of the meeting, announced in the previous reunion, was about the approaching liturgical feasts, current events, abuses and problems of society. The conferences and the discussions unfolded according to the Little Method, animated by simplicity. Each of the participants, in a humble and simple way, in writing or out loud, shared their thoughts about the practice of the virtues. The Eucharist, daily meditation, the Liturgy of the Hours, the reading of the New Testament, the

¹⁵ Cf. SV I, 204.

examination of conscience at midday and evening, all also constituted themes for reflection. On Holy Thursday, the participants renewed their baptismal promises and their promise of obedience.

The members of the Conferences, as we have said, made themselves aware of the needs of the poor. From 1641 they preached the missions to the galley slaves, in the hospice of small houses outside of Paris. The mission preached in 1641 in the quarter Saint-Germain-des-Prés had extraordinary fruits. There were conversions, reconciliations, and restitutions, repairing of scandals, surprising changes of life. Here there is the hand of God, the protagonists of that incredible adventure said. We can say that the hand of God guided the trusting and humble works of Vincent.¹⁶

From 1633 until the death of the saint, over 250 names of participants in the Conferences were enrolled. Many of them held important roles in the Church: 40 doctors of theology, 22 bishops, founders of religious communities, representatives in the Parliament, chaplains in the royal court, canons, and pastors.

The Conferences were founded at Puy (1636), Pontoise (1642), Angoulême (1647), Angers, Bordeaux, and in other cities whose names are not noted.¹⁷ They were also founded in Italy and in Ireland.¹⁸

5. Seminaries

The organization and direction of seminaries had made a very important contribution to the reform of the Church in 17th century France. The bishops had already tried to organize seminaries in the 15th century: In Italy (Pistoia, Florence, Bologna, Venice, Rome) and in France (Rheims, Aix, Châlon, Avignon). These efforts did not, however, bear the expected fruits.

Seeing the necessity of a solid preparation to the priesthood and the introduction of some discipline to the clergy, the Council of Trent, on July 15, 1563, had ordered the foundation of seminaries. Vincent was convinced that this decree came from the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ In France, however, the Tridentine reform was introduced with a notable delay. The French Parliament accepted the ordinances of Trent on July 7, 1615.

¹⁶ Abelly, I, part 2, cap. 3, 261-264, quoted by J.M. Román, *op. cit.*, 335.

¹⁷ Cf. J.M. Román, *op. cit.*, 331.

¹⁸ Cf. SV I, 537; II, 491.

¹⁹ Cf. SV II, 459.

In the work of renewal of the ecclesial state, noted persons of the time gave themselves to the task i.e. de Bérulle, Charles de Condren, A. Bourdoise, J. J. Olier, A. Duval, and Vincent de Paul.²⁰ The first attempts to organize seminaries did not succeed, above all because of the difference in the ages of the candidates. It was very difficult to prepare a good program that would respond to such different ages. Vincent divided the candidates into two groups. For the younger candidates he founded minor seminaries and for the older ones, who were preparing directly for the priesthood, major seminaries.

Among the major seminaries there were three types: the parochial seminary which prepared candidates for priestly service in a practical manner; the live-in seminary in which the students lived while they received their intellectual formation in universities or in colleges; and, finally, the seminary-college for intellectual and spiritual-liturgical formation. The seminaries directed by the Vincentians were of this third type, with the accent placed on pastoral preparation.

The first two seminaries given to the confreres were founded in Annecy and in Alet, and then in Marseille, Périgueux, and Montpellier. Other bishops also asked the saint to organize a seminary in their dioceses. In the year of the death of Vincent, the confreres directed 16 seminaries in France. J. M. Román, quoting H. Kaman, affirms that *the most important work of Vincent and the most decisive influence he had for the reform of France was his contribution to the formation of the clergy: change the Christian people by changing for this their ministers.*²¹

Vincent often underlined the importance of the spiritual formation of the clergy, he drew attention to the daily practices of piety: prayer, participation in the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, meditation and examination of conscience. He wrote that formation consisted “particularly in the interior life, and in the practice of prayer and of the virtues; because it is not enough to demonstrate for them chant, ceremonies, and a little moral theology; the primary thing is to form them in a solid piety and devotion” (SV IV, 597). The sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist held the principal post. The saint underlined the necessity of the virtues necessary to the ecclesiastical state, in a special way of obedience and chastity: *“That which I wish to recommend to you, in the name of Our Lord, is to carry those in your charge to the interior life. They will not lack knowledge if they have virtue, they will not lack virtue if they give themselves to*

²⁰ Cf. L. Nuovo, “Seminarios”, in *Diccionario del Espiritualidad Vincenciana*, Salamanca 1995, II, 563-565 (with the selected bibliography); also L. Mezzadri, “La Chiesa di Francia nel XVII secolo,” *Vincentina* 31 (1987) 438-456; J. Dukala, *Organizacja Studiów I przygotowanie do kapłaństwa alumnów w Seminariach Diecezjalnych pod zarządem Zgromadzenia Księży Misjonarzy w Polsce w latach 1675-1864* (doctoral thesis) Kraków 1975; L. Mezzadri, J.M. Román, *Historia Zgromadzenia Misji* (Polish translation) Kraków 1995, I, 245-288.

²¹ *op. cit.*, 331.

prayer, that being well and exactly done, it will unfailingly introduce them to the practice of mortification, of detachment from goods, the love of obedience, zeal for souls, and the rest of their obligations” (SV VIII, 3). The intention was to introduce the students to good participation in the liturgy, in ecclesiastical song, and in the teaching of the Catechism. Then, taking into consideration their age, they had to study different subjects.

Vincent was convinced that the purpose of formation was not so much intellectual formation, but rather spiritual and pastoral formation. From here comes the accent on the importance of pastoral practices. The saint wished to educate good pastors who would know how to preach, catechize, administer the sacraments and resolve cases of conscience. Summing up, he wished to form good pastors, pious, virtuous, and zealous.

For this reason, Vincent accepted parishes in the area of the seminary to give the students the possibility of some pastoral experience: *“but experience has helped us recognize that, where there is a seminary, it is good for us to have a parish to give the seminarians a place to work so that they can better learn priestly functions by practice as well as by theory” (SV VII, 253-4). The students also took part in the giving of missions to country people.*

Vincent was aware of the great importance of the work that Divine Providence had given him. He said that the candidates for the priesthood constitute the most precious treasure of the Church, and that their formation is the noblest task in the Church, but also the most difficult. One time, he said to the confreres: *“O my Savior! How much must the poor missionaries give themselves to you to contribute to the formation of good ecclesiastics, for this work is the most difficult, the most taxing, and the most important for the salvation of souls and for the advancement of Christianity!” (SV XI, 7-8). For this reason he assigned to this work the best and the most prepared confreres. He was convinced that we have to acquire the values ourselves and then share them with others. “And for this, Father, we must be the first to be filled with them, because it would be almost useless to give instruction about them to the students, without being living examples of them. We must be like filled up basins to make our waters flow without exhausting us, and we must possess this spirit with which we wish that they be animated, because no one can give what he does not have. Let us ask this of our Lord, and let us ask him ourselves for the grace to conform our conduct and our actions to his.... We will learn from Our Lord how our duty must be always accompanied by humility and grace, to attract to him the hearts of men and not to turn anyone away from him” (SV IV, 597). He also wrote: “I can only help you imagine, on the part of the Lord, that he wants them to be good and perfect ecclesiastics, that he wants them to do all in their power to become such, not putting aside prayer, sermons, exercises, or good example. See, Father, the treasure of the Church is there that God has confided to you, and the*

field where you must know how to value the graces that he has given to you” (SV VII, 30). This must be an ongoing commitment, full of seriousness, humility, and animated by a spirit of profound faith.

Conclusions

Many means and forms utilized by Vincent retain forever their freshness and value. We wish to mention a few of them here: distinction between minor and major seminary, formation by example and word, working together of the whole community, work in groups, accent on spiritual, pastoral, community and intellectual formation, retreats before ordination, pastoral practices, good preparation for the worthy celebration of the sacraments, good preparation for teaching Catechism.²² But in a special way we must underline the necessity of ongoing formation of priests and of the members of institutes of religious life for one's whole life, put in evidence with such force both in papal documents as well as those of the respective Roman dicasteries.²³

One among the fields of making concrete the end underlined in our present Constitutions is that of the formation of the clergy: *“The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ evangelizing the poor. This purpose is achieved when, faithful to St. Vincent, the members, individually and collectively... help the clergy and the laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor”* (C 1). We are thus invited to help clergy and laity in their formation and to get close to them for their participation in the evangelization of the poor. In the chapter on apostolic activity, we read: *“The formation of clerics in seminaries, a work of the Congregation from its beginnings, is to be effectively renewed where needed. In addition, members should afford spiritual assistance to priests both in the work of their ongoing formation and in promoting their pastoral zeal. They should work to encourage in them the desire of fulfilling the Church's option for the poor”* (C 15).

In the history of the Congregation many provinces have written a beautiful page on the formation of the clergy. Now, we must confess that the number of confreres engaged in this service is not sufficient and, sadly, is diminishing. The Superior General informs us that there are bishops who, above all in mission countries, ask the confreres to teach in and run seminaries. From countries on other continents these requests do not come. But I am convinced that the bishops will ask us to be capable and prepared as spiritual directors, both in seminaries

²² Cf. *Pastores dabo vobis* (exhortation of John Paul II) Vatican City 1992; also the document of the Holy See *La formazione negli istituti religiosi “Potissimum institutioni,”* Vatican City 1990.

²³ The following cites these documents, analyzes them and presents the means of this type of formation: A Zakrepta, *La formazione permanente dei religiosi. Studio giuridico-teologico* (doctoral thesis) Rome 1998.

and in regions of the diocese, as confessors of priests and seminarians, as preachers of spiritual retreats and of conferences for ongoing formation.

We can seek to find other ways to help the clergy in their formation, for example: organizing centers of ongoing formation; creating in our own houses (perhaps even with us) the possibility of making a retreat, or days of retreat; giving priests the possibility to celebrate the sacrament of Penance; welcoming priests into our houses; being concerned about older priests; teaching in seminaries; collaborating in an exemplary way with the clergy of the diocese as we take part in their various initiatives. The value of the example of our lives always remains valid. We can also write books and articles on priestly spirituality, and, finally, we can pray for their apostolate and their holiness. Even here, the famous expression of our saint can find realization: “*love is infinitely creative....*” (SV XI, 146)

(ROBERT J. STONE, C.M., translator)

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

by Alvaro Quevedo Patarroyo, C.M.
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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.

(PHILIP VAN LINDEN, C.M., translator)

Models of “Being Holy”

— A View toward the Past, the Present, and the Future —

Deep in the heart of every Christian lies the desire to be holy. It is part of our “job description,” so to speak; in baptism, we pledge to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rm 13:14).

A few years ago I took part in my first canonization, in which John Gabriel Perboyre was declared a saint. The celebration, I must say, touched me far beyond what I had anticipated. Since then, I have found myself reflecting often on models of holiness. I remember reading, as a boy, the lives of Isaac Jogues and Jean de Brébeuf. They moved me deeply. I had many a fantasy about paddling my canoe to the remotest reaches of Canada and shedding my blood for the sake of the gospel! I also recall devouring a poignant biography of Damien the Leper. I was forcefully struck by his life and death and by the stirring letter that Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in his defense. I imagined myself ministering to the most abandoned, though I surely found wasting away with leprosy much less attractive than a swift martyr’s death!

For Catholics in all ages the saints have made holiness real. They give it flesh. They show us in the concrete what it means to live the gospel. Even in our most anti-institutional moments or in cultures where events like canonizations evoke less than an enthusiastic response, there is something deep within us that yearns for holiness. We want the charity of Christ to fill us. That is, after all, what it means to be a Christian.

Four Models

From the lives of the saints, our tradition has distilled certain models. Models are concrete images. They are not metaphors like the classical “following of Christ,” “climbing the ladder of perfection,” or “ascending the spiritual mountain”; rather they give a clear, brief (even if incomplete) insight into the concrete reality of holiness and make us aware of what commitment to it involves. They are like “icons” of the gospel, symbols of Christian self-giving.

Models do not exhaust the reality; they are partial representations of it. They complement rather than exclude each other, as each places a particular emphasis on what it means to be holy. As symbols, they also arouse an affective response within us, drawing us toward the goal of holiness. Who could fail to be moved, even while horrified, in reading how Brébeuf’s captors ate his heart in the hope of absorbing the courage they had seen him display!

Below, I will describe a few of these models, with the hope that they will be helpful to all of us in seeing where we might fit.

1. **Martyr**

The Christian community has offered this model to believers right from the beginning, presenting it to us dramatically in the gospels. Jesus “lays down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). All four evangelists build their narratives toward the climatic story of Jesus’ passion and death, followed by the triumph of his resurrection.

Jesus’ dying love has been the source of strength for countless martyrs since his time. Even the telling of martyrs’ stories has often been influenced by the passion accounts of the gospel. This is quite evident in the narration of Stephen’s martyrdom in the Book of the Acts, with its many similarities to the death of Jesus. John Gabriel Perboyre gave his life in a manner strikingly similar to Christ’s death. He was betrayed by a disciple, suffered a long passion, forgave his enemies, and died on a cross. As the story of his heroic death was recounted again and again, it took on more and more of the details of Jesus’ passion.

The wonderful part about this first model is its striking clarity and simplicity. It is wonderfully inspiring, arousing our admiration and our deep-seated desire to give generously. The martyr, out of love, renounces the most basic of all human gifts, life. Some saints, like Polycarp, underwent a martyrdom which crowned a long life that was already strikingly holy. “I have served Christ for 86 years,” Polycarp told his captors, “how could I deny my king and savior now?” For others, martyrdom was more like a “second baptism,” washing away their (even rather notable) sins “in the blood of the lamb.” One 16th century martyr, for example, was living in concubinage at the time of his death. That paled into insignificance, however, in the light of his martyrdom; he was canonized anyway (something that might strike us as rather odd!). In that sense, his martyrdom was perceived as an “express ticket” to the Kingdom of God.

In recent times, theologians like Karl Rahner have often recommended that the concept of martyrdom be broadened. Traditionally martyrdom has been defined as acceptance of death “for the faith.” In the case of Maria Goretti’s canonization in 1950, “faith” also included Christian morals. Moreover, in 1982 the Church recognized Maximilian Kolbe as a martyr in giving his life in substitution for another. One might hope for a similar broadening of the concept in the case of Oscar Romero, widely recognized as a martyr but not yet canonized, who gave his life by standing in solidarity with the poor in their struggle for justice. This might be said of many others in Latin America, like Rutilio Grande.

But as a model, martyrdom has some disadvantages. Martyrs are relatively rare. Few of us will walk that path. While we might long for the clear, simple, dramatic gesture, the truth is that, for most of us, the following of Christ will involve bearing the cross day-in and day-out, over a long life, with patience and fidelity. As a wise old missionary once said to me, “It is often harder to live for Christ than to die for him.”

The martyr-model can also breed an occasional fanatic. We see kamikaze terrorists today who give their lives willingly, while killing others, convinced that this guarantees their immediate entrance into God’s presence. I once knew a fiery prelate of whom a friend of mine said, with some frustration: “He was born to be a martyr. He is ready to die for any cause and fights with equally fierce tenacity whether the issue is great or small.” So far, he is still alive!

2. **Ascetic**

As the early persecutions came to an end and Christians became conscious that relatively few were winning the crown of martyrdom, they began to focus more sharply on another model: the ascetic. “Asceticism” means training or discipline. Christ’s “athlete” seeks the laurel wreath placed on the head of the winner at the end of life’s race. “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. From now on a merited crown awaits me” (2 Tim 4:7). The ascetic often engages in fasting, sexual abstinence, and an austere or simple lifestyle. The point of such ascetical practices, at least in their best form, is not to “give up” objects, but to reconstruct the self, to become a new person. In other words, all self-denial has growth in love as its goal.

Over the centuries virginity and celibacy have stood near the top of the ascetical ladder. This reflects how highly the Christian community has esteemed the sacrifice involved in renouncing sexual intimacy. But of course, the quest for holiness does not end with such renunciation. The same energy that a person might have poured into the pursuit of marital fidelity, or possessions, or power is meant to be expended in the service of the Lord and his Kingdom.

The ascetical model has many advantages. It has given birth to numerous saints because it has enabled them to concentrate their energies on the affairs of the Lord. In fact, the following of Christ always involves discipline, “taking up one’s cross daily” (Lk 9:23). On the list of ascetics and great lovers of the cross, one thinks spontaneously of Francis of Assisi whose life has fascinated countless Christians. He lived with wonderful simplicity, renouncing family, wealth, marriage, and power, while still obviously being deeply in love with creation.

The witness of a simple lifestyle, of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, of humble and obedient responsiveness to the needs of the poor is a powerful sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God. An ascetic model, while not very

much in vogue today, has enormous relevance in a consumer society characterized by the inequitable distribution of wealth, an entertainment culture, the desire for immediate gratification, and exploitative sexual and power relationships.

On the debit side, ascetics have always run the risk of Pelagianism, an athletic view of salvation. The tendency is to think that if one “trains” well enough, the race is won. Ascetics can become proud of their “works.” They can become hard on others who seem less disciplined. But ultimately, holiness is a gift from God, not an ascetical achievement. Only the humble are able to receive it.

3. **Contemplative**

Jesus’ prayer is striking in the gospels. Christians have always been fascinated by his union with God, whom he called his Father. From very early times, some went off into the desert to pray, as Jesus did. Gradually, communities became organized and, with time, a whole monastic tradition developed, with St. Benedict laying the ground rules.

Contemplation is, of course, not limited to monks, as Thomas Merton often pointed out. I think immediately of Blessed Anna Maria Taigi, a housewife who lived in 19th century Rome, famous for her works among the poor and her contemplative union with God, all of which she carried out while raising seven children of her own and taking care of the six children of her widowed daughter. I recall, likewise, Madame Acarie, mother of six, to whom all the great spiritual leaders in France at the beginning of the 17th century came for advice about union with God; her children laughed with her, in her later years, as they reminisced about how they had to wait for her to come out of her mystical ecstasies.

The serious pursuit of holiness, in whatever form it might take, has consistently recognized the need for union with God in some form of prayer. In the monastic tradition, however, life’s contemplative dimension stands out in stark relief. One withdraws from society in order to hear the deepest voices of reality: the word of God and the cries of suffering humanity.

The contemplative model has some wonderful advantages. It places before us with great clarity one of the indispensable elements of New Testament spirituality: union with God in Christ. The contemplative dedicates his or her life to meditating on God’s word, to singing his praises, and, at times, to a “wordless” kind of union that is often described as “contemplative prayer.”

The dangers of this model are “escapism” and “angelism.” The contemplative’s withdrawal from the world, as Thomas Merton reminded his

readers, must enable him or her to hear life's deepest voices. If one simply flees, one remains rapt in splendid isolation. Moreover, the contemplative must be ever mindful of the concreteness of life. We express ourselves bodily, not as angels. Real Christian love must body-forth in concrete acts. One is surely suspect who has beautiful contemplative moments but is difficult to live with and relate to.

4. **Servant**

Outgoing charity is the core of the following of Christ. "By this shall all know that you are my disciples: that you love one another" (Jn 13:35). The other day I met two recently retired Italian women, both nurses. I asked them how they were enjoying their new leisure. They told me that it was wonderful. They finally have time to relax. Each — as they told me — has obtained, through Catholic Charities, a list of sick people to whom she ministers, visiting them in their homes. I was struck by how spontaneously they had focused on an essential aspect of the gospels at this autumn time in their lives: serving those in need. There have been millions of individuals like them, not to mention the many communities founded specifically for that purpose. Saints like Vincent de Paul, communities like the Daughters of Charity, and the countless lay groups that reach out to touch the needy are a striking sign in the world of the good news of God's presence.

A significant advantage of this model is that it can be lived out in very varied circumstances. Missionaries, spouses, teachers, lawyers, doctors, nurses, can all build their lives on the gospel foundation of a call to service. This is especially true because gospel service need not be dramatic but can be as simple as "giving a cup of cold water" (Mt 10:42) to the thirsty. From the prominent politician who regards himself as a "public servant," to the obscure poor person who finds ways of serving others who are even poorer, all can identify in some way with the servant role.

The danger of this model is, of course, activism. If the contemplative might attempt to live as an angel, the servant might try to be a messiah, shouldering all the world's problems. If the former does too little, the latter attempts too much, burning himself or herself out and winding up disillusioned or bitter.

These four models give all of us plenty to work on. The martyr tells us that some things are worth dying for, foremost among these being our faith in Christ. The ascetic reminds us of the cost of discipleship: there is no following of Christ without denying oneself and taking up the cross daily. The contemplative accents the transcendent, calling us to union with God in prayer. The servant teaches us that practical, everyday charity lies at the heart of New

Testament spirituality and is the only really convincing sign that one loves God and one's neighbor.

A fifth model?

The models complement one another. Most, if not all, saints whose lives epitomize the servant model were also deeply prayerful. The contemporaries of Vincent de Paul, surely one of the most active saints of charity, recognized him as a contemplative. His followers in fact, are called to be "contemplatives in action and apostles in prayer." Likewise, many ascetics have been generous servants (one need only think of the Curé of Ars) and many contemplatives have been formidable ascetics (like Anthony in the desert). Martyrs, of course, have also offered striking examples of all the other models.

But while each of the models can be an effective springboard to holiness, especially when complemented by the other models, they all have a somewhat "privatizing" ring about them. In an age where we emphasize the role of the community in the quest for holiness (we are baptized into *the Church*; we celebrate the liturgy *as a community*), the four models speak very much of the individual. One could, of course, supplement the models by adding additional considerations about how important the support of others is to the martyr, the ascetic, the contemplative, and the servant. But the models themselves do not clearly carry that connotation with them. In that sense, they leave something to be desired.

May I suggest another model which, to be truthful, you will not find on the classical list distilled from the Christian tradition, but which I would love to see added in the future. For debating purposes, let me call it "the couple." I choose the name "the couple," because married persons, we believe, enter into a covenant to work out their holiness *together*. They are to love one another as Christ loved the Church, with a love that is sacrificial, forgiving, service-oriented, and faithful unto death.

Actually, over the centuries, there have been many husband and wife saints. They have come from all strata of society. At the head of the list stand Mary and Joseph, who came from the surroundings of a wood-worker's shop. Priscilla and Aquila, both regarded as saints, earned their living as tent-makers. Justinian (482-565) and Theodora, saints in the Orthodox tradition, were emperor and empress. St. Stephen and Blessed Gisela (11th century) were the first king and queen of Hungary. Isidore of Madrid and María de la Cabeza (12th century) were farmers.

Of course, I recognize that, ironically, some spouses become saints *in spite of* their husband or wife, or precisely *because of the difficulties* created by

their partner, but that is by no means the Christian ideal. The ideal is that they walk the Christian journey together.

The couple model has two striking advantages. First, it has wide applicability. Most people get married. Committed married life is the ordinary way in which most Christians grow holy or fail to do so. Would it not be wonderful to hold up before today's Christian community a number of striking examples of modern married saints, *both* of whom were canonized. These saints would surely have profited from the other models (since, as mentioned above, all the models are complementary), learning self-giving from the martyr, self-denial from the ascetic, prayer from the contemplative, and action from the servant. But the couple's pilgrimage, and learning, would be a common project.

This brings me to the second advantage of the model. It is communal, social. The couple pledges to mirror the union of Christ and his Church, to work out their holiness *together*. This communal dimension of the model corresponds to the reality of the following of Christ, which always takes place in company with others.

On the debit side, one might object that the couple-model underrates the individual responsibility which the human person can ultimately never shirk and which is the precise reception-place for God's gift of holiness. That is surely a valid caution. Nonetheless, I sense that it is precisely the opposite side of the coin that needs more emphasis today: namely, that marriage is a covenant of holiness which husbands and wives enter into *together*.

Will the third millennium bring us canonizations of "saintly couples"? I hope so.