

# Vincent de Paul: Co-founder of the Daughters of Charity

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If we took Vincent de Paul at his word, this would be a very short conference. *I never thought about this*, he reminds the first sisters when he talks to them about the foundation of the Daughters of Charity (SV IX, 202). Vincent had a way of looking back at foundational events and giving them a mythical re-interpretation. Usually he downplayed his own role and highlighted the action of God in the history of his foundations.

One problem in talking about this topic is that we have to approach it in a way that St. Vincent himself avoided. Obviously the Company of the Daughters of Charity didn't fall from heaven. St. Vincent was heavily involved in the foundation of the Company. He made important contributions for a quarter of a century.

A second, bigger problem, is that he was a co-founder, not the only founder. St. Louise had a big hand in the foundation. On the day to day level, clearly things fell more directly on her shoulders. But, on almost every level of development of the Company of the Daughters of Charity the two founders acted together. They shared so much, sometimes in ways we don't know about (lost letters, private conversations, etc.) that it is difficult to separate one influence from the other.

I have taken that as the key to this conference. I found it unhelpful to try and separate the roles and actions of the two founders. The foundation is not a mathematical equation where you can talk about percentages and clear divisions of influence. It seems to me a better approach, somehow reflected in the history of the foundation, to point out three areas where St. Vincent's contribution was important, without trying to ask who was the bigger influence in a particular area.

## 1. A Theological Vision

One of the reasons that St. Vincent gave so many conferences to the first sisters was his desire to share a his vision with them. Every time he speaks with them he finds a way to help them understand the world,

God and a Vincentian way of living the Gospel. Even when his topics are very practical, there's an underlying theological vision which animates the conference.

### **A. *Vision of the world***

The Church in the Seventeenth Century was reacting to the ideas of the Renaissance, especially its exaltation of humanity. The position of many, perhaps most, theologians, was to emphasize God's grace and the sinfulness of humanity. By rejecting the world as a place of evil, they hoped to defend the need for God and his grace. Orthodox theologians, like Berulle and his followers would have accepted this basic scheme. Flight from the world became the road to perfection in this vision. Taken to an extreme, this Augustinian theology led to Jansenism.

A second, more positive, theology grew up around Francis de Sales and his disciples. Without negating the presence of sin or the weakness of the human person, Francis saw the world in positive terms. Since the world was God's creation, it became the place to experience salvation or to live the Gospel. The path to salvation was the response to God's love in the world. In the first pages of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* Francis tells his readers that the life of devotion is simply the life of love. Everyone is capable of responding to God's grace, without escaping the world, by living a life of love.

St. Vincent was familiar with both schools of thought. Many of his friends were influenced by the dominant Augustinian theology. Berulle was one of his early spiritual guides. He frequently used the negative language and expressions of the French School. Nonetheless I think he uses the idiom of the times with a different meaning. The content is almost always closer to the theology of Francis de Sales despite the language. He found in the Bishop of Geneva a kindred spirit. Francis was his image of a good, pastoral man. More importantly, I think Francis gave him a way to understand his own experience of finding God in the world of the poor.

A lot of St. Vincent's language only makes sense in the framework of a positive theology of the world. *Coming and going, secular, not religious* – phrases that appear all of the time in his conferences – reflect a positive image of the world. It is the place where God acts and the sisters come to holiness.

### **B. *An Understanding of God***

St. Vincent spent a long time avoiding God and the poor. Almost half his life was spent running from the encounter with God. At the heart of his conversion experience, the fruit of all those events like

Clichy, Folleville, Chatillon and the rest, was a profound experience of Christ's presence in the poor. He spent a lot of energy in his early days escaping poverty. For a while he was able pursue his own plans for a comfortable life.

One of the things he came to realize was that God entered his life to bring him to salvation. The farther away he was from the poor, the farther away he was from God. Little by little he was able to open his life to God's love as he opens his life to the poor. So he begins to understand that God is Providence. That's not *Christian Good Luck*. It's God's will to save. God who had saved him, acts in love to bring the poor to salvation. Everything is in God's hands.

### **C. A Missionary Ecclesiology**

Like most of his contemporaries in the age of the Catholic Reform, the saint was influenced by the decisions of the Council of Trent. Many of his projects (clerical reform, missions, etc.) grew out of the concerns of the Council. The agenda at Trent was affected by the need to reform abuses in the Church and the struggle with Protestantism. The strong criticisms by the Protestant reformers of the Catholic sacramental system and practice moved the bishops to focus on priestly ministry. The need to reform abuses caused them to ask the question: How do we organize the Christian community better? The response of the Council centered around a well organized community, directed by the hierarchy and a better trained clergy. The ecclesiology of the Council was inner-directed.

Vincent shared some of the concerns of the post-Tridentine reformers. But his own missionary experience colored his ecclesiology. The fundamental question for him became not how do we organize the community, but rather, how do we evangelize the poor? It was a shift to a missionary model of the Church. That missionary ecclesiology in turn raised the questions about ministry. St. Vincent began to understand ministry (lay men and women, Daughters of Charity, priests of the Mission) to go out to the poor in new ways.

### **D. A New Form of Religious Life**

Everyone knows that St. Vincent insisted that the sisters were not religious. The first Daughters of Charity were part of the Confraternities of Charity. Later on they evolved into the Company of the Daughters of Charity. These were ways to avoid assuming the structures of religious life, especially the cloister. The great fear for the founders was that the ordinary way of living religious life would become an obstacle to the service of the poor.

I think there's another element to this that is not always recognized. The first sisters were poor women. Religious life was mostly the preserve of the wealthy in the seventeenth century. They were the only ones who could afford the dowry. Some of those communities of religious women also offered a limited service of the poor. But they did it as rich women from a cloister.

It's interesting that the model for the Daughters of Charity was Marguerite Nazeau, a poor woman from the country. St. Vincent frequently refers to the virtues of country girls. He was slow to accept women who were not poor into the Company. He wanted women who would serve the poor, not from above or outside the world of the poor, but from the reality of the poor. The idea was so radical it still causes us problems four hundred years later. The lack of a cloister wasn't so much about bars on the windows of a building. It was a way to insert people into the life of the poor. The best way to do that was with poor women living like the poor.

## **2. The Vincentian Charism**

When St. Vincent and St. Louise took the first steps to found the Company they both had passed the mid-point of their lives. It's interesting that at a moment in life where most people become more conservative, they became more radical. The two founders were on fire with the charism. They inspired the first sisters with that charism.

By 1617 St. Vincent knew that God was calling him to dedicate his life to the service of the most abandoned. It took him longer to understand that God was also calling him to share that charism with others. As events unfolded in his life he had discern what were the steps he needed to take to include others in the charism. Vincent was always practical and he could see the difficulties in founding communities inspired with this new vision. This was especially true in the case of the Daughters of Charity. As early as 1630, St. Louise was suggesting that they found some type of community. St. Vincent hesitated for three years until he was sure that they could organize a group of women around the Vincentian charism.

In the twenty-seven years that followed the coming together of the first sisters in St. Louise's house, the Daughters of Charity would find their own way of embodying the charism of service to the poor. They shared many things with the other Vincentian groups. However they developed their own structures and life-style and organization. St. Vincent's role here was to keep calling them back to the initial inspiration for those structures in the service of the poor.

### 3. Vincentian Spirituality

Vincentian spirituality is perhaps St. Vincent's most lasting contribution to the foundation of the Daughters of Charity. Vincentian spirituality is a way of living the Gospel according to the Vincentian charism. The path to holiness for any Christian is the Gospel. In his conferences and letters, St. Vincent points out to the sisters (frequently at St. Louise's suggestion) ways to live the Gospel. Let me point out a few of the characteristics of that Spirituality:

#### A. *Christocentric*

Christian spirituality is always centered on Christ. Different spiritualities reflect different experiences of Christ. In the Vincentian tradition the image of Christ is the poor Christ who evangelizes the poor. By word and act Jesus communicates God's love to the poor. The Gospel is Good News because it responds to the bad news that the poor experience all of the time. The biblical accounts show Jesus preaching the in-breaking of the Kingdom. In each instance he finds a way to respond to people's needs. So to the hungry, he provides food; to the sick, healing; to sinners, forgiveness.

St. Vincent says over and over again that we participate in the mission of Jesus. Following Jesus among the poor means assuming Jesus' cause, the Kingdom of God.

#### B. *Sacramentality of the poor*

The following of Christ is not a static or abstract. He invites us to follow him among the poor. So we find him present among the abandoned or we do not find him. In the Vincentian tradition it is not either Christ or the poor; but rather, Christ in the poor.

The presence of Christ in the poor is not transparent or self-evident. St. Vincent doesn't say we see Christ in the poor. He says the poor represent Christ to us. There is a sacramental quality to this presence. When we go to the poor, we serve the poor as our brothers and sisters in need. We see the poor. It is a faith experience that enables us to find Christ in the experience. If you think about the Seven Sacraments you get some idea of how this works. At the Eucharist we see a piece of bread. My faith tells me something more is present.

We sometimes say that the poor evangelize us. I think people mean by that the good poor. The people who give good example in the midst of their poverty, live a moral life, go to Church. I think even the poor who are not so good, those who don't go to Church or

lead a moral life also evangelize us. They call us to love the unlovable. They give us the opportunity to expand our horizons to include the excluded.

### **C. *Missionary***

Following Jesus on the periphery of society means going to an encounter with the poor on the margins. The poor live in another reality where different values hold sway. Following Jesus is missionary because it means leaving our place in the center of society and entering another place with the economic and social outcasts. It's the free choice of making the world of the poor our world. We cross the boundaries of race, class, culture and status in order to live the Gospel with the most abandoned. The missionary seeks to love in unfamiliar territory by being a herald of God's mercy among those who have been shown no mercy.

Missionary in this sense is not so much a geographical change. It is the willingness to enter the world of the poor and abandoned. The virtues of the Company have a lot to say in this context. St. Vincent offered simplicity, humility and charity to the sisters because they were the things he himself lacked as a young priest. He knew from his own experience that without them it was impossible to enter the world of the poor.

### **D. *Secular***

Vincentian spirituality is secular. That doesn't mean atheist or separated from God. It means being in the world. Vincent points that out to the sisters in that famous conference:

*For a monastery the streets of the city; for a cell a rented room  
For a chapel the parish church; for a veil, holy modesty...*

This is a call for insertion into the world and its problems. Vincentian spirituality does not lead to the chapel, but to the houses of the poor. Where else can we live the Gospel – charity, forgiveness, justice, humility – if not in the world of the poor?

The secular dimension of Vincentian spirituality points out that spirituality is always lived out in relationships with other people, especially the poor. Whatever you do to the least of my brothers – in the words of Matthew 25.

### **E. *Contemplative in action***

When we say that we don't live the Gospel in the chapel, we don't mean that the chapel is not important. Nothing is possible without prayer. By prayer I don't mean common exercises or acts of piety (as important as they may be) I'm talking about the personal dialogue with the Lord about the events of life. It's sharing with God about what's happening in community, ministry and my personal life.

Everyone needs moments of silence, time apart to concentrate on the dialogue with Christ. It's about creating spaces in the midst of responsibilities and an active life. In this conversations with Christ it's always important to ask: Where is Christ in the different situations I encounter? What are the Gospel values and the disvalues? What does Christ tell me here?

### **F. *Charity***

The goal of any spirituality is charity. This life leads to love or it makes no sense. It always has something to with relationships. Charity is an encounter between people. In the Vincentian tradition it is meeting the poor with the spirit of God's love. It is the response to our brothers and sisters who are in need. We can pay people to do our work. But we can never replace the fraternal encounter with the poor.

Every time we go to the poor in charity something happens to them and something happens to us. What is Good News for them becomes Good News for us as well. For them it is a response to their needs and maybe the experience of God's love. For us it is the path to love on in ever-deeper ways.

## **4. Conclusion**

St. Vincent made many contributions to the foundation of the Daughters of Charity. The three things I mentioned in this conference – a theological vision, the Charism and Vincentian Spirituality – seem to me to be the most important. All the all the other things he did with the sisters flow from these fundamental elements.