

# IN THE SERVICE OF THE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED

*by Gerard van Winsen, C.M.*

In the preface to the English translation of the biography of Monsieur Vincent by Abelly, Stafford Poole, despite some reservations, says that this work is for us fundamental, unique and indispensable, the one important source.(1) It is especially through Abelly that we know what Monsieur Vincent did for the mentally handicapped and what he said about work in their service.

Abelly, in passing, makes some comments in his text in which we see what people of his time thought about the mentally handicapped; "These people are not capable of recognising the good that people do for them, are normally dirty, embarrassing and sometimes even dangerous.(2) Everyone scorns them and no one wants to be burdened with them."(3) Abelly also writes; "these people, mentally disturbed, are a burden to their parents and a shame to their families."(4)

These quotes give the impression that seventeenth century society had little esteem for these people. We are especially struck by the words; "they are a shame to their families." It is in this context, which conveys an attitude of mind, that we must judge the attitude and words of M. Vincent.

## **1. THE MENTALLY DISTURBED AT ST. LAZARE**

In 1632 there were three or four mentally handicapped people at St. Lazare,(5) whom the Augustinians had kept in their house. M. Vincent continued the care and treatment of these poor men. According to Pierre Coste, in 1659 there were between 50 and 60 'held' at St. Lazare, but one cannot be exact about how many of these were mentally handicapped.(6) Up to the French Revolution the Congregation took care of these people. A priest was in charge of the work, another took care of their spiritual needs, while the brothers watched over them and took charge of other necessary services. The families of the sick paid board and lodging.(7)

Monsieur Vincent thought that it was Divine Providence which had given this work of serving the insane to the Company.(8) He had not looked for this work, but had taken it from the Augustinians, when they had left St. Lazare;

"We are not going to look for them, they will be led to us; and how do we know that, if His Providence has ordered it so, He does not wish to use us to improve the condition of these poor people?"

M. Vincent, as he himself admits, loved these poor people;

"At that time, we had a case, whereby we would either be driven from or remain in the house of St. Lazare; and I remember asking myself: "If

you must now leave this house what affects, and will affect, you most? And what will cause you the greatest sadness and regrets? And it seemed to me, at that time, that it would be never again to see these poor people and to leave their care and service."(9)

When the brothers gave the residents meat and wine left over from the day before, M. Vincent railed against this abuse for two reasons;

- 1) it was an injustice because the families were paying for good treatment;
- 2) the sick were not able to defend themselves against such conduct.

The brothers must confess their faults!(10)

At the end of his life, M. Vincent was very preoccupied with keeping and transmitting his charism to the Company. We see this worry in the conference of 6 December 1658 on the the End of the Congregation of the Mission;

"But, Sir, another will say to me, is it our rule to receive at St. Lazare the mad and these deplorable souls who are such little demons? I will say to him that Our Lord wished to be surrounded by lunatics, demoniacs, the insane and the possessed."(11)

## **2. THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY AND THEIR CARE OF THE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED**

The Daughters of Charity were installed, in the second half of 1655, in the 'Petites Maisons' ('Little Houses'), to take care of 400 people afflicted by madness, shameful illnesses or illegitimacy.

M. Vincent knew the situation of this institution . Even before the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission he preached a mission there.(12) What he tells us about the situation in the 'Petites Maisons' is terrible;

"These are people who, for the most part, have led disordered lives, who have never made their confession as they should and who are about to appear at the Judgment of God.(13) These are all people who are mad and disturbed, extremely weak-minded, who live entirely with a bad grace. There are constant fights. Oh, there is nothing at all like it. I cannot tell you about it. There is so little ability to mix with one another that they cannot even live two together and must constantly be separated. Each makes his own way."(14)

It wasn't easy to find a place for a sick person in this institution. When Sr. Marguerite Chetif requested M. Vincent's help in getting a place there for a handicapped person he had to answer;

"I do not have enough standing there to have this good man, distracted in his mind, of whom you write, taken in at the Petites Maisons, because there is never a vacant space, being reserved, as they are, by others a long time before they come free. Please let his children know that I am

very put out not to be able to get this consolation for them, and that they would do well to send him."(15)

When the Sisters began their work in the Petites Maisons Mlle. LeGras asked M. Vincent to explain to the Sisters what good they would be able to do there and in what way.(16) M. Vincent did this in passing in the conference of 18 October 1655.(17)

Sr. Anne Hardemont was named Superior but, due to difficulties, was replaced by Sr. Cecile-Agnes Angiboust.(18)

### **3. THE MOTIVES FOR TAKING CARE OF THE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED**

From the time of his experience at Gannes and Folleville, M. Vincent was always thinking about the salvation of souls. He wanted to help men and women to live in the fellowship of God. The means for this was the mission. It is perhaps the reason why he had even preached a mission at the Petites Maisons; "I have never seen more beautiful missions than those given at the hospital of the Petites Maisons in this town."(19)

Here we can state a first motive of M. Vincent's for working with the mentally handicapped; his zeal for the salvation of souls. He has a clear judgement of the moral situation of a person with mental handicap;

"Certainly, those reduced to this state are greatly worthy of compassion. It is really true that they are, in some way, in a state of sinlessness, not being masters of their own will, and having neither judgement nor liberty. And in this they must be esteemed blessed, if, when they fell into this state, they were in a state of grace; while, on the other hand, they have much to grieve for if this state overcame them in a state of mortal sin."(20)

For M. Vincent a second motive for serving these poor people was the example of Christ Himself. Our Lord was surrounded by the mad and the possessed.(21)

M. Vincent is touched by the words of St. Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians; "But we, we proclaim a crucified Christ, a scandal for Jews and folly to the pagans."(22) M. Vincent deduced from this that Christ was regarded as a mad man. And he says to the Daughters of Charity;

"You must know, Sisters, that the Lord wished to undergo, in His own person, all possible sufferings. The expression in Scripture is that he wished to pass as a scandal for Jews and madness for Gentiles to show you that you can serve him in all poor afflicted people. That is why he wanted to enter into this state, to sanctify it like all others. It is in this belief that you must offer them service and, when you go to see them, you must rejoice and say to yourselves; I am going to these poor people

to honour in them the person of Our Lord; I am going there to see the incarnate wisdom of God, who desired to pass as one of them, though not, in fact, being so."(23)

M. Vincent is also forcefully struck by the verses in Mark 3, 20-21; "He came to the house...and his own people, learning this, set out to take hold of him, for they said; he has lost his mind."

M. Vincent believes that the service of the mentally handicapped is even more meritorious since these people cannot show their thanks for it.

#### **4. IT IS NECESSARY TO WORK FROM THE BASIS OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS**

For a number of years I have celebrated the Eucharist on Sundays in an institution for the mentally handicapped. How, in pastoral practice, can we apply the Vincentian doctrine on mental problems?

It is a joy for me to work for these people, because it is truly a Vincentian work. In Monsieur Vincent's time there were no medicines for sedating the mentally disturbed. From what M. Vincent says, and especially from the comparison that he makes with Jesus (*in frenesim ductus est*)(24) we can conclude that the mentally disturbed lodging at St. Lazare were occasionally fiery and very difficult. That is perhaps why M. Vincent said that these men were not able to show their thanks. My own experience shows me that one certainly cannot generalise that remark.

But I have to recognise that the idea that I meet Christ in these people is not a living one for me. When one regularly goes amongst them that becomes one's ordinary milieu; what one meets in society outside, one also sees in an institution like this. There are likable people, there are people who want personal contact but there are also difficult or problem people.

I often believe (and I say it with all the necessary reservations) that there are members of staff who work with the idea that these handicapped people are people who, like others, have the right to have a good life. I have a great admiration for the nurses, men and women, who work every day for the insane and I do not understand their perseverance in this work. At the human level, I have seen some beautiful scenes, especially when a patient dies. The more a patient has been in need of the care of the staff, the stronger is the bond which develops between the nurses and the patient. With the death this link is broken and they often wait for a word of consolation from the chaplain.

My conclusion is; from a human basis, it is possible to work with the insane for many years. Or could it be that I am fooling myself about the deepest motives of the staff that I have watched at work for many years?

However, this is my difficulty with the Vincentian doctrine, which is nothing more than that of the Gospel. The mentally handicapped wish to be encountered at a human level, they must be recognised as people. The handicapped person wishes to be helped because each is a human person, with particular gifts and particular faults. I cannot diminish him into an object to help me in my encounter with Christ.

How can I avoid this difficulty? There must be a unity between the human and the faith levels. Through experience I know that, when I become impatient with the handicapped, I must search for the reason within myself; when they are always asking me the same thing, always telling me the same stories, never leaving me a moments recollection before the Eucharist celebration. Therefore I recognise in myself the necessity of meditating on the words of Jesus; "Amen, I say to you, each time you have done this to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me."(25)

But at the Vincentian level, I am convinced that M . Vincent's doctrine on meeting the Christ is completed by his doctrine on mercy. According to him mercy is the fruit of charity;

It is true that you cannot watch another suffer if you do not suffer with them, that you cannot watch another cry, if you do not cry with them. It is an act of love which makes hearts enter into one another and feel what each other feels, far different to those who have no feeling for the pain of the affected or the suffering of the poor.(26)

In my opinion, charity must be completed by its fruit; mercy, in order to really encounter another person both at the human and the faith level.

Personally, I am more moved by M. Vincent's idea that Christ has sanctified this state. For me, it is a far more useful way to meet with and work amongst these people in the spirit of the Gospels.

## **5. CELEBRATING THE EUCHARIST WITH THE HANDICAPPED**

It is a privilege to say Mass for the handicapped . They show you the best way to do it. Once I was telling a secular story as an example in a homily. One of the handicapped cried out aloud; "You must talk about Jesus." It shows what they expect of the celebrant. After that I faithfully followed his advice.

You learn what the liturgy means to these people when you have to give the sacrament of the sick to a dying person. They remember the words that you have said about Jesus; "Jesus is your friend, you are Jesus' friend. Jesus has been good for the sick, now I am going to give you Jesus' medicine for the sick, so that you will be made strong by the strength of Jesus."

You have the experience that the whole liturgical year is a great catechesis on Jesus Christ; his birth, his passion, death and resurrection, his ascension. You really find yourself in the Vincentian tradition when it is your concern that the handicapped should know something of the great truths of the faith through the mysteries celebrated during the liturgical year. It is very moving when the handicapped come to venerate the cross in a liturgy adapted from that of Good Friday. They do it in their way but with signs which express their faith and their friendship for the suffering Jesus. And when, in a simple ceremony, you light the paschal candle they follow it with their total attention.

Celebrating the liturgy for the handicapped is not always a joy. There are also times when you need great patience, especially in Autumn when the leaves are falling from the trees. The chaplain needs the support of a liturgy team with some nurses, male and female, as members. They are the ones who guide you to resolve the difficulties, in order to adapt the liturgy better to the needs of the handicapped; who let you know what people look for in order to celebrate the sacred mysteries. On the one hand the chaplain learns from experience that he needs lay people in order to be a good celebrant, but on the other, he 'feels' that for the handicapped he really is the representative of the Church. For example, it is to him that they confide their intentions for the Prayers of the Faithful.

## **ALLOWING YOURSELF TO BE EVANGELISED BY THE HANDICAPPED**

When you give a homily to the mentally handicapped, you are obliged to speak very simply. And each time you have the experience that the Gospel is simple. You are required to explain the essence of the Gospel. Jesus preached through images and through examples drawn from daily life. The more you follow the living stories of the Lord, the more you are able to lead the handicapped to Him. You learn that the Gospel is directed at the simple in heart, it is they who listen to the words of Jesus, who seek them, who try to live them out. This is the gift the handicapped give you; you yourself must be small, in order that the words of Jesus may be words of life for you too.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

On 29 May 1654 M. Vincent wrote a letter to Br. Jean Barreau. The original is only signed by him. But as he is very sensitive, M. Vincent adds the following post script in his own hand, which acts as a kind of resume of his doctrine and his attitude to the mentally handicapped;

Your brother the prosecutor has fallen ill with a sickness for which your brother and brother-in-law, on the advice of relations, have asked us to take him into St. Lazare; which we will do. We must honour the Lord and the state in which he was, to which we wish to be joined, saying ; quoniam in frenesim versus est,(27) to venerate this state in those whom His divine Providence places there; be content to conform your will in this to that of Our Lord's, as you do in all things.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Louis Abelly; *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul* New City Press, 1993. As far as I know, it is especially the German doctor, Werner Leibbrand, who deals most fully with the subject in *Vincenz de Paul*, 3 Auflage, Heidelberg, 1960. He refers to the following works; Jacques Vie and Laignel-Lavastine; "La Vie Médicale de St. Vincent de Paul" in *Revue des Etudes Historiques*, 96 (1930) which I have not found in the *Catalogue of Publications 1. St. Vincent de Paul* (1988) and also to J-C Martin du Theil; *La Doctrine Hospitalière de Saint Vincent de Paul*, Arnette Louis, Paris, 1939.

2. Abelly, 1891, I, 152

3. Abelly, I, 154

4. Abelly, III, 88

5. Abelly, I, 152

6. Pierre Coste, *Monsieur Vincent*, II, 516, especially note 3.

7. XI, 331

8. XI, 21 ; XII, 88

9. XI, 21-22

10. XI, 331

11. XII, 88

12. Abelly, 1891, II, 29

13. II, 336

14. XIII, 596

15. VII, 184-185, 22 June 1658

16. Spiritual Writings, 473, Letter 428, (1655)

17. X, 125

18. VI, 568-569, 30 October 1657; Writings, 573, 2 November 1657. Nothing is said about the nature of the difficulties.

19. II, 336. Thinking of the description M. Vincent gives about the situation in the hospital, the question naturally arises as to how the mentally ill could benefit from a mission. Abelly recognises this difficulty and says of the mission, preached by the members of the Tuesday Conferences; "They also gave a mission at the hospital of the Petites Maisons, in which, apart from the poor insane people who could not benefit from the mission, there were a number of poor families with whom several residents of the Faubourg took part in the instructions which took place." Abelly, 1891, II, 330

20. XI, 20-21

21. cf. Matthew, IV;24

22. I Cor. II;23

23. X, 125-126

24. Mark III;21

25. Matthew, XXV;40

26. XII, 270

27. Coste adds the following note; "The text reads; quoniam in furoren versus est (Mark III, 21). The saint has changed a word in order to better express his thought."

28. V, 146

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