

THE EMBLEM AND MOTTO OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION

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Introduction

Does the Congregation of the Mission have an official emblem and motto to identify it? The emblem most commonly used, and hence familiar to its members, consists of an oval frame enclosing the figure of Jesus standing on a globe, facing forward, rays surrounding his head, and arms outstretched downward. This study will show that this familiar figure of Jesus and the motto *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me* both date from the time of Saint Vincent. However, the use of both of these together, with the motto surrounding the oval, dates only from the mid-nineteenth century.

Origin of the emblem

Louise de Marillac seems to be at the origin of the Community's emblem.(1) Among the religious scenes which she drew is a miniature figure of the resurrected Lord Jesus. She has drawn him standing on a globe or clouds, rays coming from his head. He faces forward, arms down, with his cloak billowing over his left shoulder. In addition, he bears the marks of four wounds: the place of the nails in his open hands and feet. This miniature is not dated, nor are there references to it in her extant writings, but it is the earliest surviving "Lord of Charity." This was a figure of Jesus, gesturing to the poor below, intended to nourish the piety of the members of the Confraternities of Charity. Louise wrote a letter to Vincent, dated provisionally as August 1647: "If you have any pictures resembling the one of the Lord of Charity in any of your books, I would beg you most humbly to do me the kindness of giving me one."(2) The meaning here is unclear. Louise may be referring to holy pictures (*images*) slipped into a book, or she may be referring to some other reproductions. The clearest reference is found in another letter, also dated provisionally between 1640 and 1646. Louise wrote to a sister: "I am enclosing pictures for you. One is a Lord of Charity to put in the room where you receive the poor. The other is for your room."(3) In a letter to Jean Martin, from Paris, 29 September 1656, M. Vincent refers in all likelihood to the same pictures: "We will send you the images of the Charity which you are asking for."(4) Since "image" often referred to small reproductions, it is unclear whether he was referring to them or to the six or more large canvases still extant. It should be noted that none of these paintings of the Lord of Charity includes the eventual motto of the Congregation of the Mission.

Use of Emblem for Seals

An examination of the wax impressions on letters which Vincent de Paul wrote, and of other early seals, shows that the Lord of Charity had been adopted as the seal of the Congregation, but without the four wounds. The text on these early seals relates to the person or house using the seal, such as SUPERIOR GENERALIS.CONGREG.MISSIONIS. The earliest surviving use of his seal is on a letter dated 31 March 1641. Use of similar seals by other houses became common in the 1650s.

It was left to René Alméras, to regulate the question of seals. He did so in a circular letter dated 4 August 1670, to accompany the Rules of Office revised by the assembly of 1668. He described the text but did not describe the seal. Neither did he treat the subject of the motto.

It should be noted that the engraving done for the frontispiece of the Common Rules, dated 1658 does not depict the seal or motto, nor is their use prescribed in the rules or other early documents. Nevertheless, Firmin Get, the superior in Marseille wrote to ask permission of the founder to display the arms of the Congregation on a new building. He received the following reply: "*Très volontiers je trouve bon que vous fassiez mettre sur la porte de votre nouveau bâtiment les armes dont vous m'avez envoyé le modèle.*"(5) ["I very willingly approve your placing above the door of your new building the arms, whose design you sent me."] The fragile page sent by Get with the drawing of the arms and the motto may still be the one in the archives of the Maison Mere. Following the traditional shape, the arms are not oval, like seals, but rectangular. In this drawing, the motto appears on a ribbon below the shield, and not surrounding the figure on the shield. This letter may make it appear that Get was the designer of the emblem, but the late date of the letter shows otherwise. What the saint probably meant was that he approved the use of the traditional emblem taken from the seals worked into a coat of arms, with the addition of the text.

Origin of the Motto

The origin of the motto is unknown. Louis Abelly, Vincent's first biographer, did not mention the choice of a motto, either for the Congregation as a whole or for the founder personally.(6) Firmin Get may have chosen the text (see letter 1872 above), but this is unlikely, given its importance. Vincent commented occasionally on the text, taken from Luke 4:18, based on Isaiah, "*Evangelizare pauperibus misit me,*" but did not claim that this text summarized his entire spiritual way.(7) The Common Rules, in the introductory letter, do allude to the text: "My idea was that men who are called to continue Christ's mission, which is mainly preaching the good news to the poor [*quae potissimum in Pauperum Evangelizatione consistit*"] should see things from his point of view and want what he wanted." This is far from the choice of a motto.(8)

One early engraving by Hérault of "Monsieur Vincent de Paul, institutor and first superior general of the Congregation of the priests of the Mission," dated from the end of the seventeenth century, has included the motto as part of the text below his

portrait: "*Evangelizare Pauperibus misit me etc. Luc c. 4.*"(9) This might prove only that someone, Hérault, associated this text with Vincent de Paul. It probably points, however, to its more widespread use in connection with the founder.

Disuse and Restoration

In the period before the French Revolution, the only appearance of the emblem seems to have been on oval or circular seals for letters and documents. Because of the need to identify the authority behind seal the motto did not appear with it. The text did appear on the book depicted lying at the saint's feet in the large statue sculpted by Pietro Bracci (1700-1773) for Saint Peter's basilica in the Vatican, and placed there in 1754.

Although the motto did not appear with the emblem used as a seal, two other texts, however, also became associated with Saint Vincent during the eighteenth century. These appeared in various engravings, paintings and pious images perhaps more as slogans than as mottoes. The first and most common was CHARITAS CHRISTI URGET NOS, ["the charity of Christ urges us"].(10) Although Saint Louise probably chose one form of the text as the motto of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, ("The Charity of Jesus Crucified urges us") it was also used to commemorate Vincent's devotion to practical charity.

The second text used as something of a motto is AD SALUTEM PAUPERUM ET CLERI DISCIPLINAM, ["for the salvation of the poor and the education of the clergy"] taken from the collect written after the canonization of Saint Vincent appears on some engravings of the period.

Immediately after the French Revolution, there was not much need or interest in the question of the emblem and motto of the Congregation. The emblem, with or without the motto, in addition, did not appear on the title pages of the Congregation's official books printed in France. Neither did they figure in the works of Brother François Charbonnier, the artist of the mother house, working in the 1840s. Standard depictions based on the early emblems were not found across Europe, such as in Italy, Spain and Poland, not to speak of overseas missions. Instead, the SV monogram came to be used, as for the new casket made for the relics of the founder, and placed over the altar of the mother house in 1830. Following this, the SV monogram came to be used on the title pages of books, on letter-head stationery, occasionally for the seals of houses.

By the time of the generalate of Jean-Baptiste Étienne (1843-1874), the iconography of the Congregation began to develop again as the Community itself was more and more organized. The restored seals of the provinces or visitors either remained in use or were replaced in the older provinces and newly made for the new ones. The restored emblem also figures in the decoration of the Maison Mere chapel, but without any motto. Instead, the major text in the chapel, is PERTRANSIIT BENEFACIENDO ["He went about doing good"].(11)

Despite this, there is no indication of an official adoption of the emblem and motto for use as a seal in any general assembly decrees in the 19th century, nor in the minutes of the general council in the same period. The impetus to adopt an emblem and motto may have come from the Daughter of Charity seal and motto, which appeared on the title page of their official books beginning in 1852.(12)

Another influence might well have been engravings of the Miraculous Medal. Seen from a distance, the Vincentian emblem and the front of the Miraculous Medal are virtually indistinguishable. In any case, if the Vincentian emblem offered a model for the medal, it was most probably the medal which gave the Vincentians the use of the emblem and motto together.

The earliest known use of the emblem surrounded by the motto took place outside of Europe, among the confreres of the American province. As their need for identification grew, the confreres began to adopt various means for this on early printed stationery. Out of these tentative designs came the first use of the oval emblem with the motto, dated 1862. It was used for letterhead stationery prepared for the province and houses by the printer Murphy in Baltimore. As the American stationery became more widely known, it can be assumed that it offered a model to be imitated.(13)

The earliest known use in France of the oval emblem and the motto is on an illuminated parchment prepared for the fiftieth anniversary of vows of Étienne, 1870, a day marking also the 27th anniversary of his election as superior general. This was followed by an engraving by the artist Dumont in an official publication dated 1876.(14) Whether the French model was taken from the American version, or developed independently is unknown, but it seems likely that the American stationery offered a model to be imitated by others. From 1876, the Dumont emblem with the motto began to be used more commonly, seen in the *Catalogue des Maisons et du Personnel*, and on the cover of the *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*. However, the new design also appeared in the form of the coat-of-arms mentioned above, and these two alternated in some official publications.(15)

Contemporary Use, Theological Content

Today, there are many varieties in the usage of the emblem and its accompanying motto. There is, however, no official "logo" in use. Instead, several versions of the Community's emblem are in use side by side.

Those who follow Saint Vincent can take comfort and strength in identifying with the glorified yet wounded Jesus, sent to evangelize. The text "He has sent me" can be personalized as a call to mission, and a stimulus to fidelity.

NOTES

- (1) This is also the conclusion drawn by E. Didron, "Louise de Marillac et le Sacré Coeur," Petits Annales de Saint Vincent de Paul 1:6 (15 June 1900) 174.
- (2) Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac. Correspondence and Thoughts. (Ed., and trans. Louise Sullivan), Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991, p. 224. Coste 3:254, letter 999; Coste dates the letter as October 1647.
- (3) Spiritual Writings p. 334 (Letter 3.)
- (4) Coste, 6:98; letter 2150.
- (5) Coste, 5:379, letter 1872, and note 2, dated 14 May 1655. The design of this seal as described in the Armorial de Marseille by Godefroi de Montgrand, is reported in H. Simard, Saint Vincent de Paul et ses oeuvres à Marseille (Lyon: E. Vitte, 1894), p. 96.
- (6) Abelly did, however, remark as follows: "We can say in truth that without realizing it, he [Vincent] left us a miniature portrait of his whole life and a sort of motto, when he said one day: 'Nothing pleases me except in Jesus Christ.'" (Abelly, Life, bk. 1, p. 103.)
- (7) See conference 180, on the rules, 17 May 1658, for a discussion of this text (Coste 12:3ff); conference 195, 6 December 1658, on the end of the Congregation (Coste 12:90ff.); conference 216, 7 November 1659, on vows (Coste 12:367f.); conference 19, (Coste 11:32), and conference 86, 29 October 1638, on perseverance (Coste 11:108ff.) Although the text in the Latin Vulgate is that cited here, the original language versions (Greek, Hebrew) and modern translations divide the sentence differently. "... because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives...."
- (8) Other references are both in Common Rules 1,1: "*quando evangelizavit pauperibus*," and *evangelizare pauperibus, maxime ruricolis.*"
- (9) Chalumeau papers, C613, Hérault, in Archives of the Mission, Paris.
- (10) 2 Cor 5:14.
- (11) Acts 10:38.
- (12) Prières extraites du formulaire à l'usage des Filles de la Charité, Paris, 1852.
- (13) The American text sometimes reads: EVANGELIZARE PAUPERIBUS MISIT ME DEUS. CONG. MISS.
- (14) Acta Apostolica... in Gratiam Congregationis Missionis. (Paris, 1876).
- (15) The combined use of the emblems of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, joined with the SV or sometimes with the AM monograms, seems to date only to the late 1930s.