

A Model for Mentoring in the Vincentian Family

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

Homer recounts that Odysseus, as he left for the Trojan War, placed his son Telemachus under the tutelage of an old friend named Mentor. Since then, countless “Mentors” have held a special place in human history. They have prepared princes and princesses to be kings and queens. They have trained artists and musicians. They have guided students at schools and universities and in novitiates and seminaries.

The first modern use of the now commonly employed term “mentor” can be traced to the French Sulpician theologian-bishop François Fénelon, who was tutor to the son of King Louis XIV. In 1699, he published *The Adventures of Telemachus*, whose lead character was Mentor. The book became immensely popular, one of the most frequently reprinted publications in the 18th century. The modern-day meaning of “mentor” stems from Fénelon’s work: a guide in life, usually a more experienced person, a trusted friend, a counselor, a teacher, a spiritual director.

The book is actually a thinly-veiled allegorical attack upon the absolutism of Louis XIV. It aimed to instruct Louis’ heir in the duties of royalty. Fénelon takes his hero, Telemachus, through a series of adventures which illustrate the author’s thesis that an ideal monarch should be a man of peace, wisdom, and simple ways of life.

The Adventures of Telemachus so angered Louis XIV that he banished Fénelon from Versailles, confining him to his diocese, where he remained, with few exceptions, for the rest of his life. Yet, a few years later, people were hailing the young successor, King Louis XV, as a new Telemachus and flattering his tutors as new “Mentors.” Fénelon’s book set the standard for future works about the education of leaders. It became a favorite of Jean Jacques Rousseau and of Thomas Jefferson.

Actually, Mentor in Fénelon’s book is a much more developed wisdom figure than Mentor in *The Odyssey*. In *The Odyssey*, it is really Athena, disguised as Mentor, who is the wisdom figure.¹

¹ *The Odyssey*, XIII, 256-310. Actually, Mentor sometimes flubbed the job, but Athena, the goddess of wisdom, assumed the lead role in guiding Odysseus’ son. Taking on Mentor’s appearance, she gave Telemachus sage advice on how to escape from danger. Finally, she revealed herself to Telemachus as a beautiful woman and told him: “You did not know me, Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus: she who is ever by your side to protect you in all your adventures.”

Mentoring today

I often thank God for some wonderful mentors who have helped me throughout life, sharing with me the time-tested wisdom they had acquired:

- my parents, who transmitted to me so many core values;
- several theology professors who taught me to analyze and reason;
- a teacher in high school and another in college who made good literature come alive for me;
- two other teachers who communicated to me their enthusiasm for art and music;
- a Provincial Superior who, by example, modeled for me and others what servant leadership is about;
- a Spanish confrere whose competence and intellectual curiosity sparked in me a deeper interest in Vincentian studies.

Sometimes mentors enter upon our life's stage suddenly and exit from it rapidly, quite unaware of the impact they have had. When I was a young priest, I taught a course on Social Justice at Attica, a maximum security prison in upstate New York. I was told that nine of the fourteen students in my class were murderers. I carefully prepared 15 3-hour sessions, but in the first session there was so much lively discussion that I got only halfway through my material. As I was leaving the prison, I found myself walking beside a much older professor, who, probably noticing that I was young and nervous, asked me how it had gone. "OK," I said, "but there was so much discussion that I didn't cover all the material I wanted to treat." He replied: "Let them talk. It's probably the only opportunity they have for reasonable debate. Guide the discussion, but encourage it." Looking back, I think that my semester at Attica was the best teaching experience I ever had. And I never saw the older professor again.

All readers, I'm sure, have had mentors like that. In this article, I will focus on how important good mentoring is, especially for the young, and will offer several suggestions about the mentoring process. Mentors guide us on the human journey. They share with us not just "content" or specialized knowledge, but something of themselves. They draw us forward on the road to authenticity.

Mentoring on the Road to Authenticity

The great 20th-century philosopher/theologian Bernard Lonergan states that authenticity on the human journey involves fidelity to five fundamental imperatives in being human:

- be attentive;
- be intelligent in sifting through life's experience;

- be reasonable;
- be responsible; and
- be in love with God and God's creation.

On the journey, we can get stuck at any one of those five steps. Often, a good mentor can help us break through.

To discern where the grace of the moment lies requires attention. But some remain habitually inattentive; they fail to observe. The contemporary world's multiple stimuli diffuse their attention. The many sounds surrounding them deafen them to the deepest voices of reality. As the gospels put it, they see, but do not see; they hear, but do not hear.

Some, though attentive and observant, do not sift through life's varied experiences intelligently. Their framework remains narrow. They fail to understand the broader context for events or to distinguish between experiences people have in common and experiences in which they differ. They neglect to analyze commonalities and different experiences rigorously. Socrates states that their lives are useless, that the unexamined life is not worth living.

We have all met people too who, while attentive and intelligent, are, unfortunately, not reasonable. Rather than judging on the basis of the data that lies before them, they react out of prejudice. Already sure of their own opinions, they cling to them, denying the data that lies before them and refusing to enter into the dialogue and exchange of ideas that leads to wise conclusions.

Beyond that, there are others who, while they are reasonable and know precisely what ought to be done, simply resist doing it. For one reason or another, they refuse to act responsibly.

The fifth step – falling in love with God and God's creation – is, for everyone, a challenge worth facing. It can knock us off our feet at times, but, if we struggle forward again and again, we find ourselves entering into an unpredictable but life-giving journey. As we discover that God loves us and gives us the gifts of creation – and that we had nothing at all to do with it – we begin to experience life with gratitude.

When we fall gratefully in love, everything changes. Being in love fulfills our deepest longings. It brings "a deep-set joy that can remain despite failure, privation, pain... It brings a radical peace..."²

Mentoring is companionship someone on his or her journey through the five steps Lonergan describes. Finding a good mentor is a great grace. Since the initial relationship of Jesus and his disciples, it has been a special grace in the Church, which has a rich tradition of mentoring.³

² BERNARD LONERGAN, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 105.

³ Reading the gospels, it is clear that Jesus does not just "teach" the twelve, though, in fact, he instructs them constantly. Beyond that, he "mentors" them.

A wise mentor may take on various mentoring roles; for example:

- a soul friend or spiritual guide;
- a listening ear / a sounding board;
- an expert on a particular subject matter;
- a coach and confidence builder;
- a role model in a profession;
- a networker.

Mentoring in the Vincentian Tradition

The word “mentor,” in its modern sense, did not exist at the time of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, though, in fact, they mentored many followers and developed effective mentoring techniques.

Vincent teamed young missionaries up with experienced ones so that the latter might model for the former how to preach to the poor in the countryside. He also wanted missionaries to be attached to seminaries, so that those preparing for the priesthood might learn from those who had labored for years in active ministry. He wrote tens of thousands of letters over the last 35 years of his life. Many of them are good examples of mentoring, offering wise advice to priests, brothers, sisters and lay men and women.

There are few letters that mentor more beautifully than the one Vincent wrote in 1656 to Antoine Durand, a young new superior at the seminary in Agde:⁴

“The direction of souls is the art of arts. It was the work of the Son of God on earth; it was the reason why He came down from heaven, was born of a Virgin, gave every moment of His life, and, in the end, suffered a very painful death. That’s why you must have a very high esteem for what you’re going to do..

...neither philosophy, nor theology, nor discourses can act in souls; Jesus Christ must be involved in this with us – or we with Him – so that we may act in Him and He in us, that we may speak as He did and in His Spirit, as He himself was in His Father, and preached the doctrine He had taught Him; those are the words of Holy Scripture.

So, Father, you must empty yourself of self in order to clothe yourself with Jesus Christ. You know that ordinary causes produce the effects of their nature: a sheep produces a sheep, etc., and a human another human; likewise, if someone who directs and forms

Mark 3:13-14 tells us: “He appointed twelve whom he also named apostles that *they might be with him* and he might send them forth to preach.”

⁴ SV XI, 342 ff.

others and speaks to them is animated with only a human spirit, those who see him, listen to him, and strive to imitate him will become totally human: no matter what he says and does, he'll inspire them with only the appearance of virtue, and not the substance; he'll communicate to them the spirit with which he himself is animated, as we see that masters impress their maxims and ways of acting firmly on the minds of their disciples.

On the contrary, if a Superior is filled with God and with the maxims of Our Lord, all his words will be efficacious; virtue will go out of him that will edify others, and all his actions will be so many beneficial instructions that will bring about good in those who are aware of them.

...adopt this holy maxim – acting toward those with whom you're going to live *quasi unus ex illis* (like one of them) – telling them from the outset that you haven't come to lord it over them but rather to serve them; do that inside and outside the house, and you'll do well."

Louise, too, throughout her life, mentored the young, often poorly educated, women who entered the Daughters of Charity. While Vincent gave frequent conferences to the growing community of Daughters in Paris, it was Louise who was the sisters' daily mentor, living with them, educating them, guiding them, and offering them spiritual direction. Louise, like Vincent, also mentored countless sisters by her letters. She realized how difficult it was to be in charge. In a letter remarkable both for its evangelical tone and its frankness, she told a Sister Servant:⁵

"Enter upon this charge in the spirit of him who said that he had come not to be served but to serve. Listen to him willingly when he tells us that those who humble themselves shall be exalted, and that the one who would be the greatest must begin by becoming the least, so as to be great in the sight of God. Finally, my dear Sister, look upon yourself as the beast of burden of the house."

While both Vincent and Louise did abundant group formation, they also fostered, over the years, a number of personal mentoring techniques that perdure in the Vincentian Family to this day:

- placing the inexperienced with a wise, experienced person, particularly during the early years of service;
- sending people on mission two by two;
- urging them to engage in regular spiritual direction;
- assigning mature, well-rounded people as directors of the internal seminary and schools of philosophy and theology;
- writing frequent letters to those seeking counsel.

⁵ SW 118.

The mentoring tradition did not end with Vincent and Louise. There are other outstanding examples in the history of our Family.

I have enormous admiration for Rosalie Rendu, whose grave I visit whenever I go to Paris. Besides being a prodigious worker who initiated extraordinary projects for the marginalized, she was also a wonderful mentor. The house where she lived became, informally, a “formation house,” to which her superiors sent young sisters. From Rosalie they learned firsthand how to serve the poor. Twenty-two postulants lived with her over the years. Eighteen sisters prepared for vows under her direction. At the time of her death, 12 sisters lived in her community; half of them had been sisters for less than four years.

Among those whom she mentored was Frederic Ozanam, the principal founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Admirably, the Society continues to this day its original mentoring practice of sending members to visit the poor two by two. Ozanam, like Vincent de Paul, was a wonderful letter-writer and mentored many by that means. He writes about topics as varied as marriage, family difficulties, church and civil politics, and the newly-formed Society of St. Vincent de Paul. A good example is a letter he wrote to a friend in 1852:

“Truth must be within the reach of the lowliest, and religion must rest upon evidence accessible to the most insignificant. After experiencing many doubts, after having drenched my pillow many and many a night with tears of despair, I rested my faith upon an argument which any mason or coal digger may take hold of. I said to myself that since every people have a religion, good or bad, it is clear that religion is a universal, perpetual, and consequently legitimate need of humanity. God, who created this need, has consequently pledged Himself to satisfy it; there must, therefore, be a true religion.”⁶

Mentoring Core Values to the Young

I suggest below a series of core values which, I trust, mentors in the Vincentian Tradition, will transmit to new members. Sometimes mentors will teach these values explicitly through words, but much more often they will communicate them by the way they relate to the poor and to their companions in the service of the poor.

1. *Recognizing and affirming the sacred dignity of all; treating them with reverence and respect as valued human persons*

Central to St. Vincent’s spirituality was his affective and effective love for the most marginalized in society. He acknowledged that those on the margins are sometimes difficult to love, but he saw them as the

⁶ Letter to M.H., written on June 16, 1852; cf. *Œuvres Complètes* de A.F. Ozanam (Paris, 1865) XI, 385.

icon of the suffering Christ and urged his followers to love them as they would love Christ or as they would want to be loved themselves. For Vincent, all had a sacred dignity as children of God. At the same time, he saw that each had a unique story, unique life circumstances, and a unique calling in the world. It was this conviction that gave birth to the multiple works that he and Louise de Marillac initiated for so many marginalized people.

In that same spirit, the Vincentian Family is committed to creating an inclusive, welcoming environment in which the most marginalized feel genuinely respected as persons – regardless of race, sex, age, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, employment, economic status, health, intelligence, achievement or any other differentiating characteristic. It is not what individuals do or what they have that gives them a claim on respect; it is simply being human that establishes their dignity.

2. Attending to the whole person

St. Vincent loved to say that we minister to the poor “spiritually and corporally.” He used this phrase in speaking to the three principal groups he founded: the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity. He tells the Daughters of Charity that they should tend not only to bodily needs, but also share their faith with the poor by their witness and their words.⁷ And he warns the members of the Congregation of the Mission that they should not think of their mission in exclusively spiritual terms. Rather, they too should care for the sick, the foundlings, the insane, even the most abandoned.⁸

So, Vincent encouraged his followers to examine various elements in the lives of the poor to determine what their most urgent needs were: education, job opportunities, nourishment, health care, and spiritual care. He focused on the whole person and urged his followers to treat the person holistically.

Those who work with young people know, perhaps better than anyone else, that, though schools have a special focus on academics, human growth is much more complex than intellectual development. It involves value formation, religious experience, service-learning, cultural development, and the give-and-take of daily living. Those who successfully journey along life’s many various streets acquire broad human experience. Those who have walked on only a few streets are likely to be narrow.

⁷ SV IX, 59 and IX, 593.

⁸ SV XII, 87.

Attending to the whole person is a very varied challenge. It involves helping young people choose their own personal vocation, their mission in life, their career. It involves counseling them about moral and health-related issues like the norms that govern responsible sexual behavior or the use of alcohol or drugs. Today it presents the relatively new challenge of helping them work out a reasonable, healthy, disciplined use of the media.

3. *Building community, valuing relationships, modeling an ethic of social responsibility*

Vincent knew how to gather people together. He built communities in the service of the marginalized. He knew how to network. He became famous as an organizer. He brought together rich and poor, young and old, clergy and lay, men and women. He had the ability to recognize and call forth people's gifts. He saw that collaboration was the key to success in serving the poor. So, he forged bonds, built bridges, and fostered unity among very diverse groups of people.

He knew how to draw these people into his captivating vision of life. On his one side was Anne, the Queen of France, a woman of broad culture and also of political intrigue; on his other side was Marguerite Naseau, a peasant girl who did not know how to read or write. He drew together women and men of every rank in society, by sharing his vision with them and getting them excited about it.

Critics of contemporary society note how prominent individualism is. But, contrary to the persistent tendency toward self-absorption, the human person is essentially social. Human flourishing demands that young people have a sense of mission that transcends themselves, that they be connected relationally with others, and that they build with others communities of life and interest.

4. *Valuing transparency, living with integrity*

Simplicity, or what today we call "transparency" or "authenticity," was central for St. Vincent. He said: "Simplicity is the virtue I love most."⁹ "It is my gospel."¹⁰ He tells us again and again that people are attracted to those who speak and live simply, who are transparent in what they say and do.

How wonderful it would be if we were able to say consistently of the members of our Vincentian Family: "She is so integral in her values." "He is so transparent in what he thinks and says."

⁹ SV I, 284.

¹⁰ SV IX, 606.

One of the fundamental characteristics of good mentors is that they have developed the ability to listen to others, to speak with them simply and transparently, and to encourage them on the road toward authenticity. Douglas Steere, an influential ecumenical observer at Vatican II, once stated: "To 'listen' another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service any human being ever performs for another."

5. Practicing the wise stewardship of resources

Through his life, Vincent negotiated detailed contracts and wrote precise rules as he set up all the groups he founded. He wanted those groups to be firmly established so that their service to others would be long-lasting. The contracts provided for the financial stability of the groups. The Rules conveyed the structure and described the charism and the spirit of the groups he founded. Both the contracts and the Rules played a foundational role in preserving these groups into the future. It is helpful to note that Vincent saw no conflict between trusting in Divine Providence and providing for the future by laying firm financial foundations and setting up structures that would make his projects sustainable.

Social critics tell us that materialism, like individualism, is one of the prevailing temptations of modern society. Recently, the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace issued a remarkable document entitled "The Vocation of the Business Leader – a Reflection".¹¹ It outlines six practical principles of business, based on respect for human dignity and pursuit of the common good. Can we mentor young people to use the gifts of creation as responsible stewards, channeling them toward the common good?

Mentoring Leadership Skills to the Young

Besides mentoring values, we can also mentor skills. Of course, prior professional training is essential for acquiring certain skills: being a treasurer, offering psychological assistance, becoming a doctor, a lawyer, a theology professor – all require professional preparation. But having a wise mentor is often the key to growth in the exercise of those skills.

Young people can develop leadership skills by working side by side with competent leaders. In recent years, for example, universities have been providing mentoring programs for prospective presidents. Care-

¹¹ The document can be found online at: <http://www.pcgp.it/dati/2012-05/04-999999/Vocation%20ENG2.pdf>

fully chosen candidates “shadow” a good president to see how he or she exercises authority.

Could the same be done for Provincial Superiors? For national and international leaders in AIC or the Society of St. Vincent de Paul? For treasurers on all levels?

Within our many branches, could mentoring programs be set up that will foster good future leadership? In July 2012 the Society of St. Vincent de Paul offered a National President’s Training Program in which 27 Presidents took part. “Role playing” occupied a significant place on the agenda, so that the Presidents learned from each other’s experiences.

Fr. Greg Gay, Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, has established a “Vincentian Family Collaboration Commission” to design a leadership formation process that will assist the various branches in their service of those living in poverty.

An Action/Reflection Model for mentoring in the Vincentian Tradition

Years ago, I worked with a very insightful priest. Often he reacted critically to phrases that people used. When they said that someone was “very experienced,” he might respond: “Yes, but he never learns anything from his experience.” When people spoke of the courses or workshops that they had engaged in as part of their “ongoing formation,” he might remark: “It’s not courses and workshops that change us; it’s reflecting on and learning from our experience.”

Today, there are many tools for reflection, especially in service-learning programs at schools and universities. Let me propose, for the use of mentors, a simple, straightforward model that flows from our Vincentian Tradition. It involves four steps:

1. Engaging in Service

Especially for new members, the choice of an appropriate service placement is very important. Some service placements may require careful previous preparation and training. Placing young people with wise mentors is a gift not only to them, but also to the poor whom they will serve throughout their lives.

2. Reflecting on Experience: What did you see and hear as you went through the experience?

Here, the focus is on the member’s reaction to the experience. Often, several people have a common experience, but see and hear things differently. Therefore, in this second step, simply reflect about what you experienced as an individual.

Take some quiet time. Use your mind and imagination. Write in a journal, or converse with an individual or a group. Describe objectively: What happened? Where? When? Why? Who was involved?

3. *Articulating What You Learned: As you saw and heard these things, what went on inside you? What did you feel? How was your heart touched?*

The focus here moves to a new, internal level. Here it is important not to talk merely about what you “think” with your head, but also about what you *feel with your heart*. Even beyond that, what was God saying to you as you went through this experience? Where was God in the experience? Here again, we move to another level, a level that deals with the relationship between you and God. In light of this experience, what is God asking of you for the future? Areas to explore might be:

- Personal Growth Learning – my strengths and weaknesses, my assumptions, my personal skills, the effect I have on others, the things I need to change...
- Service Improvement Learning – how did things turn out? might other approaches be possible and/or better? could there be a more systemic approach to this situation?
- Academic or Professional Enhancement Learning – how does this experience apply what I have learned previously? do I need further academic or professional training?

4. *Engaging in Renewed Service*

In light of the three steps above, what changes should you make when you engage in this service anew? What did you learn? How did you learn it? Why is it important? What does it teach you for the future?

I encourage readers to use all four steps as you mentor young people. I have noticed at times, in our Vincentian Family, that some are reluctant to ask the “God question” in the third step. But I want to encourage those who mentor young people: do not hesitate to speak of God. Our Family serves within the Catholic and Vincentian tradition. We should witness to that tradition unabashedly, while respecting those who do not share it.

As I trust is evident to the reader, I am suggesting to mentors a simple method that is related to the method of prayer that St. Vincent suggested to the first members of the Congregation of the Mission and Daughters of Charity. The Vincentian way of praying has its own particular dynamic, flowing from and leading to action. The documents of the Vincentian Family say that we are called to be contemplatives in action and apostles in prayer. Like St. Vincent and St. Louise, the founders of almost all religious congregations were incredibly active men and women. But almost all who were also known by their contemporaries as persons of deep prayer.

It is clear that Vincent felt that the vitality of the groups that he founded depended on their fidelity to active service of the most marginalized and prayerful reflection on our action. Holding action and reflection/prayer in tension lies at the heart of our tradition.

What I have described above is a mentoring model which is easy to use and almost universally applicable. I hope that it will be of service to all the branches of our Vincentian Family, especially as we initiate new members into the wonderful charism that St. Vincent has left us. Below, in conclusion, I offer it in outline form.

