

Mercy in Our Vincentian Being

Monsieur Vincent, Apostle of Mercy

Bernard Koch, C.M.

Context

Devotion to Divine Mercy is not a new idea; it stands in a direct line of one of the many currents of Revelation, in the Bible, in the great river that is the history of the Church, and amongst the Fathers, the theologians, and other spiritual authors. What follows is a preamble in order to contextualise Divine Mercy.

It is one of the essential characteristics of God, “God of Mercy and Pity,” Psalm 86 (85):15, and others. There are two Hebrew words: *Rahamim*, which more properly refers to mercy, and, somewhat more frequently, *Hésed*, which refers to mercy, but also to love in general, which latter is insufficient as *Hésed* is a quasi-visceral feeling which urges one to love, assist, help from the depths of the heart. It goes further than the words ‘pardon’ and ‘compassion’; the Bible uses the word ‘womb,’ *viscera*, (in French ‘entrailles’) and we say that we are ‘formed in the womb.’

The word Charity also had this sense, though it has become restricted to ‘charitable’ application.

Mercy implies going even as far as self-sacrifice, if necessary, in order to save even one who has done us wrong. This was, above all else, the work of Our Lord Jesus Christ, announced in Isaiah, 53:5, “he was wounded for our sins,” strongly emphasised by Saint Paul as well as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews and others throughout the centuries.

German has no other word for Charity except Mercy.

Let us note at the outset that, in the Old Testament and, to a degree, in the New, even in the mouth of Our Lord, God does not always act in mercy.

God offers mercy to those who repent, who ask it of him and accept it, to those who show mercy: in Saint Matthew (5:7), it is the fifth beatitude.

On the other hand, he cannot ‘impose’ mercy on those who are hard of heart, as we see in the final words of the judgement of Christ ‘go, therefore, to the eternal fire’ (Matthew 25:41, 45-46). It is not the case that he refuses mercy, rather that he can offer it only to those willing to receive it; this is the essence of the problem of God’s All Powerfulness and the free will of human beings.

Still, some phrases have troubled many people throughout the centuries. As at Horeb, in the episode following the Golden Calf and the pardon that Moses asks of God, the Lord replies: “you have found favour before me, I know you by your name” and Moses asks God to show him his glory. God replies “I will show it to you and I will show mercy to those I wish and I will be clement to those it has pleased me” (Exodus 33:19).

This phrase is taken up by Saint Paul in his epistle to the Romans (9:15). He has just recalled the promises made by God to Abraham, then the choice of Jacob in place of Esau, citing Malachi, 1:2-3: “I have loved Jacob and hated Esau.” He continues: “what can we say? Is God unjust? No. God says to Moses, ‘I will show mercy to those to whom I show mercy, I will have compassion on those on whom I have compassion.’ It is not a question of human will or effort, but of God being merciful” (Romans 9:15-16).

We recall that God never refuses mercy to those who seek and ask for it, but he is not obliged to it; it is He who decides. Simply put, he calls each to his/her proper place and role, where he/she receives mercies, graces, and gifts. We can have confidence in God, the Father of Mercies, all the while knowing that we have no power at all over him.

“**Misericordia**” is composed of two words: “**miseria** (pity)” and “**cor** (heart),” a heart that is open to pity, to those who suffer in body or in soul, pain or loss, or who may cause pain or loss and who ask pardon. More especially, mercy, God’s mercy, extends most of all to those who do not deserve love.

A closely allied term is “**compassion**,” “to suffer with.”

This word is linked with an even more concrete word: “**womb** (or guts).”

A beautiful example is given in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20 and 31). For the younger son who returns, the father is full of mercy; the original Greek translates as 'he was grasped in the guts'; it is a pity that a misplaced prurience means that this translation is not used.

Mercy is proper to God, as are Love and Charity, and Mercy is exercised by the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, unto the Cross. Only God truly is merciful, those who do the works of mercy and those who ask God to show mercy to sinners and to the poor, are not the source of mercy, they are only his instruments, though they truly are that.

Let us conclude by saying that God can do all things but he does not wish to do it without us.

This visceral aspect of mercy is noted by several saints. Saint BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090/1091-1153) meditated a great deal on the wounds of Jesus. He shows us, in his "Sermon 61 on the Song of Songs," that the wounds of Jesus are the guarantee of his mercy:¹

"The secret of his heart are seen in the openings of his body, we see there the great mystery of his infinite goodness, the womb of the mercy of our God, by which the rising Sun has come to us from on high. How could the womb be seen except through these wounds?"

It is on the cross that the mercy of the Father is fulfilled, by the body and blood of his Son, who declared at the Last Supper, "This is my body, given for you," "this is the chalice of my blood which will be poured out for you." It is in the Mass, as in the other sacraments, that Jesus makes present his great work of mercy.

Saint CATHERINE OF SIENNA (1347-1380) in her *Dialogue* has two Treatises on Mercy, in chapters 14 to 87, asking Mercy of the Father for the Church and mercy for the world. More recently, Saint Faustina Kowalska (1905-1938) offered her life to the mercy of God for the conversion of sinners.²

¹ There are many editions. Besides Migne Latin (which follows the edition of the Benedictines, by Dom Jean Mabillon) there are many others; in Latin, in French, and bilingual and there are two websites:

Latin: http://www.binetti.ru/bernardus/pl182_index.shtml and

French: <http://www.abbaye-saint-benoit.ch/saints/bernard/index.htm>

² See various sites, such as http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faustine_Kowalska and http://www.misericordedivine.org/catechese/c_lheure.html

We come then to the practice: since the beginning of the Church, from the time of the Acts and Epistles of the Apostles, there have been the works of mercy, for the poor, the sick, the widows, the orphans, and the abandoned children.

It is time to come now to Saint Vincent de Paul.

Vincent often expressed the mercy of God, confiding either himself or his correspondents to God's mercy, and expressing his thanks for graces received from the divine mercy.

He frequently says or writes: "by the divine mercy" or "by the mercy of God." All that was good or turned to good for him, all the conversions and progress in the Christian life are "by God's mercy." He sees the same at work in the lives of the men and women who write to him, as in the lives of many others of the time.

He contemplates the proof and source of divine mercy, Jesus crucified, in the details of his suffering and recommends meditating on them.

It is useful, without a doubt, for people who may not know Saint Vincent, to present episodes from his life.

He was born near Dax, in 1581, in Gascony, a region that was recovering, with difficulty, from the ravages of the wars of religion, born into a family, which included farmers on his father's side and notaries on his mother's side, and Christian on both sides. He had not thought to become a priest; his family encouraged him towards the clerical state simply that he might benefit from income from the Church, to which end it was sufficient simply to receive the tonsure. It was one of his mentors who encouraged him to go on to priesthood. His goal remained to find funds to assist his parents and his five sisters and brothers.

Ordained at 19 years of age, in 1600, he was to continue to seek such funds in various places, according to his biographers.

Let us move on to Rome, towards the autumn of 1607, from which he would receive a mission for Henry IV in October 1608. He was to find himself in Paris, which he would never again leave as his mission base; his relations would find him still there at the end of 1613, as chaplain to the General of the Galleys of France. He was to take on ministry in the parishes on the lands of these noble lords, and, in an organised fashion from 25 January 1617, was to add to that the

foundation of successive Confraternities of Charity, starting in the month of August 1617.

His life was to be lived out to the end in the works of mercy, in the spiritual and corporal services of the poor of all kinds, including the galley slaves, and, from 1633, with the Daughters of Charity. From 1638, he took on the service of ‘abandoned children,’ all the while engaged with the formation of future priests and the intellectual and spiritual support of priests.

From 1635, the wars in Lorraine and then in Picardy impelled him to bring help to the populations who had survived in misery for 25 years.

Preoccupied by the state of the slaves of the Muslims in Northern Africa, he sent missionaries to Tunis and Algiers from 1645.

Everywhere there were people in material and spiritual poverty, people to support and to convert, following his two criteria: “spiritual and bodily care,” and “by words and deeds.”

Let us see firstly, the works of mercy on God’s part for us, then of us for others, or others for us, which calls us to ask for God’s mercy for sinners, which includes all of us.

I- God’s mercy for us.

God shows us his mercy by sustaining us in our efforts and in difficult moments, our progress comes from him and not solely from our own strength. We have seen all this, Monsieur Vincent repeats: “by the mercy of God.”

On 9 October 1640, he writes to Étienne Blatiron, priest of the Mission:³

“Perfection consists in a constant perseverance to acquire the virtues and become proficient in their practice ... Now the way to do that, Monsieur, is to be continually grateful for God’s mercy and goodness to us, and to have a constant or frequent fear of rendering ourselves unworthy and of failing to be faithful to our little exercises.”

³ *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, C.M.; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume II, p. 146; future references to this work use the initials CCD, followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD, II, 146.

The mercy of God is experienced firstly in the face of our sins.

Vincent always referred to himself as a great sinner, far from perfection, and asked his confreres to implore God's mercy for him. Here is one of the many texts, from 3 February 1641, written to Louis Lebreton in Rome:⁴

“The Company is increasing in number and in virtue, by the mercy of God, which everyone recognizes and which was apparent to me during the visitations. I am the only wretch who keeps on heaping new iniquities and abominations on myself. O Monsieur, how merciful God is to put up with me with so much patience and forbearance, and how weak and miserable I am to abuse his mercies so greatly!”

Saint John shows us the greatness of the mercy of God in his first epistle (3:20): “if our heart accuses us, God is far greater than our heart.”

Vincent echoes him at least twice:

Firstly, with regard to himself and his distractions in prayer, when he was busy with many things, he explains to Louise de Marillac in September 1642:⁵

“I have been involved in business matters this whole morning, able to make only a little prayer and that with many distractions; ... Still, this does not discourage me, because I place my confidence in God and not, indeed, in my own preparation nor in all my efforts, and I wish you the same with all my heart, since the throne of God's goodness and mercies is established on the foundation of our miseries. Let us trust then in His goodness and we shall never be put to shame, as He assures us by His word.”

Three years later, he wrote the same on the notes that he proposed as a prayer for a dying Brother who was, doubtless, thinking back fearfully of his sins:⁶

“Now, it's certain that one of the greatest honors and the greatest glory you're capable of rendering Him right now is to hope with your whole heart in His goodness and infinite

⁴ CCD, II, 173.

⁵ CCD, II, 323-324.

⁶ CCD, XI, 130.

merits, despite this necessary unworthiness and those infidelities committed in the past; for the throne of His mercy is the greatness of the faults to be forgiven.”

This is nothing new. Saint JEROME already, about the year 400, in his *Commentary on Joel*, on “Come back to me with all your heart,” in the *Breviary*, Friday, Week 21, had written as follows:

“Come back to the Lord your God, from whom your past sins had made you a stranger and do not doubt his pardon on account of the greatness of your sins, for his great mercy blots out our great sins.”

Against or besides our sins, there are:

- on one side, the exaggerations of activity or of penitence;
- on another, there are the limits of our spirit, things forgotten, lack of understanding of our situation, or of means of finding solutions to problems;
- and there are the limitations of our body, illness, weakness, age.

On 4 August 1655, after 30 years of experience in the ‘Little Company,’ as he called it, he gave an entire conference on the subject: “Excesses to be Avoided in the Love of God”.⁷

“... those that are too fervent must be given moderation for fear that they may go to excess; those who, under the pretext of not inconveniencing themselves, have no fervor at all and make no acts must be prodded and awakened a little; ... We have to make provision for the necessities of nature, since God has made us subject to them, and adapt to its weakness. That’s what God wills; ... He’s well aware of our woes and in His compassion and mercy, supplies for our defects. We must act very simply with Him and not be so anxious about this; His goodness and mercy will provide whatever we need.

And, in the final prayer:

“O Savior, You know what my heart wants to say; it turns to You, fountain of mercy; You see its desires; they tend only to You, they aspire only to You, they want only You.”

Let us recall this beautiful praise of God, fount of all mercy.

⁷ CCD, XI, 207-209.

Whether or not one is a great sinner, the love of God and the salvation which he gained for us far outstrip our merits; it is God who takes the initiative, we have many examples of this throughout the Bible, especially in the call of the prophets: Isaiah 44:2, 24; 49:1, 5 and Jeremiah 1:5.

He writes often to Louise de Marillac to comfort her in her moments of fear about not being in the right state of life; for example the following (around 1632): “Be fully confident that you are the dear daughter of Our Lord, through His mercy.”⁸

“Child of God by mercy,” this is the source of our great abandonment of ourselves, entirely, to the mercy of God.

II- Our mercy towards others.

The works of mercy were the great work of Monsieur Vincent and his disciples. They are founded on **three inseparable virtues: charity, mercy, and justice** – the one never seen without the others.

God, who is mercy, has created humanity in God’s own likeness and image, and it follows then that, in the image of God, we must become “**people of mercy**” as Ecclesiasticus or Sirach (44:10) presents the ancient fathers from Enoch to the Prophets. The Septuagint and Vulgate declare, “**these are the merciful ones.**” Saint Paul exhorts the Colossians (3:12) “**clothe yourselves in the ‘womb’ of mercy,**” which the Jerusalem Bible and Osty is rendered as “**feelings of compassion**”; but why fear the word “womb”? It is true that it takes people today by surprise, since it is a term that has fallen from use, replaced by words that sound less abrasive.

Our era, which displays the human body from angles, has become timid when faced with liturgical and biblical language, even though the word ‘womb/guts’ is found throughout the Bible, this term of mercy is far more evocative than love, or compassion, or pity.

To return to the practice of mercy, of which prayer and offerings form a part, let us listen to Vincent on 2 November 1656 in a conference to his confreres; it reads as a true litany and is good to read as such, as the repetitions sink in:⁹

⁸ CCD, I, 145.

⁹ CCD, XI, 328-329.

“They [the Daughters of Charity] practice mercy, that beautiful virtue of which it’s said, ‘Mercy is the distinctive feature of God.’ We practice it, too, and must do so all our lives: corporal mercy, spiritual mercy, mercy in the rural areas and in the missions by hastening to meet the needs of our neighbor, mercy when we’re at home with regard to the retreatants, and with regard to the poor, by teaching them the things necessary for salvation, and in so many other circumstances God presents to us.”

He is very aware that we are not the authors of our good actions for “without me you can do nothing,” as Jesus says in Saint John (15:5). We are only the instruments of God, but it is, nevertheless, our dignity to be called by God to be his instruments.

God shows his mercy in action and in the prayer of Christians, but he may also show it through the actions of non-Christians, whether or not they are conscious of it, and it is good for us to be aware of this. We see this in the first text that comes to us from Saint Vincent. In the first letter in which he explains how he had managed to escape from Tunis where he had been a slave, with his master, the renegade, he teaches us through whom God had shown him this mercy:¹⁰

“A renegade from Nice in Savoy, hostile by nature, bought me and took me to his *temat*; that is what they call the land that one holds as a sharecropper of the Grand Lord, because the people own nothing; everything belongs to the Sultan ... One of the three wives that he had ... a native Turk, who served God’s immense mercy as an instrument in recalling her husband from apostasy and restoring him to the bosom of the Church, brought about my deliverance from slavery.”

Do we recognise the powerful sound of this phrase in our ears? A merciful Islamic woman is the instrument of the mercy of God!

Mercy or Justice?

Saint Vincent de Paul, nephew of a lawyer, procurator of the King at the Tribunal in Dax, had, at one and the same time, a great sense of justice and of the poor. **For him, mercy towards the poor and the sick is not a matter of simple benevolence; it is a duty, not only of charity,**

¹⁰ CCD, I, 7-8.

but of justice – he wrote as much on 8 March 1658, to Firmin Get, Superior in Marseilles, who served the galley-slaves:¹¹

“I praise God for the charity the city of Marseilles is showing to the poor in their present need and for the timely help you have procured for the convicts suffering from the cold weather and poverty. God will grant you the grace, Monsieur ... of realizing that in helping them we are doing an act of justice and not of mercy! They are our brothers, whom God commands us to help...”

How do we reconcile mercy and justice? In 1638, Louise de Marillac had to deal with the case of a Sister who was both harsh and intractable, hesitating between keeping her (as mercy demanded) or sending her away (as justice demanded). Vincent wrote to her:¹²

“Jeanne, the Daughter of Charity in this parish [Saint-Laurent], has committed many faults, on account of which the Pastor, the officers, and M. de Vincy decided today that she must be changed. I entreat you, Mademoiselle, to send us another who has a more gentle and more accommodating disposition ... Now I think, nevertheless, that we must take her back for the Hotel-Dieu or somewhere else, so that justice may be accompanied by mercy.”

Mercy does not go without justice nor justice without mercy. However, they are neither truly themselves without the other.

The works of mercy are of two kinds according to the ends of the various confraternities and associations: material help and spiritual help.

1. Service of the Body

The works of mercy encounter many obstacles, especially in regions that are poor and afflicted by bad weather or epidemics, such as in times of war or revolutions, the lack of subsistence, which Saint Vincent frequently encountered in his own time.

Bernard Codoing, Superior of the Mission at Annecy, asked Monsieur Vincent for the gift of Mass intentions in order to sustain the needs of the poor populace of the mountains around Annecy. On 26 July 1640, Monsieur Vincent answered:¹³

¹¹ CCD, VII, 115.

¹² CCD, I, 449.

¹³ CCD, II, 92.

“I certainly do not see how ... the extreme poverty of the age is greatly dampening enthusiasm for alms and Mass stipends.”

Assistance is a good thing, but we must pay attention to the manner in which we do it. One should read the whole conference of 6 August 1656 to the Missioners, on the spirit of mercy. Vincent has a formula that anticipates what the 20th century was to call empathy:¹⁴

“When we go to visit poor persons, we have to sympathize with them in order to suffer with them, and put ourselves in the dispositions of that great Apostle, who said, *Omnibus omnia factus sum* (1 Corinthians 9:22); I have made myself all to all, so that the complaint Our Lord formerly made through one of the Prophets, *Sustinui qui simul mecum contristaretur, et non fuit* (Psalm 69:21) doesn’t fall on us: ‘I waited to see if someone would sympathize with me in my sufferings, and there was none.’ ”

“In order to do that, it is important to seek to make our hearts tender ... and to pray God that he will give us a true spirit of mercy, which is God’s very spirit; for as the Church says, it is God’s nature to be merciful and to bestow its spirit” [in the Prayer of the Litanies of the Saints].

“Let us be merciful, therefore, my brothers, and let us practice mercy towards all, in such a way that we may never find a poor person without consoling them nor an ignorant person without teaching them, in a few words, what is necessary for him to believe and which will serve for his salvation.” This leads us on to spiritual service.

2. Matters concerning spiritual service.

To assist the poor, the sick, the dying, also means to think about their eternal salvation, to present them to our Father in heaven, as he wrote on 20 November 1644 to the Superior at Montmirail, Guillaume Delville, where there were sick amongst the households of the nobles:¹⁵

“Blessed be God that the nobility call for you when they are sick! This is a good work and the most effective means of cooperating in their salvation. If they recover, you are

¹⁴ CCD, XI, 308.

¹⁵ CCD, II, 545-546.

getting them to take the resolution to serve God better and to adopt a better manner of living; and if they die, you are placing them in the merciful hands of Our Lord. I earnestly desire that the same be done with the poor, as far as this is possible.”

Let us recall that beautiful expression, “put them into the merciful hands of Our Lord.”

The great aim of Monsieur Vincent was to instruct both clergy and faithful at the same time, especially in the countryside, greatly abandoned by the clergy, who preferred to live in towns; and to undertake ardent prayer for the salvation of the world, for all, for the conversion of sinners, and for the return of heretics to the Church.

His teaching was aimed at several groups: • at Christians, who already had some instruction and who were living good lives; • at sinners; • at the ignorant; and, • finally, at those who had been brought up in error, in heresy. ‘Heresy’ comes from the Greek “haïresis,” which means ‘choice.’ A heretic is very rarely entirely in error; what he believes is also taught by the Church, but he refuses to believe some part of what the Church teaches, and which is found in Holy Scripture.

With regard to those who were notorious sinners, called to appear before the tribunal, he wrote to Pierre Cabel, Superior in Sedan, on 28 December 1658, that it is better to ask indulgence of the judges for the criminal, even if it is the same act of intercession for those who are blameworthy and those who deserve mercy:¹⁶

“It is the distinctive duty of priests to procure mercy and to be merciful to criminals, so you must not always refuse to help those who seek your intervention, especially when there is more misfortune than malice in their crime ... you may do so whenever you see that the case merits it, and you can prepare the minds of the judges by telling them that it is not your intention to defend crime but rather to practice mercy, by seeking it for the guilty and demanding it for the innocent, according to the obligation of your state.”

Prayer for sinners is prayer for all, including suicides, as he wrote to Edme Jolly, Superior in Rome, to whom he replied on 4 April 1659:¹⁷

¹⁶ CCD, VII, 443.

¹⁷ CCD, VII, 498.

“May God be merciful to those deceased persons you mentioned to me, especially that wretched man who took his own life, if he had a few moments to repent.”

As for relationships with heretics, disciples of John Calvin, he speaks thus to Jean Martin on 23 May 1659, reminding him that, on the one hand, we must await the occasion and, on the other, await the outcome, all the while knowing that it does not depend on us:¹⁸

“The conversion of heretics and sinners alike is a result of the absolute mercy and omnipotence of God alone...”

One can thus undertake works of mercy by prayer alone, when one is sick, infirm, or enclosed; **praying not just for the conversion of sinners but for the sanctification of all**, as he wrote to Étienne Blatiron, Superior in Genoa, on 25 September 1648:¹⁹

“I am greatly consoled by His Eminence’s determination to put good order in the seminary by having them make retreats. I beg Our Lord to sanctify them by His holy mercy.”

Prayer does not spring from itself alone; it is simply a call to the mercy of God: it is not we who achieve it, it is God – but, all the same, he awaits our prayer. He reminds the Superior of Genoa, Etienne Blatiron, of this on 14 February 1648:²⁰

“The graces God is showering on your labors is the result of His pure mercy and not of our wretched prayers.”

Finally, in order that our prayer might be true, might penetrate our life, it is necessary to follow Jesus even to the very end. He has asked this of us, he who made real the salvation of humanity, by atoning for the sins of the world on the cross. We offer ourselves on the crosses that life sends our way.

That is how far we are called upon to follow him, for he has said; “if anyone wishes to follow me, let him take up his cross and follow me.”²¹

We can conclude with these words from Vincent to the Daughters of Charity, from 31 July 1634, eight months after their foundation, on their ‘Rules’:²²

¹⁸ CCD, VII, 583.

¹⁹ CCD, III, 367.

²⁰ CCD, III, 274-275.

²¹ Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23.

²² CCD, IX, 5.

“Remember that when you leave meditation and Holy Mass to serve poor persons, you lose nothing, Sisters, because to serve those who are poor is to go to God, and you should see God in them. So then, be very careful to attend to all their needs, and be particularly alert to the assistance you can give them for their salvation; don’t let them die without the sacraments. You’re not there simply to care for their bodies, but to help them to be saved. Above all, motivate them to make general confessions; put up with their little fits of temper, and encourage them to suffer patiently for the love of God. Never get angry with them, and don’t speak to them harshly; they have enough to put up with because of their illness. **Imagine that you’re their visible Guardian Angel, their father and mother, and don’t contradict them except in those things that are bad for them ... Weep with them; God has made you to be their consolers.**”

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