

The Freedom of the Children of God, the Fruit of Indifference

Vincent de Paul's Image-Filled Teaching

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The road to beatification and canonization is often long and bumpy. Examiners make careful inquiries about the life, work, and writings of the proposed saint. A long list of questions aims at verifying whether he or she “has practiced to a heroic degree the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity as much toward God as toward the neighbor, as well as the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance, with supplementary virtues.”¹ In the case of a member of the Vincentian Family, examiners might also ask, “Was he or she a model of simplicity, humility, gentleness, self-denial, and zeal?” Promoters of causes write long documents to respond adequately to such questions.

But conspicuously absent from the list of questions is this one: Did the proposed saint express the liberty of the children of God that Paul so emphasizes? Was he or she genuinely free? By this question I do not mean: did he or she make decisions with at least basic moral freedom, rather than acting out of fear or force or ignorance or passion? That type of freedom is, of course, very important. Rather, I mean: did he or she also walk through life with a liberty that went beyond the ordinary, making decisions consistently and courageously, without fear of criticism or adverse consequences?

Many saints have shown such freedom. Among them was Vincent de Paul. As I will attempt to demonstrate below, Vincent held inner freedom in high regard and spoke of it often. Strangely, however, one searches in vain for an extensive treatment of freedom in the many books and articles written about Vincent over the centuries.

¹ Cf. the opening paragraph of Pope John Paul II's *Divinus Perfectionis Magister*, 25 January 1983, cf. also, 1917 *Code of Canon Law*, 2104.

I offer these reflections under three headings:

1. The freedom of the children of God
2. Inner freedom in the life and works of Vincent de Paul
3. Some implications today

I. FREEDOM OF THE CHILDREN OF GOD

We may be tempted to think of freedom as a quality emphasized only in modern times, linked particularly with the 18th century's focus on human rights. In the United States, the words "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" flow easily from the lips of citizens who, since 1776, have memorized the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence. "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité" are central to the ethos of the French Revolution and, since 1789, are etched on the face of countless buildings throughout France.

But emphasis on freedom long antedates the modern era. Freedom is central to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Old Testament never tires of reminding God's People of their liberation from Egypt. The New Testament continues the theme and deepens it. In Luke's gospel, as the old era comes to an end and a new age dawns, Zechariah cries out, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, he has come to his people and set them free!" (Luke 1:68).

The gospels and the Pauline letters frequently proclaim a new type of freedom in Christ. In his dialogues with the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus shows remarkable freedom from the constraints of the law (cf. Mark 7:19). He proclaims a truth that sets us free (John 8:32). "So if the Son sets you free," John tells us, "you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). Jesus embraces death freely, and in doing so, he breaks the bonds of death, raised up by his Father.

Paul focuses often on freedom from the law, from sin, and from death. He speaks eloquently of the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:21). He tells us that where the Spirit is, there is freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17).

Yet Paul characterizes himself as a servant or "slave" of Christ and is willing to make himself a slave of everyone (1 Corinthians 9:19). He wants no part of the popular notion of freedom as "being able to do whatever you want." The freedom he envisions is freedom for serving the Lord and serving the people of God, for giving one's life away on

behalf of others. Paul makes it clear that this freedom leads to moral transformation (2 Corinthians 3:18), so that we are no longer slaves to sin.

His letters to the Galatians and the Romans address the topic of freedom forcefully. In Galatia, Judaizing groups were urging Gentile Christians to adopt circumcision and other distinctive Jewish practices. They argued that if the Galatians wanted to be part of God's people, they must submit to the Mosaic Law. Paul had little patience with that way of thinking. In his view, it was "another gospel" unworthy of the name "gospel." Those who proclaimed such a message were undermining the freedom that believers have in Christ (Galatians 2:4-5). Paul emphasizes that, through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are freed from the yoke of slavery and can speak with God confidently as sons and daughters (Galatians 3:26; 4:6-7; Romans 8:15).

The Spirit is the source of Christian freedom. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom," Paul tells the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 3:17). It is important to note that the believer's experience of the freeing power of the Holy Spirit is only a down payment, a foretaste, of our inheritance (cf. Ephesians 1:13-14). Our final liberation is yet to come, when we receive full adoption, when even our bodies are redeemed, and when all creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:18-23).

II. INNER FREEDOM IN THE LIFE AND WORKS OF VINCENT DE PAUL

In this Year of Mercy, it may be helpful to note that Vincent was very conscious of the biblical teaching about jubilees and their role in restoring the freedom of the children of God. He says to the Daughters of Charity on 14 December 1656:

The Jubilee of the New Law of Our Lord Jesus Christ ... is a great source of consolation for all Christians, but not of temporal consolation like the one of the Old Law, which concerned only the body. The present one concerns the soul. The same consolations the Jubilee brought in the temporal order we receive spiritually in our year of Jubilee. And how is that? Those who are in debt in their passions, and those who have given themselves over to the evil spirit by obeying his temptations, will be set free from all that after gaining the Jubilee properly. And just as slaves were set at liberty, in like manner those who are slaves of the devil will

*be set free by the grace they'll receive and will be restored to the freedom of the children of God.*²

None of Vincent's extant writings or conferences focuses on freedom as its explicit theme, but, if we examine his life, letters, and talks, we find abundant material on the subject. Freedom comes to the fore especially in the conferences that he gave to his priests, brothers and sisters on "indifference." This teaching is not Vincent's original creation. He absorbed it from the Church's long spiritual tradition and from masters whom he admired, like Ignatius of Loyola,³ Benedict of Canfield,⁴ and Francis de Sales.⁵

For Vincent, freedom and indifference are intimately linked and are essential for those who want to do God's will. The title of five of his conferences to the Daughters of Charity includes the word

² CCD:X:186. CCD refers to the English translation of *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014: volume X, page 186. Future references to this work will be footnoted using the initials CCD, followed by the volume number, followed by the page number.* On occasion, to fit the context, I have changed the translation slightly, in light of the original text.

³ The last part of "Principle and Foundation" in the *Spiritual Exercises* has often been called "Ignatian Holy Indifference." By "Indifference," Ignatius means a total openness to the will of God in one's life. In other words, I strive to conform my will and even my way of thinking to whatever God wills for me. "Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed by free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short. The same holds for all other things" (*Spiritual Exercises* #23).

⁴ Benedict of Canfield, an English Capuchin named William Fitch (1562-1611), having been converted from Puritanism, took refuge in France. He had an enormous influence on his contemporaries and was a much sought-after spiritual director. Henri Brémond states that his *Rule of Perfection* was the manual for two or three generations of mystics, calling him "the teacher of teachers." Cf. *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* (Paris, 1916 and 1928), II:155-158, as well as VII:266. Cf. H. Brémond, *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France: From the Wars of Religion Down to Our Times. Vol. II: The Coming of Mysticism (1590-1620)*, translated by K. L. Montgomery (London: SPCK, 1930). Cf. also T. Davitt, "An Introduction to Benet of Canfield," *Colloque* 16 (1987) 268-282.

⁵ Francis de Sales. *Introduction to a Devout Life*, first published in 1609 and subsequently published in countless editions and languages; cf. Part III, chapters XI, XXVIII, XXIX; Part IV, chapter IV.

“indifference.”⁶ On perhaps no other theme is his imagery so varied. For Vincent, indifference is the disposition, or the inner freedom, to go anywhere that God calls and do anything that God asks in the service of the poor.

Indifference as the ground of freedom – a series of striking images

A fascinating article by Sung-Hae Kim,⁷ Superior General of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, speaks of indifference as the key to freedom of heart in Saint Vincent. Convincingly, she compares his teaching with that of leaders in other religious traditions like Confucianism and Daoism, showing how, in each of these traditions, indifference plays a crucial role as the ground of freedom. From each writer, she chooses a striking image. For Vincent, it is the mare. For the neo-Confucian Cheng Yi (1033-1107), it is the mountain. For the Daoist Yin Zhiping (1169-1251), it is the moon.

Below I will highlight not just the mare, but the many other images that Vincent uses to underline the importance of freedom.

• The mare, the mule, and the carriage horse

As Sung-Hae Kim points out, Vincent uses the mare, the mule, and the carriage horse to illustrate this virtue; they never resist the will of

⁶ The word “indifferent” has a very different meaning in many modern languages. It can mean “mediocre.” It can also describe the attitude of a person who “couldn’t care less.”

⁷ Sung-Hae Kim, “Indifference as the Freedom of the Heart: The Spiritual Fruit of Apostolic Mysticism — Christian, Confucian, and Daoist Cases,” *Vincentian Heritage* 30 (2011), 27-46. After comparing the representatives of the three traditions, she concludes, on p. 46: “... notice that all three mystics employed central symbols from the natural world. Vincent de Paul used a mare which pulls a cart following the will of her master; Cheng Yi chose the mountain, nurturing all forms of life according to a proper time; and Yin Zhiping envisioned a bright moon which shines upon the world, though occasionally darkened by fleeting clouds. They probably chose natural examples due to their innate lack of artificiality or falsity. Cheng Yi warned as superficial the notion of practice with effort, believing that as we artificially arouse our will it becomes selfishness. Yin Zhiping asserted that preserving a constant mind and accumulating worldly merits derives from the person, but the manifestation of the Dao, and the sages leading you, belong to Heaven. Paradoxically, it is in this entrusting passivity that the most energetic passion for apostolic outreach is born and preserved.”

their master and allow themselves to be driven wherever the master wants. Opposite to this type of indifference is inordinate attachment to any person or thing that holds us back from doing God's will.

In a conference given to the Daughters of Charity on 8 December 1659, he speaks of the mare, the mule, and the carriage horse:

*Since this virtue is repugnant to nature, which always tries to do its own will, ask Our Lord for it and say to Him, 'Lord, grant me the grace to be as You were.' And in what state was Our Lord? He tells us himself: He was like a mare, like a mule or a carriage horse. Just reflect how carriage horses allow themselves to be driven and led wherever people want, for no one has ever heard that they resisted the will of their masters. And Our Lord, to show that He was indifferent, said, 'I have been like the horse and the mule, which allow themselves to be led wherever anyone pleases.' Isn't it a great pity that senseless animals teach us this lesson of indifference, and we have such trouble practicing it!'*⁸

• The man tied to the tree

In a conference given to the Daughters of Charity on 6 June 1656, Vincent describes a man tied to a tree and enumerates four ways in which he loses his freedom. He then compares to the man a sister who is attached to the place where she lives or the clothes which she wears.

To understand better what's meant by an attachment, dear Sisters, picture a man tied to a tree by a rope, his hands and feet bound in chains, with the ropes well knotted and the chains well riveted; what can he do? There he is, enslaved; for, in the first place, the poor man can't free himself by his own efforts if no one breaks his chains and helps him to get free. Second, he can't go anywhere to look for something to eat or to sustain his life. As a result, he'll die of hunger if something isn't brought to him, and that's his third misfortune. Fourth, if he's left there during the night he's in danger of being devoured by animals because he can't defend himself against them. So, those are four things that can be said about this poor man in chains, all of which make him miserable. In the same way, dear Sisters, imagine that a Daughter of Charity who's attached to anything whatsoever is like that poor man. She can't free herself on her own if she's tightly fastened and bound; that is, if she's strongly attached it's impossible to become detached, unless she's helped by someone. So

⁸ CCD:X:560.

then, what can a Sister do who finds herself in that state? To whom shall she turn? There she is, trapped. A liking for a dress, a headdress, cuffs that show a little so people can see them, keeps her so firmly attached that she can't free herself of it.⁹

• **Those entangled in brambles**

He tells the members of the Congregation of the Mission about the great freedom that he has found in some of the confreres and the lack of freedom in others.

There are sickly old men who have asked to be sent there and who have asked it even if they have a serious disability. Oh, that's because their hearts are free; they go in spirit wherever God wants to be known, and nothing detains them here except His Will! If we weren't entangled in some wretched bramble, we'd all say: 'My God, send me, I give myself to You for any place on earth where my Superiors will think it suitable for me to go to announce Jesus Christ, and, even if I should die there, I'd be disposed to go ...'¹⁰

It is clear that Vincent has very strong feelings about this matter. He describes as *animals* those whose lives are dominated by sensual pleasure and who are attached to creatures rather than the Creator!

But how can we renounce ourselves, according to Our Lord's counsel, if we're attached to these things? How can we detach ourselves from everything, if we don't renounce the slightest thing that blocks us? Do you want a remedy for this, Messieurs? Openness to God's Will must set the captive free; this virtue alone draws us away from the tyranny of the senses and the love of creatures. Therefore, you see how necessary this virtue is and what an obligation we have to give ourselves to God to work at acquiring it, if we don't want to be slaves to ourselves and slaves to an animal – because he who lets himself be led by his sensual nature doesn't deserve to be called a man, but an animal.¹¹

⁹ CCD:X:132.

¹⁰ CCD:XII:198.

¹¹ CCD:XII:188.

- **The weakness of silk threads**

Vincent contrasts genuine freedom with illusory freedom, using the image of the silk threads. Writing to Mademoiselle Champagne, a novice, he advises her:

*We cannot serve two masters, and if you want to enjoy the freedom of the children of God, you must follow Jesus Christ on the narrow path of subjection that leads to salvation. For, regardless of how disposed you may be to do good by walking on the broad way of your own freedom, you might fall by the wayside. That is where those usually fall who are attached to God only by silk threads, so great is the inconstancy of human nature.*¹²

- **Flying – living the evangelical counsels as a road to freedom**

When he addresses the topic of the evangelical counsels, Vincent speaks eloquently about the freedom of the children of God. He states that chastity, poverty, and obedience are liberating. He urges his followers to fly!

*Those detached from a love for worldly possessions, from the greedy desire for pleasures, and from their own will become the children of God and enjoy perfect freedom; for that's to be found in the love of God alone. Those are the persons who are free, brothers, who have no laws, who fly, who go to the right and to the left; once again, who fly, who can't be stopped, and who are never slaves of the devil or of their passions. Oh, blessed freedom of the children of God! ... Now, my dear confreres, this is clearly seen in the practice of the Evangelical Counsels. These teachings are reduced to three points: love of poverty, mortification of one's pleasures, and submission to God's Will. They place a person in a state of Christian liberty.*¹³

- **The seductive, deadly basilisk – the importance of recognizing and resisting temptation**

Modern readers may not be familiar with the image that Vincent uses in speaking with the sisters on 25 May 1654. He refers to the basilisk, a legendary reptile thought to be the king of all serpents. It

¹² CCD:VII:201.

¹³ CCD:XII:245.

was reputed to be highly venomous and to have the power to cause death with a single glance.¹⁴

*There's no Daughter of Charity who doesn't have temptations against her vocation, but you must resist them courageously and never listen to them, no matter how good they may appear; for whatever good they may offer you, Sisters, they're basilisks that put up lovely pretenses in order to seduce you.*¹⁵

- **Even good trees have worms – humility as the foundation of freedom**

Vincent emphasizes that humility is basic to freedom. In the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, he calls it “the foundation of all evangelical perfection, the core of the entire spiritual life.”¹⁶

*Be aware, Sisters, that it's nothing to be attacked by one, two, or even several temptations; no, that's nothing if, from the beginning, we reject them, after recognizing that the devil is putting these wicked thoughts into our minds. You should say, 'Lord, I know there will never be a Daughter of Charity who isn't tempted.' No, dear Sisters, there are none and there never will be any. All good people must resign themselves to being tempted. No tree is free from worms.*¹⁷

In a letter written on 13 November 1640, he tells Jacques Tholard:¹⁸

Therefore, submit your judgment to what the Bishop and I have told you, please, and do not think about and do not even confess these things. Scorn both these evil suggestions and the wickedness of their author, who is the devil. Be very cheerful and humble yourself as much as you can.

¹⁴ The basilisk appears in the writings of Pliny the Elder, Isidore of Seville, Albert the Great, Geoffrey Chaucer, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, and many others. Jerome alludes to the basilisk in the Vulgate. The King James Bible uses the word to translate Isaiah 14:29.

¹⁵ CCD:IX:540.

¹⁶ CR II. 7.

¹⁷ CCD:IX:540.

¹⁸ Jacques Tholard suffered from scrupulosity. Vincent often wrote to him with compassionate advice and the assurance of prayers for his liberation. It seems that Tholard was eventually healed of his painful anxieties Cf. CCD:II:19; CCD:II:21-22. Vincent's letters to Tholard are filled with wisdom. Pierre Coste edited them heavily because of a concern about the sexual matters that they treat. They are now available in their entirety in many of the recent translations of the works of Saint Vincent.

Ordinarily, God allows these things to happen to free us from some hidden pride and to engender in us holy humility. They will diminish in the measure that you humble your understanding, and will disappear when you have made noticeable progress in that virtue. Strive therefore to acquire it.¹⁹

• **Sacrificing your own Isaacs – renouncing even precious goods for the sake of other goods**

Years ago, one of my teachers, a popular spiritual director, frequently urged us to “sacrifice your Isaacs.” I thought that he had invented the phrase himself. Only later did I discover that he had taken it from Saint Vincent, who challenges the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission:

Are you prepared, brothers, to sacrifice them to God? Let's take a close look at ourselves, and let's suppose a Superior says to us, 'Let's stop at that; you've studied enough; change houses; do something else.' That may happen to some of you; how will you feel about it? How will you feel, brothers, if you're asked for your Isaac? Will you cut the throat of this thirst for knowledge, of the pleasure of being in this place and not in another, of this stubbornness in wanting one thing and rejecting another? Examine your conscience sincerely; you'll find that you're not open to God's Will. ... Go, learn how to free yourself and to be open to God's Will; let that be your lesson.²⁰

The list of images is impressive:

- The mare, the mule, and the carriage horse
- The man tied to a tree
- Those tangled in brambles
- The silk threads
- Flying
- The seductive, deadly basilisk
- Trees that have worms
- Sacrificing one's own Isaacs

¹⁹ CCD:II:153.

²⁰ CCD:XII:197.

As one might imagine, Vincent speaks of freedom under many other headings. He often talks to the Daughters of Charity, for example, about what to do with their free time.²¹

In the course of his long life, Vincent learned, as do so many other contemplatives who lead active lives, that doing the will of God required freedom from whatever held him back: attachment to material things, to relatives, to his birthplace, to sexual desires, to his own will. Of course, he was aware that the road to indifference is a journey. Like most things, it is not obtained quickly, nor is it acquired once and for all.

In a touching letter to Louise de Marillac, Vincent states:²²

Rest assured, Mademoiselle, of the heart of one who is, in the heart of Our Lord and in His love, your most humble servant. Permit me to add to this the recommendation of holy indifference, although nature grumbles against it. I tell you that everything is to be feared until we succeed in this, since our inclinations are so evil that they seek themselves in all things. Courage! May Our Lord be in our hearts and our hearts in His, so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only what He wills.

III. SOME IMPLICATIONS TODAY

1. Being mobile, free to go anywhere in the service of the poor

At this time in history, freedom as mobility is more important than ever. Never before has the Vincentian Family been so universal. Never before have transportation and communication made it so possible to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Our Family now serves the poor in more than 150 countries. In recent years, our priests, brothers, sisters, laywomen, and laymen have begun new missions in Tanzania, El Alto in Bolivia, Albania, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, Burundi, Benin, Chad, Angola, the Central African Republic, Ghana, Libya, Punta Arenas in Chile, Tunis, Sudan, continental China, Kazakhstan, Alaska, Mongolia, and many other places.

²¹ CCD:X:523; CCD:IX:6.

²² CCD:I:212-213.

Mobility need not take us to foreign lands. Pope Francis consistently urges us to go out to those living on the periphery in our own community, our own city, our own country. We can find the marginalized both near and far.

Of course, to go anywhere one must be free. Attachments keep us at home. Vincent tells the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission that detachment is essential for a true missionary.

... we have to detach ourselves from what we have or from something that may be willed to us, free our spirit of all those things and have no attachment to them, or even to our relatives and friends; yes, my dear confreres, that's what I'm saying, we have to detach ourselves from too great a love of relatives and friends and from their interests, etc. In short, whoever says 'Missioner' (I mean a true Missioner) says a man who has God alone in view, his own salvation and that of his neighbor, a man who has no other attachment than the one that unites him more closely to God.²³

When we invite the young to join our Family, do we invite them to go wherever God asks? Wherever! That is certainly a challenging invitation.²⁴

2. Taking initiative as freedom

In his insightful book, *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, André Dodin emphasizes Vincent's gift for responding to events. From 1617 until his death, attentive to needs as they arose, he took one initiative after another without fear of failure. He engaged women and men, clergy and lay, young and old, rich and poor in meeting the urgent needs of the time. Even if we highlight only his principal accomplishments, the list is astounding:

²³ CCD:XII:23.

²⁴ Saint Vincent and Saint Louise put it eloquently in the fifth paragraph of the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity: "They will not be attached to any created thing, especially to places, duties, and persons, being careful not to become attached even to their relatives and confessors. They will always be prepared to leave everything when they are instructed to do so, reflecting that Our Lord says we are not worthy of Him nor of following Him if we do not renounce ourselves and our disordered actions in every way whatsoever, and even leave father, mother, brothers, and sisters to follow Him when He calls us." (CCD:XIIIb:149).

- In 1617, struck by the need to organize practical works of charity in Châtillon, he founded “the Charities” (later known as the Ladies of Charity and now called AIC). During his lifetime, he wrote the statutes for numerous “Charities” that sprang into existence throughout France. These confraternities spread rapidly throughout France and afterwards throughout the world, counting today more than 150,000 members in 53 countries.
- In 1625, he founded the Congregation of the Mission. By the time of his death, the Congregation had spread to Poland, Italy, Algeria, Madagascar, Ireland, Scotland, the Hebrides, and the Orkneys. During his lifetime, the missionaries at the central house, Saint Lazare, in Paris, gave more than a thousand missions. He acted as Superior General of the Congregation until his death, holding regular council meetings, writing its rules, conducting general assemblies, and resolving a host of foundational questions.
- From 1628 on, he became more and more involved in the reform of the clergy, organizing retreats for ordinands, the Tuesday conferences, and retreats for priests. Abelly, his first biographer, tells us that more than 12,000 ordinands made retreats in Paris at Saint Lazare. In the last 25 years of his life, he established 20 seminaries!
- In 1633, along with Louise de Marillac, he founded the Company of the Daughters of Charity. With Louise at his side, he acted as Superior General, guiding frequent meetings of their General Council, drafting a rule, and working out the rather revolutionary juridical base that would make the Company such a powerful apostolic force in the years to come. In his lifetime, more than 60 houses sprang up in both France and Poland. The Company later became one of the largest congregations the Church had ever seen.
- In the process of guiding the three groups that he founded, Vincent carried on an enormous correspondence, writing more than 30,000 letters. He gave frequent conferences to both the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters. Only a small number of these are extant, and even these are merely copiers’ accounts of what he said. He also gave conferences to the Visitation nuns who had been entrusted to his care by Francis de Sales in 1622; none of these has been passed down to us.

- In 1638, he took up the work of the foundlings. Eventually he assigned numerous Daughters of Charity to the work and had 13 houses built to receive the children. When this work was endangered in 1647, he saved it by making an eloquent appeal to the Ladies of Charity to regard the foundlings as their children.²⁵
- Beginning in 1639, Vincent began organizing campaigns for the relief of those suffering from war, plague, and famine. One of Vincent's assistants, Brother Mathieu Regnard, made 53 trips, crossing enemy lines in disguise, carrying large sums of money from Vincent for the relief of those in war zones.²⁶
- From 1643 to 1652, he served on the Council of Conscience, an elite administrative body that advised the king about the selection of bishops and other matters. At the same time, he was the friend and often the counsellor of many of the great spiritual leaders of the day.
- In 1652, as poverty enveloped Paris, Vincent, at the age of 72, organized massive relief programs, providing soup twice a day for thousands of poor people at Saint Lazare and feeding thousands of others at the houses of the Daughters of Charity. He organized collections, gathering each week five to six thousand pounds of meat, two to three thousand eggs, and provisions of clothing and utensils.²⁷

So striking were Vincent's activities that the preacher at his funeral, Henri de Maupas du Tour, stated, "He just about transformed the face of the Church."²⁸

Freedom and initiative are intimately linked. Freedom enables us to channel our lives and our energies creatively toward goals that take us outside ourselves in the service of others.

²⁵ CCD: XIIIb:423.

²⁶ Dodin, *op. cit.*, p. 45, states that Brother Mathieu carried 25 to 30 thousand *livres* a trip (equivalent to over a million US dollars each time)!

²⁷ For many interesting details on Saint Vincent's handling of money and his administration of charitable works, cf. René Wulfman *Charité Publique et Finances Privées : Monsieur Vincent, Gestionnaire et Saint* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, France: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998). Cf. also, John Rybolt, "St. Vincent de Paul and Money," *Vincentian Heritage*, 26 (2005) 81-103; José María Román, "The Foundations of St. Vincent," *Vincentian Heritage*, 9 (1988) 134-161.

²⁸ "(Vincent de Paul) a presque changé la face de l'Église." The text of de Maupas' funeral discourse is available in a beautiful edition by Edward R. Udovic, CM, *Henri de Maupas du Tour: the Funeral Oration for Vincent de Paul* (Chicago: DePaul University Vincentian Studies Institute, 2015), cf. 173.

3. Acting from neither fear nor favor

On 24 May 1931, a great jurist, Benjamin Cardozo, who soon afterwards became a Supreme Court Justice of the United States, addressed a group of graduating law-school students. He told them that the principled person – whether a lawyer, a judge, an astronomer, a religious – acts from neither fear nor favor.²⁹

Vincent is a striking witness to this. Numerous people sought his advice, especially in his later years. One of them was Queen Anne of Austria, who, after the death of her husband, served as regent for her infant son, who later reigned as Louis XIV. She invited Vincent to be a member of the Council of Conscience, a body that had great influence on decisions related to religious affairs, particularly the naming of bishops. There, he served under Cardinal Mazarin. Because of political intrigue on the Council, Vincent expressed his views carefully, but freely. As a result, he earned the enmity of Mazarin, who, in his secret diary, lists Vincent as his enemy and eventually maneuvered to have him removed from the Council.³⁰

Those who are “indifferent” to holding high positions can speak with freedom. The author of the *Imitation of Christ* offers this counsel: “Do not fawn upon the rich, and do not be fond of mingling with the great. Associate with the humble and the simple, with the devout and virtuous, and with them speak of edifying things.”³¹ Only the indifferent are capable of speaking prophetically in the root sense of the word: they say what God asks them to say.

A recent Vatican document describes contemporary forms of prophecy and the need for prophetic voices.³²

- *The prophecy of hospitality as openness and acceptance of the other, the stranger, the foreigner, the one from a different religion, race or culture.*

²⁹ Benjamin N. Cardozo, “Values: Commencement Address of The Choice of Tycho Brahe,” delivered at the exercises of the Jewish Institute of Religion on 24 May 1931. The full address can be found at:
<http://suffolkwomensbar.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CardozoAddress.pdf>.

³⁰ CCD:XIIIa:154-155.

³¹ *Imitation of Christ*, Book I, chapter 8.

³² Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 4 October 2015, “Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church,” 37.

In an era when there are so many migrants and immigrants and where so much controversy surrounds their reception, are we prophetically welcoming? Today there are more than 250,000,000 international immigrants. Sixty million of them have fled war, persecution, and human rights violations. During the long years of internal strife within France, Vincent ministered to those who were displaced and did so effectively.

- *The prophecy of the meaning of life.*

In an era when human life is often “cheap,” do we prophetically proclaim a consistent ethic of life, standing courageously at the side of those on life’s edges, like the unborn and the dying, the handicapped, prisoners condemned to death, the innocent in war zones, and all those whose lives are undervalued? One of Vincent’s most dramatic appeals was for the foundlings who had been abandoned on the streets of Paris. He also knew how to stand at the side of those condemned to be galley slaves, since he served as their chaplain. For him, life was a seamless garment to be valued at all stages.

- *The prophecy of the affirmation of feminine values in the history of humanity.*

In an era when women continue to be high on the list of those who are discriminated against in society, do we stand with them, advocating for equal rights for women in the home, in the work place, in Church affairs. Recent Church documents have been eloquent in speaking about the dignity of women and the recognition of their rights. *Vita Consecrata* stated: “It is therefore urgently necessary to take concrete steps, beginning by providing room for women to participate in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves.”³³ But, in Church matters, only tiny steps have been taken to put this into effect. Let me offer a very concrete instance. Seventy-two percent of the religious in the world are women. Worldwide, there are more than 3000 communities of women religious, with hundreds of thousands of members. But, almost exclusively, men make the top-level decisions about them. Vincent was prophetic about the role of women in the Church. On 6 December 1658, he said to the priests and brothers of the Congregation: “Didn’t He accept having women in His Company?”

³³ *Vita Consecrata*, 58.

Yes, He did. Didn't He guide them to holiness and to the assistance of the poor? Yes, He did. If, then, Our Lord did that, He who did everything for our instruction, shouldn't we think it's right to follow Him? ... in this way God was served equally by both sexes."³⁴

- *The prophecy of the care and protection of life, of the integrity of creation.*

In an era when Pope Francis has spoken so courageously against policies that threaten the human habitat and the effect of those policies on the lives of the poor, do we stand with him both in theory and in practice? Do we teach and preach about *Laudato Si'*, even while knowing that our words will arouse opposition?

- *The prophecy of the wise use of new technologies.*

In an era that has known unprecedented advances in technology, do we advocate for placing it at the service of worldwide communication, democratizing information so that it benefits the most disadvantaged and, at the same time, makes technology a useful instrument in evangelization? At a time when pornography is rife, do we instruct others, younger and older, on moderation and discernment in the use of the technology?

4. Giving missions and offering other services free of charge

“Free of charge” is a frequent phrase in Saint Vincent's writings and talks.³⁵ He was eager for his Family to provide its services to the poor without asking anything in return. On 1 August 1628, petitioning Urban VIII for the approval of the Congregation of the Mission, he states clearly:³⁶

They shall go from village to village, preaching, catechizing, and exhorting them to unburden their consciences of the sins of their entire life, hearing general confessions of penitents, instructing children for the worthy reception of their first Holy Communion, and setting up the Confraternity of Charity for the relief of the sick poor, all this free of charge, receiving no gifts either directly or indirectly.

³⁴ CCD:XII:76-77.

³⁵ The phrase appears 21 times in the works of Saint Vincent.

³⁶ CCD:I:50.

When I look at various Vincentian Family projects today, I see clearly that the Family tries hard to be faithful to Vincent's directive. In Project DREAM, in which the Daughters of Charity and the Community of Sant'Egidio collaborate, more than a million people have been assisted. All receive care free of charge. In many hospitals of the Daughters of Charity, the poor pay nothing. In addition, the branches of the Family continue to set up endowment funds of different sorts, so that they can perform their works without asking payment in return.

But, in every era, the temptation is to look for recompense for our work. Sometimes we seek payment not just for expenses we have incurred, but also for ourselves. Or, sometimes we are so concerned about making the books balance that we seek to have security for all future eventualities.

5. Living peacefully and joyfully

At the top of Paul's list of freedoms is freedom from death. And, of course, central to the entire New Testament is the resurrection.

Are we free, as we grow older, not to "worry about your life, what you will eat [or drink], or about your body, what you will wear" (Matthew 6:25), or about the length or shortness of life? As Shakespeare puts it, it is not the number of years we live that counts; rather, "Ripeness is all."³⁷

Saint Vincent spoke of the "theatre of patience" that he witnessed in sick and elderly members of his Family.³⁸ He reminds the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission: "We never see better what someone is than when he is in the infirmary. It's the surest proof we have for recognizing the most virtuous and those who are less so. This helps us to see how important it is for us to be firmly grounded in the proper way to behave during illness."³⁹

What a gift it is to the Vincentian Family when members grow old gracefully, living joyfully and peacefully, trusting in God's forgiveness for past failings, conformed to whatever God asks, and confident in freedom from death.

³⁷ King Lear, Act 5, Scene 2.

³⁸ CCD:XI:61.

³⁹ CCD:XI:60.

A final word

In the *Divine Comedy*, the first person whom Dante meets upon entering paradise is Piccarda Donati, whom he had known while she was living. She is now much more beautiful than he recalled. But he finds her in the lowest sphere of heaven. Dante asks her whether she ever longs for a higher place. She says *no* “with such gladness that she seemed to burn with the ... flame of love,” and then she describes for him how the wills of the blessed are in entire conformity with God’s:⁴⁰

“Brother, the power of love becalms our wills
And makes us wish for only what we have
And whets our thirst for nothing more than that.

“Were we to long for some more lofty height,
Then our desires would be discordant with
The will of Him who has assigned us here.

“Such strife, you see, has no place in these spheres
Since to exist in love is here required,
If you will truly ponder on love’s nature.

“No, it’s the essence of this blessed existence
To hold ourselves within the will of God
Through which our own wills are made one with His:

Throughout this kingdom gladdens the whole kingdom
And the King, too, who wills in us what He wills.

“For in His will is our peace.”

⁴⁰ Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Paradiso, Canto III, 70-85.