

Saint Vincent as a Mystic of Charity

By: Robert Maloney, CM

First words are important. They set the tone for what comes next. Frequently, we identify poems by their opening line: Virgil's "I sing of arms and of the man,"¹ Dante's "Halfway through life's journey,"² Shakespeare's "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?," Whitman's "O Captain, my Captain," Longfellow's "This is the forest primeval," Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for death," Hopkin's "Glory be to God for dappled things,"

In a similar vein, a recent New Testament study shows how significant inaugural discourses are.³ They offer a preview of what will follow. In his gospel and in the Acts, Luke carefully constructed three of them. The first of these, Jesus' opening words at the synagogue in Nazareth, is the inspiration for our Vincentian tradition: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore he has anointed me. To preach good news to the poor, he has sent me"

In that light, it is noteworthy that, in his initial homily after being elected Superior General, Father Tomaž Mavrič chose to speak of Saint Vincent as a "Mystic of Charity." Shortly afterwards, on 27 September 2016, in his first circular letter to the Vincentian Family, he developed the theme further. Clearly, the topic lies close to his heart and is a harbinger of things to come.

¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, opening line: "Arma virumque cano."

² Dante, *Inferno*, opening line: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita."

³ Joseph WenXi Zhang, *Paul among Jews: A Study of the Meaning and Significance of Paul's Inaugural Sermon in the Synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:16-41) for His Missionary Work among the Jews* (Catholic University of America, 2010). He examines three inaugural discourses in Luke/Acts: that of Jesus (Luke 4:16-30), that of Peter (Acts 2:14-40), and that of Paul (Acts 13:16-41).

In this article, I propose to examine at greater length what it means to refer to Vincent as a “Mystic of Charity,” offering some thoughts under five headings:

1. The contemporary relevance of the theme
2. Some hermeneutical difficulties
3. The history of calling Saint Vincent a “Mystic of Charity”
4. Vincent’s brand of mysticism
5. Ten implications for Vincentian Spirituality today.

These thoughts are simply seeds. Much more might be said on the matter. I would welcome whatever additions and corrections others might make.

1. The contemporary relevance of the theme for the various branches of the Vincentian Family

Karl Rahner, one of the great 20th-century theologians, has had an enormous influence on the theology of the Church and the sacraments, on Christology, on the relationship of nature and grace, on the sacrament of penance, on pastoral theology, and many other topics. He also wrote extensively about spirituality. One of his most frequently cited statements pertains directly to our topic. He said, *the devout Christian of the future will either be a “mystic,” one who has experienced “something,” or he will cease to be anything at all.*⁴ Rahner, of course, was not alone in saying this. Thomas Merton, in the conclusion to his book on contemplative prayer, stated forcefully:

*Without contemplation and interior prayer, the Church cannot fulfill her mission to transform and save humankind. Without contemplation, she will be reduced to being the servant of cynical and worldly powers, no matter how hard her faithful may protest that they are fighting for the Kingdom of God. Without true, deep contemplative aspirations, without a total love for God and an uncompromising thirst for God’s truth, religion tends in the end to become an opiate.*⁵

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 7 (1971) 15.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, 1969) 116.

Most recently, Pope Francis has accented a similar theme: "... a religion without mystics is a philosophy."⁶

Rahner speaks of a "mysticism of daily life." He states that, since grace is nothing less than the offer of God's very own self to each of us, the human person can be described as *homo mysticus*; in other words, being human inevitably means being bound up in the mystery of God's love.

In many essays, Rahner stresses the intrinsic unity between love of God and love of neighbor, frequently citing Jesus' teaching that love for the least of our brothers and sisters is love for him, even when we do not recognize him. So, the most profound form of mysticism, in Rahner's view, is unreserved love for others in everyday life.⁷

Instinctively, the contemporary documents of many of the branches of the Vincentian Family have expressed the same point, using other language.

Borrowing a phrase from the Jesuit tradition,⁸ the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission call each member to be "a contemplative in action and an apostle in prayer."⁹

The Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity state: *the Sisters find Christ and contemplate Him in the heart and life of those who are poor....*¹⁰ They add: *the apostolic action of the Daughters of Charity draws its strength from contemplation, following the example of the Son of God who, while remaining intimately united with His Father, often went aside to pray.*¹¹

⁶ Pope Francis, interview in *La Repubblica*, 1 October 2013.

⁷ Harvey Egan, "The Mystical Theology of Karl Rahner," *The Way*, 52/2 (April 2013), 43–62.

⁸ The phrase seems to have been used first by Jerome Nadal (1507-1580), one of the closest collaborators of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, to describe the Jesuit founder's way of proceeding.

⁹ Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, article 42.

¹⁰ Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, article 10a.

¹¹ Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, article 21a; cf. also, 13.

The new Rule of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul speaks frequently of “prayer and action,”¹² “deep prayer and reflection,”¹³ “union with Christ,”¹⁴ and “a profound spiritual life.”¹⁵

Clearly, then, the theme “Saint Vincent as a Mystic of Charity” is very relevant for the worldwide Vincentian Family today.

2. Some hermeneutical difficulties

Before addressing the topic directly, it may be useful to note two difficulties.

First, we can apply the usual meaning of the word “mystic” to Vincent only with careful nuancing. When we speak of mystics, we usually think of people who have extraordinary religious experiences.¹⁶ Their quest for God moves from active search to passive presence. They pray, as Saint Paul says to the Church in Rome (8:26), “with sighs and groans too deep for human words.” Mystics have ecstatic moments when they are completely lost in God, “whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know,” as Saint Paul recounts his experience in 2 Corinthians 12:3. At times, they have visions and receive private revelations. They attempt, with difficulty, to describe for others their moments of intense light and painful darkness. Saint Vincent knew the writings of mystics like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, but he is known much more for his prodigious works than for his mystical experiences. He was generally cautious about unusual spiritual phenomena, though he admired Madame Acarie, one of the renowned mystics of his day, who lived in Paris during his early years there.

Vincent’s brand of mysticism was strikingly different from what we usually think of when we speak of mystics. That is precisely the point of this article, as I will explain in parts 4 and 5. His mysticism is largely hidden, but sometimes reveals itself in spontaneous ecstatic language.

¹² Rule, 3.3.

¹³ Rule, 1.7 commentary; also, 2.2.

¹⁴ Rule, 2.3.

¹⁵ Rule, 3.13.

¹⁶ Cf. Harvey Egan, *op. cit.*, p. 56, for classical examples of “mystical prayer.”

The second difficulty affects English-speaking readers especially. The French word *mystique* and parallel words in other languages, like the Italian *mistica* and the Spanish *mística*, are often difficult to translate into English. Sometimes English words like “mystical,” “mystic,” and “mystique” make complete sense as translations, but at other times they sound quite strange. Readers of English may find it bewildering when they see the title of Giuseppe Toscani’s important book, to which I will refer later, translated as *The Mystique of the Poor*. Such readers may quickly object: “What! There is no mystique about being poor!”

Still, in spite of these two difficulties, an exploration of the theme “Saint Vincent as a Mystic of Charity” opens up multiple horizons.

The history of calling Vincent a “Mystic of Charity”

I suspect that Vincent would not have been happy to hear people describing him as a “Mystic of Charity,” though he might gladly have applied that phrase to others whom he knew and admired.¹⁷

¹⁷ For example, in a conference given after her death, Vincent says of Louise de Marillac (CCD:X:575): *You can imagine what a deep, interior foundation your mother had in order to regulate her memory in such a way that she used it only for God, and her will only to love Him. Sisters, an interior Sister is one who devotes herself only to God. For what does interior mean if not to be occupied with God? That’s obvious. On the contrary, go over in your mind and consider what a Sister is like who has no interior life. You have seen this in those who have left. Alas! What were they like? They had no interior peace and were troublesome to everyone. So, dear Sisters, let’s strive to develop solidly within ourselves a deep interior life.* Cf. also CCD:X:584. Speaking about Louise’s virtues, he rejoiced at a sister’s description of Louise: *She was no sooner alone, than she was always recollected.* 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. On occasion, to fit the context, I have changed the translation slightly, in light of the original text.

Still, it is important to note that, even in his own lifetime, people recognized Vincent not just as a man of action, but also as someone deeply united with God.¹⁸

The description of Vincent as a “Mystic of Charity” came into prominence in the early decades of the 20th century. Below, I offer a brief account of the principal 20th-century promoters of the theme. In the limited space of this article, I can offer only a “taste” of the rich materials that exist. I encourage interested readers to “feast” fully on the writings of these authors. References to their works can be found in the footnotes.

It may seem strange to Vincentian Family readers that two Jesuits, Henri Brémond¹⁹ and Pierre Deffrennes, appear at the top of the list and that they wrote such influential works on our founder. At times, I suppose, those outside see things with greater “in-sight” than those inside.

Henri Brémond

While writers today criticize Brémond for some of his judgments, his work is extraordinary in its scope and its eloquence.²⁰ It was Brémond who popularized the phrase “the French School of Spirituality” which is so much in vogue today. His insight into

¹⁸ Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul: Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, 3 vol., edited by John E. Rybolt, CM, translated by William Quinn, FSC, notes by Edward R. Udovic, CM, and John E. Rybolt, CM, introduction by Stafford Poole, CM, New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993, Book III, Chap. VI, 56.

¹⁹ Bremond left the Society of Jesus in 1904, but remained a priest.

²⁰ Henri Brémond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, III « *La Conquête Mystique* » (Paris, 1921). Readers can find this work online at: <https://archive.org/stream/histoirelitr03brem#page/256/mode/2up>.

personalities like Benedict of Canfield,²¹ Madame Acarie,²² and Pierre de Bérulle²³ is penetrating and, at times, quite original. He considered Vincent as the outstanding figure of an era that produced a whole line of saints.

Brémond wrote just as the complete works of Saint Vincent were becoming available to scholars and others through the patient work of Pierre Coste. He emphasizes that Vincent's letters and conferences make it clear that the popular image of Vincent as the inventive organizer of countless social works is one-sided, and therefore distorted. He states the Vincent was, first of all, a saint. "It was not love of men that led him to holiness; it was holiness that made him truly and effectively charitable."²⁴

His groundbreaking eleven-volume work, mentioned above, described Vincent's era as the time of "The Mystical Conquest." Brémond presented Bérulle as the "founder" of the French School. Perhaps for that reason, he depicts a very "Bérullian" Vincent. Many authors, both before Brémond and after him, have identified Bérulle as the predominant influence upon Vincent's spirituality. While Bérulle's influence was significant, it has perhaps been overemphasized. Vincent made a clear break with Bérulle by around 1618. Many others, particularly Francis de Sales and André Duval, helped shape his spirituality.

²¹ He calls Benedict the "the master of masters."

²² Of Madame Acarie he writes, "It is not too much to say that, of all the spiritual hearths kindled in the reign of Henry IV, none burned more brightly or equally in intensity than that of the Hôtel Acarie."

²³ He says of Bérulle, "It is impossible to doubt the exceptional eminence of someone who was the master of so many saints, the teacher of so many teachers."

²⁴ Brémond, *op. cit.*, 246. From a rhetorical point of view, Brémond's statement underlines the importance of Vincent's deep relationship with God. From a theological point of view, one can readily debate statements like this, which juxtapose and/or prioritize interacting aspects of love. What is clear, however, is that, in Vincent's spirituality, love of God and love of the poor are inextricably intertwined.

Bérulle's focus is sharply Christocentric. He accents the importance of immersion in Christ's "mysteries" (in the events of his life, death, and resurrection), a theme that Vincent too takes up and that was central to the French School. For its members, "For me, to live is Christ"²⁵ was the heart of contemplation.

But, in the end, it is hard to "fit" Vincent into the French School.²⁶ He was quite independent, even eclectic, choosing aspects of spirituality that best served his vision of Christ as Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor.

In any event, Brémond places strong emphasis not just on Vincent's remarkable works, but also on his profound union with God. He concludes an eloquent chapter about Vincent by stating: *It was mysticism that gave us the greatest of our men of works.*²⁷

Pierre Deffrennes

In 1932, Deffrennes published four fascinating articles²⁸ about Vincent. He cites numerous statements from Vincent's conferences and letters to show how "at ease" the saint was in combining prodigious activity and union with God. He highlights a saying of Vincent found in Abelly, Vincent's first biographer:

²⁵ Philippians 1:21.

²⁶ It is noteworthy that Raymond Deville, in his excellent work on the French School, while extolling Vincent, does not include him in the members of the School. Cf. Raymond Deville, *L'École française de spiritualité*, (Bibliothèque d'Histoire du Christianisme, n° 11, Desclée, Paris, 1987). Deville states, "Although a contemporary, a good friend of the foregoing, and recognized as a spiritual leader in the French church – perhaps the premier leader – Vincent de Paul does not belong to the Bérullians in the strict sense."

²⁷ Henri Brémond, *op.cit.*, p. 257.

²⁸ Pierre Deffrennes, S.J., « La vocation de saint Vincent de Paul, Etude de psychologie surnaturelle, » *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* (1932) 60-86; 164-183; 294-321; 389-411.

Our Lord unites himself continually to those virtuous souls who remain faithfully and constantly united to his holy will, to those who choose or do not choose according to his wishes.²⁹

Deffrennes focuses on the importance of the Spirit of God in impelling Vincent to service and in moving him to seek God's will in everything. He describes Vincent's psychology as completely dominated "by the needs of faith" and as "strikingly similar to the psychology of the mystics."

He concludes:

Only the mystics have known this kind of pure and prodigious activity. Saint Vincent, we know, was not a mystic of contemplation. We have repeatedly found in him the gifts of the experienced practitioner. If we have, however, succeeded in analyzing the role of faith in his experience, the way his fidelity to faith conditioned his experience, and the way the assurance of faith crowned it, might we perhaps be authorized to find there certain characteristics proper to the mystical experience: passivity, purification of nature, thirst for God, and the certitude of having found it? ... a mystic, perhaps not of contemplation, but of action and of events?³⁰

As the reader will quickly note, Deffrennes contrasts "mystic of contemplation" and "mystic of action and events." If we understand contemplation as a normal development in prayer rather than a rare phenomenon reserved for the privileged, then "mystic of contemplation" and "mystic of action and events" can be combined rather than contrasted.

²⁹ Abelly, *Vie*. Livre III, ch. II, p. 33.

³⁰ Pierre Deffrennes, S.J., « La vocation de saint Vincent de Paul, Etude de psychologie surnaturelle, » *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* (1932) 410.

Giuseppe Toscani

Toscani's influential book, *The Mystique of the Poor*, focuses specifically on our theme.³¹ He affirms that *among the spiritually-minded of his day, Vincent was the great contemplative of Charity, marked out by an extraordinary mystical experience of divine Love, unique of its kind. He is not only "the great saint of the great century" (as the sub-title of Coste's Life put it), but in a century of great mystics he is distinguished as the greatest mystic of the Love of God in Christ. After him came "the twilight of the mystics," which was a natural consequence of the eclipse of active charity, driven by the Holy Spirit.*³²

Almost lyrically, Toscani states: *Even in his most engrossing activities, Saint Vincent remains a man of prayer, prostrate before the mystery of the Incarnation, a mystic of justice, tormented by the pathos of divine Love.*³³

He notes how Vincent emphasized the French word *demeurer*, to dwell in God, to rest in God, to abide in God.

Toscani cites some of Vincent's most eloquent statements:

But what is the Spirit of Our Lord? It is a spirit of perfect charity, filled with a marvelous esteem of the Divinity and an infinite desire to honor it in a worthy manner; together with a knowledge of the greatness of His Father, in order to admire and extol them unceasingly. He has such a high esteem of this that He paid homage to Him for all the things that were in His Sacred Person and that passed out from it. He attributed everything to Him. He was unwilling to say that His teaching was His own, but referred it to His Father: Doctrina mea non est mea, sed ejus qui misit me Patris [sic]. Is there any greater esteem than that of the Son, who

³¹ Giuseppe Toscani, *La mistica dei poveri* (Torino, 1986). The book was translated by Myles Rearden, CM, and published informally by the Commission of Charism and Culture in the Asia Pacific in 2011.

³² *Ibid.*, 52.

³³ *Ibid.*, 136.

*is equal to the Father, and yet who acknowledges the Father as the author and sole principle of all the good that is in Him? And what was His love? Oh, what love! O my Savior, what love did You not show for Your Father! Could there have been any greater love, my dear confreres, than to annihilate himself for Him? For when Saint Paul speaks of the birth of the Son of God on earth, he says that He annihilated himself. Could He show any greater love in that than by dying through love in the way He died? O love of my Savior! O love! You were incomparably greater than the angels were able to understand and will never understand!*³⁴

Toscani identifies Vincent as not only *a contemplative, but also a great orator, endowed with powerful eloquence ... As his eloquence progresses, expands, and becomes more inspiring and expressive, it reflects more clearly the action that the Spirit of Christ, precisely as Love, exercises in him.*³⁵

For Vincent the mystic, *charity is everything, in everything: in God, in Christ, in the Church, in religion, in life, on earth and in heaven.*³⁶ Toscani adds: *Charity gives to every human being, as it does to Jesus, the facial expression of God's love. In the very last of human beings, the poorest, in all those in whom the need for goodness is greatest, Love presents itself at its most active, because committed to making itself loved ever more intensely and demandingly.*³⁷

André Dodin

Dodin, whose writings were so influential in 20th-century Vincentian studies, presents a more Salesian Vincent than many of his predecessors.³⁸ He emphasizes Vincent's break with Bérulle and the influence that Francis de Sales and André Duval had on him. He

³⁴ CCD:XII:93-94.

³⁵ Toscani, *op. cit.*, 67-68.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁸ André Dodin, *François de Sales, Vincent de Paul: Les deux amis* (O.E.I.L., 1984).

describes Vincent as a “mystic of religious action.”³⁹ He affirms: “Vincent was a mystic who didn’t know he was one.” He was not a visionary. Nor was he an activist. He simply pushed people to “see.” And the only way in practice to “see” people as they are is to represent them as they are in reality, “that is to say, in God.”⁴⁰

José-María Ibañez

Ibañez carried this line of thought further and condensed his thinking in a work of great originality.⁴¹ He investigated the origins, dynamism, and orientation of Vincent’s prodigious activity. He states that Vincent, though he had the temperament and flair of a man of state, was essentially a *mystic of action*. It was his profound faith – alive, dynamic, and strong – that was open to life and its events, and that opened him to “reality.” In prayer, he encountered not only God but also God’s love. But this love, he understood, was open to humanity, and from there he discovered that the will of God is “a will of service to human persons.”

Luigi Mezzadri

In his introduction to Vincentian studies, *La Sete e La Sorgente*, Luigi Mezzadri provides a very useful summary and critique of the views of the authors above and of many others.⁴² In his Vincentian

³⁹ A. Dodin, « Spiritualité de Vincent de Paul », *Mission et Charité* 1 (1961) 54-75; cf. also, « Vincent de Paul mystique de l’action religieuse », *Mission et Charité* 8 (1968) 26-47.

⁴⁰ A. Dodin, « Vincent de Paul, mystique de l’action religieuse », *Mission et Charité*, 8 (1968) 46.

⁴¹ José-María Ibañez, *Vicente de Paúl y los pobres de su tiempo* (Salamanca, 1977); cf. also, Ibañez, “Educar en la sociedad de hoy, según el espíritu de Vicente de Paúl,” *Mensaje Vicenciano y Juventud Actual* (XIII Semana de Estudios Vicencianos; CEME, Salamanca, 1987), 41-96.

⁴² Luigi Mezzadri, *La Sete e La Sorgente* (CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane; Roma 1992), 111 ff. One might translate the title into English as *Thirst and the Source*.

dictionary,⁴³ under the word “mystic,” he situates Vincent’s mysticism, as does Toscani, in his contemplation of divine Love, which, as revealed in Christ, is for the least of our brothers and sisters.⁴⁴

Mezzadri’s analysis of the major biographies of Vincent and his review of many 20th-century studies on Vincentian spirituality is clear and penetrating. He too, like several of the authors mentioned above, moves away from the “Bérullian” interpretation of Vincent and accents the role of Francis de Sales and André Duval.

Hugh O’Donnell

In recent years, a number of other authors have treated this topic. Important among them are Hugh O’Donnell and Thomas McKenna, both of whom contributed to Father Mavrič’s inaugural letter.

In an insightful introduction to a volume on Saint Vincent and Saint Louise in the series *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, Hugh O’Donnell describes “Vincent 1” (the journey to freedom) and “Vincent 2” (the Apostle of Charity), who were remarkably different from one another and worked from very distinct sets of motivations.⁴⁵ Following Dodin, he speaks of Vincent’s experience, faith and practical wisdom and describes him as a “mystic of action.” He notes how Vincent contemplated his experience and reacted to it creatively.

⁴³ Luigi Mezzadri, *Dizionario Storico Spirituale Vincenziano* (CLV - Edizioni Vincenziane; Roma 2003).

⁴⁴ Using the French version of Vincent’s writings, he cites: I, 86; XI, 221; XI, 112-114; XII, 485-486; XI, 3; XI, 24; XI, 145-146; XI, 246; XI, 146-147; XII, 270; XI, 392-393; XII, 390; X, 138-139; IX, 336; XI, 42; IX, 252; V, 203-204.

⁴⁵ Hugh O’Donnell, “Vincent de Paul: His Life and Way,” *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: The Classics of Western Spirituality*, John E. Rybolt and Frances Ryan, eds. (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 13-38. For some related reflections, cf. O’Donnell, Hugh, CM (1995) “Apostolic Reflection,” *Vincentian Heritage Journal* (Vol. 16 # 2, article 2).

He writes, in an article on “Vincentian Discernment”:

Another pattern is also evident in the journey: it is from action to presence. This pattern has special importance in an apostolic community, because at some point there comes a diminishment of our energies. If our total identity as apostolic persons is linked up with our activity and our achievements, when our energies diminish, we begin to think we are running out of love for God. Actually, what is happening is that our way of loving God is being transformed from activity to presence. The greatest of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit is presence. Father Richard McCullen, the former superior general of the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity, has said, “A saint is someone who has time.” That is true, isn’t it? If someone has time for us, if I have time for you or you have time for me, that is a great gift. Someone who has time is someone who is able to be present. This shift to presence is accompanied by intensified apostolic prayer. The heart of the apostle grows in us and we come to carry the world of our brothers and sisters – their joys, their sorrows, their brokenness, their hope – in hearts full of God’s compassion.⁴⁶

Thomas McKenna

In an article focusing on motivation, Thomas McKenna refers to Hugh O’Donnell’s “Vincent 1” and “Vincent 2” and expands on it. He states that writers like Deffrennes and Toscani describe Vincent’s interior experience as “the slippery one of mysticism,” and he clarifies the meaning of mysticism, stating: *While the word has many (mystifying) meanings, here it means simply the lived contact a person has with God. It can bring in such things as visions and ecstasies, but these writers pass over such phenomena and look simply to Vincent’s inner experience of the divine.⁴⁷*

⁴⁶ Hugh O’Donnell, “Vincentian Discernment,” *Vincentian Heritage Journal* (Vol. 15 # 1, article 2).

⁴⁷ Thomas McKenna, “Vincent de Paul: What Moved Him? And What Moved Him Toward Those Who Are Poor?” *Vincentian Heritage*, 32 # 2 (2015).

Near the beginning of another article, on apostolic reflection, he uses a catchy image to describe Vincent's approach to life and to prayer: *Over a lifetime, (Vincent) developed what might be called a bi-spectacled spirituality, an outlook that recognized the presence of God through the two lenses of quiet prayer and active service, both at much the same time. He could see the face of Christ in his time in the chapel and at work, in his contemplation and in his interactions with poor people who walked up to him on the street.*⁴⁸ The article ends with a lovely story from Anthony De Melo highlighting the role of detachment in spirituality.

4. Vincent's brand of mysticism

Vincent's brand of mysticism is very much his own. He found God in the people and events around him. His "visions" were Christological.⁴⁹ He saw Christ in the face of the poor. Christ led him to the poor and the poor led him to Christ. When he spoke of the poor and when he spoke of Christ, his words were often ecstatic. He told his priests and brothers:

*If we ask Our Lord, 'What did you come to do on earth?' he answers, 'To assist the poor.' 'Anything else?' 'To assist the poor.' So, are we not very fortunate to belong to the (Congregation of the) Mission for the same purpose that caused God to become man? And if someone were to question a Missioner, wouldn't it be a great honor for him to be able to say with Our Lord, 'He sent me to preach the good news to the poor.'*⁵⁰

When he spoke about Christ, he could be rapturous. In 1655, he cried out,

⁴⁸ Thomas McKenna, "Uncover the meaning in service," *Horizons* (Summer 2016), 26.

⁴⁹ Vincent does speak, without using his own name, of a vision that he had upon the death of Madame de Chantal, with whom he had a close relationship during his many years as superior and spiritual director of the houses of the Visitation religious in Paris. Cf. Abelly, *op. cit.*, 283.

⁵⁰ CCD:XI:98.

*Let us ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart that causes us to go everywhere, this heart of the Son of God, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, that disposes us to go as He went ... He sends us, like the apostles, to bring fire everywhere, to bring this divine fire, this fire of love*⁵¹

For Vincent, the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of spirituality were meshed inseparably; love of Christ and love of the poor were one. Again and again, he urged his followers not just to act but also to pray, and not just to pray but also to act. He heard an objection from his followers:

*But there are so many things to do, so many house duties, so many ministries in town and country; there's work everywhere; must we, then, leave all that to think only of God? And he responded forcefully: No, but we have to sanctify those activities by seeking God in them, and do them in order to find Him in them rather than to see that they get done. Our Lord wills that we seek above all His glory, His kingdom, and His justice, and, to do this, we make our primary concern the interior life, faith, trust, love, our spiritual exercises, meditation, shame, humiliations, our work and troubles, in the sight of God our Sovereign Lord. Once we're grounded in seeking God's glory in this way, we can be assured that the rest will follow.*⁵²

Vincent is at times so caught up in the mystery of God's love, as revealed in Christ, that his words spontaneously reveal how closely united with God he is:

Let us look at the Son of God; what a heart of charity He had; what a fire of love! Please tell us, Jesus – Who pulled You away from heaven to come to endure the curse of earth and the many persecutions and torments You suffered? O Savior! Source of love humbled even to our level and to a vile agony – Who showed, in that, greater love for the neighbor than You yourself

⁵¹ CCD:XI:264.

⁵² CCD:XII:111.

did? You came to lay yourself open to all our misfortunes, to take the form of a sinner, to lead a life of suffering and to undergo a shameful death for us; is there any love like that? But who else could love in such an outstanding way? Only Our Lord, who was so enamored with the love of creatures as to leave the throne of His Father to come to take a body subject to weaknesses. And why? To establish among us, by His word and example, love of the neighbor. This is the love that crucified Him and brought about that admirable work of our redemption. O, if we had only a little of that love, would we stand around with our arms folded? Would we let those we could assist perish? Oh, no! Charity cannot remain idle; it impels us to work for the salvation and consolation of others.⁵³

In 1659, just a year and a half before his death, he tells his community of priests and brothers:

How many people never lose sight of God! We see some among us always walking and acting in His presence. How many people in the world do this!⁵⁴

5. Ten implications for Vincentian spirituality today

Vincent's being a "Mystic of Charity" is not merely an interesting theoretical consideration; it has practical implications for the members of the Vincentian Family today. In this final section, I will use a series of phrases to describe those implications. Readers will recognize many of these phrases as very important aspects of Vincent's teaching.

1. Integrating prayer and action
2. Praying contemplatively
3. Serving contemplatively
4. Seeing Christ in the face of the poor
5. Praying from events and experience

⁵³ CCD:XII:216.

⁵⁴ CCD:XII:136.

6. Praying with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other
7. Praying always
8. Leaving God for God
9. Handing on the fruits of contemplation
10. Learning to be detached in order to be free

1. *Integrating prayer and action*

For Vincent, Jesus' habitual way of integrating prayer and action was a model for all to follow. Writing to a priest of the Congregation of the Mission in 1657, Vincent described what he regarded as the two great virtues of Jesus, *his filial relationship with the Father and his charity toward the neighbor*.⁵⁵

Bérulle, Olier, and other members of the French School speak of *religion* as the basic response of the human person before God, an attitude of adoration and of total consecration of oneself to whatever God asks.⁵⁶ Saint Vincent tells the Daughters of Charity that, as an expression of this religious attitude, ... *Our Lord himself was a man of the greatest prayer... His chief and constant exercise was prayer*.⁵⁷

As is evident, few saints have been as active as Vincent de Paul, but his contemporaries also regarded him as a contemplative. Abelly, his first biographer, writes that *his spirit was continually attentive to the presence of God*.⁵⁸ He adds that a priest who knew Vincent well recalled seeing him contemplating a crucifix for hours on end. The naturalness with which Vincent speaks about contemplation, especially to the Daughters of Charity, is an indication that he himself was at ease in this world.

⁵⁵ The French text (SV VI, 393) reads: « les deux grandes vertus de Jésus-Christ, c'est à savoir la religion vers son Père et la charité vers les hommes. »

⁵⁶ Raymond Deville, *op. cit.*, 103-104.

⁵⁷ CCD:IX:326.

⁵⁸ Louis Abelly, *op.cit.*, Book III, Chapter VI, 56.

Speaking to the members of the Congregation of the Mission on 13 December 1658, he muses:

Oh, if we only had a vision incisive enough to penetrate a little into the infinity of His excellence, O my God, what lofty sentiments we would take away from it, brothers! Like Saint Paul, we would say that eyes have never seen, nor ears heard, nor the mind understood anything like it. God is an abyss of gentleness, a sovereign, eternally glorious being, an infinite good that embraces all good. Everything in Him is incomprehensible.⁵⁹

I suggest that the integration of prayer and action, so evident in Saint Vincent's person, is one of the most important elements in the spirituality of our Vincentian Family.⁶⁰ Vincent was utterly convinced that prayer and action go hand in hand. Divorced from action, prayer can easily turn into fantasy and can create illusions of holiness. Conversely, service divorced from prayer can have a "driven" quality to it and become an addiction. Vincentian spirituality is at its best when it holds prayer and action in creative tension with one another.

Concretely, Vincent emphasized the need for daily meditative prayer. In fact, he accented few things more strongly. Speaking about meditative prayer, he said to his priests and brothers:

Give me a man of prayer, and he'll be able to do anything; he can say with the holy Apostle, 'I can do all things in Him who sustains and comforts me.' The Congregation of the Mission will survive as long as it is faithful to the practice of meditation because meditation is like an impregnable rampart, which will protect the Missioners against all sorts of attacks; it is a mystical arsenal, or is like the Tower of David, which will supply them with all sorts of weapons, not only to defend themselves but also to attack and rout all the enemies of God's glory and the salvation of souls.⁶¹

⁵⁹ CCD:XII:94-95.

⁶⁰ For a longer treatment of this topic, cf. R. Maloney, "On Uniting Action and Contemplation: A Key to Understanding Vincent de Paul," *Vincentiana* 44 # 2.

⁶¹ CCD:XI:76.

In other words, Vincent regarded daily meditative prayer as utterly essential for those engaged in active service to the poor. That was how they were to nourish their “filial relationship with the Father” and their “charity toward the neighbor.”

2. *Praying contemplatively*

Vincent did not regard contemplation as an extraordinary phenomenon; rather, he saw it as an ordinary occurrence. In speaking about prayer to the Daughters of Charity, he states:

The other type of prayer is called contemplation. In this, the soul, in the presence of God, does nothing but receive what He gives. It doesn't act and, with no effort on the part of the soul, God himself inspires it with everything it may be seeking, and much more. Haven't you ever experienced this sort of prayer, dear Sisters? I'm sure you've done so very often in your retreats, when you've been amazed that, with no contribution on your part, God himself filled your mind and imprinted on it knowledge that you never had.

(In prayer, God) inflames the will; lastly, it is in prayer that He takes total possession of hearts and souls. Now, you must know, dear Sisters, that, even though educated people may have a greater disposition for making meditation, and many succeed in it and may have, of themselves, minds open to many inspirations, God's conversations with humble souls are quite different. I thank you, Father, that You have hidden these things from the wise of this world, and have revealed them to the little and the humble.⁶²

But Vincent, while considering contemplation a common occurrence, wanted no posturing or posing among his followers.⁶³ He wanted us to pray simply, without being self-conscious about

⁶² CCD:IX:330-331.

⁶³ CCD:XI:77-78. Cf. CCD:XI:175, where Vincent corrects a seminarian for an expression he used in talking about his prayer.

how we are praying, without “trying” to be a contemplative. Nor did he want us to be overly conscious of our own needs. Otherwise, our prayer would become artificial or distorted.⁶⁴

3. *Serving contemplatively*

In speaking with the members of the Congregation of the Mission, without using the word *contemplation*, he says how important it is for a missionary to be filled with the Spirit of God:

*O Savior, O my good Savior, may it please Your Divine Goodness to keep the Mission free of that spirit of laziness and of seeking its own comforts, and give it an ardent zeal for Your glory, which will make it accept everything joyfully and never refuse an opportunity to serve You! We are made for that; and a Missioner – a true Missioner, a man of God, a man who has the Spirit of God – must find everything good and indifferent; he accepts everything, he can do anything; for even greater reason, a Company or a Congregation, animated and led by the Spirit of God can do anything.*⁶⁵

It is interesting to note here that both Hugh O’Donnell and Thomas McKenna allude to Vincent’s mysticism when writing about apostolic reflection. They pinpoint the importance of reflecting on what we do, or of serving *contemplatively*.

One might contrast the phrase “serving contemplatively” with “serving frenetically.”

4. *Seeing Christ in the face of the poor*

Is there anything more fundamental to the spirituality of our Family than Vincent’s concrete Christological vision? He urges his followers repeatedly to see Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ.

⁶⁴ One is reminded of Pope Francis’ criticism of a Church that is “auto-referential” or closed in on its own concerns; he describes this as a sickness.

⁶⁵ CCD:XI:191.

See, Sisters, I'm only repeating what you've said: in serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ. How true, Sisters! You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here. A Sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she will find God there. As Saint Augustine says, what we see with our eyes is not so certain because our senses sometimes deceive us, but the truths of God never deceive. Go to visit a chain gang, you will find God there. Look after those little children, you will find God there. How delightful, Sisters! You go into poor homes, but you find God there. Again, Sisters, how delightful! He accepts the services you do for those sick persons and, as you have said, considers them as done to himself ... our hearts must magnify and amplify God, and may God amplify our souls for that, may He give us a broad understanding in order to be truly aware of the greatness and extent of the goodness and power of God; to know how far our obligation to serve and glorify Him in every possible manner extends; a fullness of will to embrace every opportunity to procure the glory of God. If we can do nothing of ourselves, we can do everything with God. Yes, the Mission can do anything because we have in us the seeds of the omnipotence of Jesus Christ. That is why no one can excuse himself on the grounds of his powerlessness; we will always have greater strength than is needed, especially when the occasion arises; for when it does, a man feels like a completely new man.⁶⁶

Deffrennes makes a distinction here. He says that Vincent does not “find” Christ in the poor; rather, it is Christ who “reveals” himself to Vincent in the poor. In other words, the grace of seeing God in the poor is really *grace*; it is God’s gift.

Pope Francis has often spoken of the poor as God’s gift to us. For that reason, he emphasizes the need for a culture of encounter and dialogue, where we meet the poor gratefully as a gift from God, where we listen, and where we reverence God in them.

⁶⁶ CCD:IX:199.

Over the centuries, writers have often spoken of contemplation as seeing and gazing. Etymologically, *contemplate* comes from a Latin verb meaning “to gaze attentively” or “to observe.” Its root meaning derives from *con* (an intensive prefix) and *templum* (= temple or sacred space); that is, being present within a sacred space in a concentrated way. A recent Vatican document on contemplative life states:

Contemplation thus involves having, in Christ Jesus whose face is constantly turned to the Father, a gaze transfigured by the working of the Holy Spirit, a gaze full of awe at God and His wonders. Contemplation involves having a pure mind, in which the echoes of the Word and the voice of the Spirit are felt as a soft wind. It is not by chance that contemplation is born of faith; indeed, faith is both the door and the fruit of contemplation. It is only by saying with utter trust, “Here I am!” that one can enter into the mystery.⁶⁷

5. *Praying from events and experience*

Dodin puts great emphasis on this point. Vincent believed that God’s will was revealed in the events occurring around him and in the people he met, especially the marginalized. He cites the beautiful words that Vincent addressed to the Daughters of Charity:

Yes, Sisters ... we can say that God’s great pleasure is to reveal himself to the humble. What beautiful words of Jesus Christ, which show clearly that it is not in palaces like the Louvre⁶⁸ nor in the residences of Princes that God takes His delight! He says so in Scripture, “O Father, I praise and thank you that you have hidden your mysteries from the great ones of the world and revealed them to the humble.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 22 July 2016, 11.

⁶⁸ At that time, the Louvre was not the present-day museum, but the royal palace.

⁶⁹ CCD:I:315.

This is precisely the point that Karl Rahner was emphasizing in speaking of “the mysticism of daily life.” One of the principal commentators on Rahner’s writings states:

Rahner offers common human experiences to help us ‘dig ... out from under the rubbish of everyday experience’ real life occurrences of grace, such as accepting with hope the experience of utter loneliness; forgiving with no expectation of the other’s gratitude or even of feeling good about one’s selflessness; being utterly faithful to the depths of one’s conscience, even when taken as a fool; praying, even when it feels useless; maintaining faith, hope and love, even when there are no apparent reasons for so doing; experiencing bitterly the great gulf between what we desire from life and what it actually gives us; and silently hoping in the face of death. God is experienced, in Rahner’s view, most clearly and intensely, “... where the graspable contours of our everyday realities break and dissolve; where failures of such realities are experienced; when lights which illuminate the tiny islands of our everyday life go out.”⁷⁰

This relationship between experience and union with God is beautifully described by the British Carmelite nun Ruth Burrows, in her book *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*:

When all is said and done, the long line of saints and spiritual writers who insist on ‘experience,’ who speak of sanctity in terms of ever deepening ‘experience,’ who maintain that to have none of it is to be spiritually dead, are absolutely right provided we understand ‘experience’ in the proper sense, not as a transient emotional impact but as living wisdom, loving involvement.⁷¹

That Vatican document on contemplative life,⁷² taking up the same point, describes Mary as the “summa contemplatrix” (the

⁷⁰ Harvey Egan, *op. cit.*, 47.

⁷¹ Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer* (Burns & Oates, 2007) 55.

⁷² *Vultum Dei quaerere*, paragraph 10.

highest contemplator), since she turned events over in her heart and pondered them.⁷³ In his Marian devotion, Vincent highlighted a similar theme.⁷⁴

6. Praying with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other

Countless writers have attributed to Karl Barth⁷⁵ the statement, *we must hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other*. Actually, The Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary has been unable to pin down exactly from where that quote came. But it is clear that Barth made the Bible/newspaper connection frequently throughout his career.

Perhaps the source that is most consistent with the alleged quotation comes from a *Time* magazine article published on Friday, 31 May 1963, which stated that Barth recalled that 40 years earlier *he advised young theologians “to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”* In an interview given in 1966, Barth stated, *The Pastor and the Faithful should not deceive themselves into thinking that they are a religious society, which has to do with certain (religious) themes; they live in the world. We still need – according to my old formulation – the Bible and the Newspaper.*

Few people have put the scriptures into practice more concretely than Vincent did. Abelly, his first biographer, says of him: *“He seemed to be nourished by the passages of Scripture like a child sucking his mother’s milk. He drew such nourishment for his soul that in all his words and actions he seemed filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ.”*⁷⁶

⁷³ Luke 2:19.

⁷⁴ CCD:XII:110.

⁷⁵ The statement sometimes is attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr also.

⁷⁶ Abelly, *op.cit.*, III, 72-73.

7. *Praying always*

For Vincent, Christ was the absolute center: Christ revealing himself in daily prayer and Christ revealing himself every day in those around him, especially in the suffering poor.

Basically, Vincent is saying to us, as did so many saints, that the word which God most wants to speak to us is the Word Made Flesh. Saint Teresa of Avila tells us that her only subject of meditation was the humanity of Jesus, because, in Jesus, God is revealed in the flesh. The scriptures and the saints state clearly: do you want to know God? Look to Jesus, “the self-giving one” (Galatians 1:4). He is the “way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

Precisely because Vincent found Christ both when he meditated and when he served actively, he was “praying always.”

Similarly, one of the sisters who lived with Blessed Rosalie Rendu wrote: “If we had to leave God for God and accompany her on a charitable visit, she said to us: ‘Sisters, let’s begin our meditation!’ She suggested the outline in a few simple, clear words” and entered into prayer. A close friend of Rosalie quotes her as saying: “I never pray so well as I do in the street.”⁷⁷

8. *Leaving God for God*

Vincent makes an important observation that is closely related to our topic: *Perfection does not consist in ecstasies but rather in doing the will of God.*⁷⁸

So, in helping the Daughters of Charity discern where the will of God might lie, Vincent often used the phrase “leaving God for

⁷⁷ Positio, « Sommaire du Procès Ordinaire de Paris », p. 199.

⁷⁸ CCD:XI:285. Cf. also CCD:IX:26: “You shouldn’t make (your prayer) in order to have exalted ideas, ecstasies, and raptures – which are more harmful than useful – but only to perfect yourselves and make you truly good Daughters of Charity.”

God.⁷⁹ He tells them: *If you have to leave prayer to go to a patient, go ahead, and in that way you'll leave God in prayer and find Him with that sick person.*⁸⁰

Charmingly, he says to the sisters:

Just think, Sisters, of the pleasure God takes in regarding a soul that is intent on pleasing Him, careful to offer Him all it plans to do? It is beyond imagining, Sisters, and the Sister was so right in saying that it gives joy to God. Yes, it's a joy to Him, His good pleasure, His delight. He is like a father is with a son who takes care to bring him everything people give him; if someone gives him something he has no rest until he has found his father and says, 'Look, Dad! Look what I have; this was given to me; I did that myself!'

*And the father takes indescribable pleasure at seeing the docility of that child and those little tokens of his love and dependence. The same holds true of God, dear Sisters, and in a far higher degree....*⁸¹

He attributed the phrase “leaving God for God” to Thomas Aquinas,⁸² but there seems to be no evidence for this. Rather, as Bernard Koch points out,⁸³ the phrase was used earlier by Saint Philip Neri, Saint Camillus de Lellis and others, and most likely came to Vincent through Benedict of Canfield, Madame Acarie, and Bérulle.

The key here is to blend discipline with inner freedom, structure with spontaneity. In applying Vincent's instruction about “leaving God for God,” it is important to have a rhythm of daily prayer in

⁷⁹ CCD:IX:252; X:3.

⁸⁰ CCD:X:445.

⁸¹ CCD:IX:287.

⁸² CCD:X:556.

⁸³ A huge number of Bernard Koch's unpublished documents can be found at: http://famvin.fr/Congreg_Mission/ARCH_Invent_PDF%2026_08_09/Table-Koch.html.

our lives. Yet, when emergencies arise and call us to respond to the urgent needs of others, we should not hesitate to interrupt that rhythm and see, listen to, and serve the Lord in the needy who cry out to us.

9. *Handing on the fruits of contemplation*

Even if Aquinas did not explicitly speak of “leaving God for God,” he emphasized another theme that profoundly influenced Vincent’s thinking; namely, that we are to share with those we serve the fruits of our prayer, offering them not just material assistance, but words of encouragement, of good news, of faith. Aquinas’ phrase is “*contemplata tradere*” (to hand on what we have contemplated).

In his great work, the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas assigns the highest place not to a purely contemplative life, but to a life in which someone contemplates and then shares with others the fruits of his or her contemplation:

*The contemplative life is, absolutely speaking, more perfect than the active life, because the latter is taken up with bodily actions: yet that form of active life in which someone, by preaching and teaching, delivers to others the fruits of his contemplation, is more perfect than the life that stops at contemplation, because such a life is built on an abundance of contemplation, and consequently such was the life chosen by Christ.*⁸⁴

The service that our Family offers to the poor is, in Vincent’s vision, integral. He organized the Confraternities of Charity to serve the poor “spiritually and corporally,” through “word and work.” He sends the Daughters of Charity to minister to the poor “spiritually

⁸⁴ *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 40, a. 1, ad 2: “Vita contemplativa simpliciter est melior quam activa quae occupatur circa corporales actus, sed vita activa secundum quam aliquis praedicando et docendo contemplata aliis tradit, est perfectior quam vita quae solum contemplatur, quia talis vita praesupponit abundantiam contemplationis. Et ideo Christus talem vitam elegit.” Cf. also II-II, q. 188, a.6, c.

and corporally.”⁸⁵ He warns the members of the Congregation of the Mission, moreover, that they should not think of their mission in exclusively spiritual terms. Rather, they too should care for the sick, the foundlings, the insane, the most abandoned.⁸⁶ In this way, they will preach by both “word and work.” In this way too, their love will be both “affective and effective.”⁸⁷

10. Learning to be detached in order to be free

For Vincent, freedom and detachment (or what he called “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 “indifference.”⁸⁸ On perhaps no other theme is his imagery so varied.⁸⁹ For Vincent, detachment is the pre-condition for the inner freedom to go anywhere that God calls and to do anything that God asks in the service of the poor.

Using an appealing image, Vincent says to the Daughters of Charity:⁹⁰

⁸⁵ CCD:V:61; VI:461; VII:600; IX:467; X:94; XI:395; XIIIb:39.

⁸⁶ CCD:XII:77: “*If there are any among us who think they’re in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, ‘Come, beloved of my Father; possess the kingdom that has been prepared for you, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was naked and you clothed me; sick and you assisted me.’ To do that is to preach the Gospel by words and by works.*”

⁸⁷ CCD:IX:467.

⁸⁸ 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.”

⁸⁹ For a description of Vincent’s imagery in addressing this topic, cf. R. Maloney, “The Freedom of the Children of God - the Fruit of Indifference - Vincent de Paul’s Image-Filled Teaching,” *Vincentiana* 60 (April-June 2016), 53-71.

⁹⁰ CCD:X:132.

To understand better what is 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.

The key question for each person to answer is: what holds me back from giving myself completely to the Lord and from doing what he asks of me? With the scriptures in one hand and the newspaper in the other, we can identify many things that allure us: power, money, popularity, sexual pleasure, food, drink, drugs, the list is long. All these things, given the right circumstances, can be healthy. But when they impede us from giving ourselves to God, Vincent urges us to cut the bonds that tie us down.

The recent Vatican document on the contemplative life lists, among the obstacles that can tie us down, the “noonday devil,” mentioned so often by the early Christian writers.⁹¹ It is a “temptation to listlessness, mere routine, lack of enthusiasm and paralyzing lethargy.” Today, we might call it “the blahs,” or the tedium or discouragement that can sap the energy and zeal of good people.⁹² In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis states, little by little this leads to “*A tomb psychology ... develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum. Disillusioned with reality, with the Church and with themselves, they experience a constant temptation to cling to a faint melancholy, lacking in hope, which seizes the heart like ‘the most precious of the devil’s potions.’*”⁹³

Vincent becomes eloquent when he describes those who become truly free: they fly!

On the contrary, 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;

⁹¹ *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 11.

⁹² For an interesting treatment of this topic, cf. Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer’s Life* (Riverhead Books, 2008).

⁹³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 83.

*for that is to be found in the love of God alone. Those are persons who are free, who have no laws, who fly, who go to the right and to the left; once again, who fly, who cannot be stopped, and who are never slaves of the devil or of their passions. Oh, blessed freedom of the children of God!*⁹⁴

CONCLUSION

In a poem that focuses on light and darkness, William Blake (1757-1827), famed also for his etchings and paintings, wrote, ... *we are put on earth for a little space that we might learn to bear the beams of love.*⁹⁵

After his conversion, Vincent⁹⁶ bore the beams of love perseveringly and creatively as a “Mystic of Charity.” His mysticism flowed from being consumed by love of God and love of neighbor, which he regarded as inseparable. He spoke ecstatically about both. His “visions” as a mystic consisted in gazing into the eyes of the poor person and seeing the suffering humanity of Jesus. The “revelations” he received as a mystic came from the cries of the poor. With “exuberant confidence”⁹⁷ in God’s love, he could repeat aloud ecstatically “the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord ... this divine fire, this fire of love.”⁹⁸ Knowing the mission that Jesus received from his Father and intensively aware that he and his Family shared in it, Vincent could describe it animatedly, with Jesus, as “the poor, the poor, the poor.”⁹⁹ Speaking about members of his family who had recently died, he exclaimed, “How happy will those be who, at the hour of death, can say these beautiful words of Our Lord, ‘The Lord sent me to bring Good News to the poor!’”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ CCD:XII:245.

⁹⁵ William Blake, “The Little Black Boy.”

⁹⁶ Or, as Hugh O’Donnell might say, Vincent 2.

⁹⁷ CCD:III:279.

⁹⁸ CCD:XI:264.

⁹⁹ CCD:XI:98.

¹⁰⁰ CCD:XI:122.

More and more in his final years, Vincent uttered ecstatic words about God's love. On 13 December 1658, he cried out, *O love of my Savior! O love! You were incomparably greater than the angels were able to understand and will ever understand!*¹⁰¹

On 21 February 1659, he prayed aloud in a conference to his priests and brothers:

*O my Savior Jesus Christ, who became holy so that we also might become holy, and who spurned earthly kingdoms with their wealth and glory, having only at heart the reign of Your Father in souls ... what should we not do to imitate You, who have raised us from dust and called us to observe Your counsels and to aspire to holiness!*¹⁰²

On 30 May 1659, he told his followers:

*Let us look at the Son of God; what a heart of charity He had; what a fire of love! Please tell us, Jesus, who pulled You away from heaven to come to endure the curse of earth and the many persecutions and torments You suffered? O Savior! Source of love humbled even to our level and to a vile agony, who showed, in that, greater love for the neighbor than You yourself did?*¹⁰³

On 7 June 1660, less than four months before his death, Saint Vincent de Paul said to a group of friends gathered around him: *To wear oneself out for God, to have happiness and strength only to consume them for God, is to do what Our Lord Himself did, who exhausted Himself for love of His Father.*¹⁰⁴ So too was Vincent consumed by love of God and love of neighbor.

Vincent's nourishment as a "Mystic of Charity" came from two primary sources: daily meditation on God's word and live contact with the poor. Each infused the other. Few saints, if any, have mixed a better blend.

¹⁰¹ CCD:XII:94.

¹⁰² CCD:XII:124.

¹⁰³ CCD:XII:216.

¹⁰⁴ CCD:XIII:195.