

5

Theme: The Vincentian Jubilee Year, 400 Years of the Charism

Two Genes of the Four-Hundred Year Old Charism

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Luigi Mezzadri, CM, begins his biography of Vincent de Paul with the following affirmation: *[Vincent] did not invent charity, but he discovered it within the Church and placed it at the top of the list of the world's concerns.*¹ In reality, we cannot understand the Vincentian charism apart from its roots in the Church and, therefore, apart from the spirituality that brought about its birth in the 17th century and that has enriched its development during the past four centuries. As we have become further removed from those historical events, we run the risk of making subjective interpretations about the Vincentian charism² (with some more or less clear ideas), but nonetheless, always with the potential danger of utilizing superficial knowledge to speak about that which identifies us as Vincentian missionaries and that which makes us distinct with regard to other charisms that might appear to be similar to our own. Therefore, during this time of jubilee, it would be good for us to take the time to reflect on a hermeneutical approach that would enable us to focus

¹ Luigi Mezzadri, *Vincenzo de' Paoli. Il Santo della Carità*, Roma 2009, p. 7.

² *With some commendable exceptions, they [researchers] sometimes demonstrate great neglect for the hermeneutic problem. Is this the result of carelessness, ignorance, or fraudulent concealment, given the difficulties in determining the exact criteria for interpretation?* cf. Père Giuseppe Toscani, *La Mystique des Pauvres*. Versailles, 1998.

on the DNA of the charism³ and the vocation that originated in Folleville and that, four hundred years later, continues to be vital to the life of the Church.

With no pretension of being a profound study of the first chapter of our history, we will attempt to draw closer to the DNA of the *mystic of action* through identifying the *two genes* that have their origin in the manner in which Vincent approached the mysteries of faith, mysteries that led him to embrace the mission that God called him to undertake, a mission in which his followers participate.

The first gene: the soteriological emphasis of Vincentian Christology

From the time of 1618, Vincent began to distance himself from Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629) and at the same time established a closer relationship with his new spiritual teacher, André Duval, a professor at the Sorbonne. The element that distinguished Vincent's thinking from the abstract theology of Bérulle was his Christological perspective. Bérulle, one of the leaders of the French School of spirituality, was grounded in the mystical tradition that sought perfection through contemplation of the mysteries of the faith. Vincent de Paul was not afraid of contemplation, quite the contrary. Here we recall Vincent's desire to see his followers as authentic *apostles* when outside the house and, at the same time, Carthusians *who work most earnestly at their interior holiness* (CCD:XII:384).⁴

³ The six hermeneutical criteria proposed by Father Toscani continue to challenge all Vincentian researchers/scholars, criteria such as the following: unity in the whole, rigorous attention to the concepts that Vincent utilized, defining the context, study of the Company, study of Vincent's love for the poor, study of Vincent's mystical inspiration; cf. Toscani, *ibid.*, p. 35-41.

⁴ CCD:XII:384 refers to: *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 XII, p. 384; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, then the page number.

There is no doubt that Vincent offered a new perspective and did not feel bound by the vision and concepts of his former teacher. *Vincent viewed the Bérullian language as “quite artificial” and could not comprehend how one could work with purity of intention by simply being attentive to the gaze of God. Vincent viewed purity of intention as intimately related to doing God’s will and to obedience. Because of his own physiological make-up and his peasant roots, Vincent mistrusted “desires” and “gazes” that were not translated into action.*⁵

It was this new understanding that gave origin to the Christ-centered spirituality of Vincent de Paul. The unique Christ, the face of the Father’s mercy (*Misericordiae Vultus*, #1), had been the focus of various spiritual masters. In Vincent’s case, the emphasis was placed on the missionary Christ,⁶ the one sent by the Father to fulfill his will: *My food is to do the will of the one who sent me* (John 4:34).

Vincent de Paul discovered Christ by listening to the same voice that knocked Saul,⁷ the persecutor of Christians, from his horse, that caused him to become blind, and that ultimately transformed him into Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles. Vincent also had a plan that he

⁵ Antonio Orcajo and Miguel Pérez Flores, *San Vicente de Paul II: Espiritualidad y Selección de Escritos* [Vincent de Paul II: Spirituality and Selected Writings], Madrid, 1984, p.101-102.

⁶ The threefold mission of the Missionary Christ: creative, salvific, and glorifying; cf. Orcajo and Pérez Flores, *ibid.*, 96-164.

⁷ Vincent was devoted to the patron of the Gentiles: *[Vincent] loved and venerated Saint Paul, the master and teacher of the Gentiles, who had worked harder than anyone else. Since he bore his name, he also strove to imitate his virtues*; cf. 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 vols., 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, III:94. Future references to this work will be inserted into the text, for example Abelly, III:94.

pursued⁸ and he had to confront situations of calumny (Abelly I:50-51) and captivity (CCD:I:1-11). Furthermore, Vincent experienced those “dark nights of the soul” during which he had no understanding of God’s will for him (CCD:XI:26-27). But there came a time when Vincent clearly heard the call that Christ, the missionary, was extending to him and his followers, a call to participate in Christ’s own mission, namely, the mission *to evangelize the poor* (CCD:XI:162-164).

We should not be surprised, then, by the words that Vincent chose as the motto for the Congregation of the Mission: *The Lord has sent me to bring Good News to the poor* (Luke 4:18). Jesus’ words, which were spoken in the synagogue in Galilee, were intended as a public explanation of his salvific mission, which was expressed in a series of signs that revealed the fact that salvation and the kingdom of God were being proclaimed to the poor.⁹

The saving mystery of Christ in which the Son is sent forth by the Father and the apostles are sent forth by the Son captivated Vincent de Paul and led him to dedicate his life to Christ, the evangelizer of the poor. It is that perspective that enables us to understand the various works that Vincent undertook: the popular missions that concluded with the establishment of a Confraternity of Charity, the establishment of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the “little method,” retreats for ordinands, seminary ministry, political involvement, and, finally, concern about what he should do as he advanced in years.

⁸ Vincent sought a benefice, *the means of an honorable retirement* (CCD:I:15).

⁹ Translator’s note: The footnote in Spanish refers us to page 336-337 of the Spanish edition of the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*. When I checked the Spanish edition, page 336-337 should correspond to pages 272-274 in the English edition. The text, however, in the English edition that I have appears to be different from the text in the Spanish edition.

We can say that an authentic gene in the DNA of the Congregation of the Mission is this lived Christology, this Christology that is expressed in a soteriological proposal on behalf of the poor. Therefore, even though one might place the initials “CM” after one’s name and even though one’s name might appear in the *Catalogue of the Congregation of the Mission*, if a community or a province or an individual missionary has not opted for the commitment of evangelizing the poor, then one cannot call oneself a Vincentian.

Four hundred years after the establishment of the Congregation of the Mission, the words of Vincent de Paul continue to resound: *I do know well, however, what was done at the beginning of the Company, and that it was exact about the practice of letting no opportunity pass to instruct a poor person, which the men did if they saw that the person needed it; priests, seminarians, and our Coadjutor Brothers all did this, as they came and went. If they met some poor person – a boy or some good man – they’d speak to him to see if he knew the Mysteries necessary for salvation; and if they noted that he didn’t, they’d teach them to him. I don’t know if we’re still as careful today to observe this holy practice; I’m talking about the men who go into the rural areas and stay at inns along the way. If that’s the case, fine! They should thank God for it and ask him for perseverance for the same Company; if not – and if there has been any relaxation in this – they should ask for the grace to correct themselves* (CCD:XI:343).

Second gene: the path of a spirituality, mystics of action

*Few missionaries know how to be mystics like Vincent de Paul and few mystics are as active as the prophet of charity and the mission.*¹⁰ Those words were written by our Brazilian confrere as

¹⁰ Vincius Teixeira, *San Vicente de Paúl, a mystic of charity*, published on 3 January 2017 on www.cmglobal.com.

he commented on the theme, *mysticism of action*, a theme that was presented by Father Tomaž Mavrič at the very beginning of his term of office as Superior General.¹¹

If we use the definition of mysticism that is found in paragraph #2014 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we discover that the element of *union with God* is pivotal with regard to identifying the mystical experience: *Spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ. This union is called “mystical” because it participates in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments – “the holy mysteries” – and, in him, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God calls us all to this intimate union with him, even if the special graces or extraordinary signs of this mystical life are granted only to some for the sake of manifesting the gratuitous gift given to all.*

Viewed from that perspective we can avoid the discussion of previous eras that debated whether Vincent could be classified as a mystic in accord with classical theological treatises. Indeed, it is clear that Vincent de Paul exemplifies that which the spiritual theologian, Giovanni Moiola, wrote about what he stated: *if men and women feel called to be mystics, they must continue to understand that they are first and foremost called to be authentic Christians, that is, called to know God according to the new covenant.*¹²

Vincent de Paul, is in fact, the father of a school of spirituality that is intimately related to the mystery of the One and Triune God.

¹¹ Cf. Tomaž Mavrič, First Homily as Superior General (given during the XLII General Assembly and found at <https://cmglobal.org/en/2016/07/07/day-10-july-6-solidarity/>) and his letter dated 19 September 2016 (on the occasion of the celebration of the Solemnity of Saint Vincent de Paul in *Vincentiana*, 60th Year, #4, October-December, p. 445-452).

¹² Giovanni Moiola in *Diccionario de Espiritualidad*, Spain, 1983 (this work has been translated into English, but, as translator of this article, I was unable to obtain a copy of this book in English.)

As a result of his integrity and his commitment to those individuals most in need, Vincent is most deserving of the title, *mystic of action*. Vincent's inventive love flowed from that mysticism and generated the following elements that must be held together in tension: contemplation and action; charity and mission; community life and the apostolate; fervent prayer and generous service; organization/planning and surrender to the dictates of Providence.

The second gene: mysticism of action

The second gene of the Vincentian DNA is the *mysticism of action*,¹³ a theme that has gained prominence in the Vincentian Family, thanks to the various interventions of the present Superior General. In this regard, however, there is also a danger; namely, that we will use that element as a theme for our reflection rather than a hermeneutical principle that enables us to understand and live the Vincentian Charism in such a way that we clothe ourselves anew in the spirit of Jesus, the evangelizer of the poor. It was no coincidence that Vincent gave a hierarchical order to the purposes of the Congregation and, therefore, before referring to the various apostolates, stated: *the whole purpose of the Congregation is: 1° to have a genuine commitment to grow in holiness, patterning ourselves, as far as possible, on the virtues which the great Master himself graciously taught us in what he said and did* (Common Rules I:1).

¹³ *A sixth criterion, and the most important, which must be insisted upon, places emphasis on the mystical inspiration (spirituality), the attraction of divine Love, which illuminates the intuitions and dictates the choices of Saint Vincent. Of all the distortions of spirituality, the worst is always the lack of recognition of a fundamental and natural mystical dimension of the Love of God that exhausts itself in authentic Charity. Any research that failed to take account of the basic tendency would cut itself off from all possibility of "adherence," cf. Toscani, op.cit., p.38.*

In that which is most essential with regard to the Vincentian charism, one discovers the *mystical* strength that springs forth from the spirit that has called the missionaries to live as poor, chaste and obedient men; to cultivate the five characteristic virtues; and to do all these things from the time of their initial option until the time of their encounter with the mystery of the heavenly mission¹⁴ (a mystery that was contemplated in a limited manner when they ministered here on earth). For a Vincentian, the ascent to Mount Carmel is found in the cultivation of the virtues of simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal.

It is in the characteristic Vincentian virtues and the evangelical counsels that the missionaries have been called to embrace, as well as in acts of surrender to the designs of Divine Providence (CCD:I:59; II:517-518; VIII:452; XI:340-342), and of contemplating the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity¹⁵ that we find the insights that enable us to live as mystics of action in the 21st century. Furthermore, all of those elements (that is, the evangelical counsels, the characteristic virtues, surrender to Divine Providence, and contemplation of the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity) enable Vincentians to clothe themselves in a radical manner in the sentiments of Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ Vincent had great interest in this concept of the *heavenly mission* and he spoke about this in an exhortation to a dying brother: *what consolation you must have to be chosen from the first to go on mission – but to that eternal mission where all the exercises are to love God* (CCD:XI:129). Thus, we find in the Vincentian eschatology another expression of the mysticism of action, one that, from the perspective of Vincent, perfectly harmonizes being (love) with doing (mission). This perfect harmony, however, is a characteristic of the Church triumphant, a characteristic of those who, like the dying brother, contemplated that same mystery through means of their total commitment to the poor.

¹⁵ Cf. CCD:I:140-144; XIIIa:296-304; Common Rules X:2 which states: *According to the Bull which established our Congregation, we are bound to honor in a special way the Most Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, mysteries beyond words. We should therefore try to carry this out most faithfully and, if possible, in every way.*

In accord with the criteria that Father Tomaž Mavrič has set forth from the beginning of his term of office, we cite here the words of Karl Rahner: *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. For devout Christian living as practiced in the future will no longer be sustained and helped by the unanimous, manifest and public convictions and religious customs of all, summoning one from the outset to a personal experience and a personal decision.*¹⁶

Today's Vincentians will either live as mystics of action or else they will have nothing to say to the world. They might be tireless ministers but they will not be Vincentian ministers; they might have the best vocational recruitment literature, but they will not make people question their lives. Unless Vincentian are mystics of action, everything will remain pleasant and appealing but, in reality, everything will be nothing more than good theatre.

Conclusion

Four centuries separate us from the time of the origin of the Vincentian charism. Nevertheless, the DNA of that mystical experience is alive and continues to challenge us at this time when there is an ever greater urgency to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor. This urgency arises from the fact of prevailing relativism, an increase in violence, and the number of people living in situations of poverty.

The genetic formation of the charism makes us feel the need for working in collaboration, working as members of one charismatic family, working together in projects that promote systemic change

¹⁶ Karl Rahner, "Christian Living, Formerly and Today" in *Theological Investigations: Further Theology of the Spiritual Life*, Translated by David Bourke, London: Dorton, Longman and Todd; New York: Herder and Herder, 1971, volume 7, Page 15.

(for example, the FamVin Homeless Alliance).¹⁷ We must do all of this without neglecting those projects which, at the provincial level, continue to give life to our charism, a life that is manifested by a commitment to the salvific announcement of Christ to the neediest.

The mystic of action, who knew how to conform his life to that of Jesus Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor, continues to challenge us to share the joy of the Gospel, to be inventive unto infinity while at the same time remaining faithful to our missionary calling. If we live in this manner, we will see our Little Company grow, for as Pope Francis has stated, *it is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction*” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #15).

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¹⁷ Cf., the letter of the Superior General (June 1, 2017) addressed to the leaders of the Vincentian Family: https://famvin.org/en/files/2017/06/ENGLISH-Letter-to-Heads-VF-on-Homeless-Alliance_1June2017.pdf