

# Vincent de Paul and the Holy See

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The child who was born in Landes, in the south-western part of France during the sixteenth century did not appear to be destined to confront the leader of Christianity. But yes, during his lifetime Vincent de Paul did in fact establish relationships with several of the Popes. When he was studying in Dax and Toulouse he had listened to others speak about the Popes who were involved in various political dealings at that time and also concerned about the religious wars that assaulted France and reached Italy. Perhaps Vincent had formed some image of the Renaissance Popes, worldly individuals who were involved in the politics of Italy. Most probably all of this appeared to be a reality that was quite removed from him and therefore nothing to be concerned about. Yet as events unfolded Vincent would become deeply involved with the Holy See.

It should be remembered that during the eighty years of Vincent's life there were eleven Popes: Gregory XIII (1572-1585); Sixtus V (1585-1590); Urban VII (1590); Gregory XIV (1590-1591); Clement VIII (1592-1605); Leo XI (1605); Paul V (1605-1621); Gregory XV (1621-1623); Urban VIII (1623-1644); Innocent X (1644-1655); Alexander VII (1655-1667).

Vincent's first contact with the Holy See occurred in 1601 when he had been appointed pastor of Tilh. His appointment was disputed and he decided to abandon his claim to this position. He did however have his sights set on higher positions *which he dared not speak about* and which seem to indicate the possibility of being named a bishop. Even though Vincent was unable to achieve his objective, nonetheless, his first visit to Rome enabled him to visit the different Christian monuments in the city. When M. Du Coudray was in Rome in 1631, Vincent wrote to him and stated: *So you have finally arrived in Rome, there where the visible head of the Church militant resides, where the bodies of Saint Peter and Paul lie, as well as those of so many other martyrs and holy people who, in former times, gave their blood and dedicated their whole life to Jesus Christ. O Monsieur, how fortunate you are to walk on the ground where so many great and holy individuals have trod! This consideration moved me so such an extent when I was in Rome thirty years ago that, although*

*I was burdened with sins, I could not help being moved, even to tears, it seems to me*<sup>1</sup>.

In 1601 Clement VIII was Pope and Vincent greatly admired this man whom he considered to be a saint, especially when he heard that the Pope wept when he climbed the holy stairs located adjacent to the Basilica of Saint John Lateran. Perhaps Vincent found in this first encounter with holiness a personal call to holiness which at that time remained simply a desire.

Seven years later Vincent traveled to Rome once again. He had lived through his experience of captivity and with the assistance of the Vice-legate, Pietro Montorio, he was able to travel to Rome. The bishop had made promises with regard to a financially profitable appointment and so Vincent lodged with the bishop, taking on the role of a servant and teaching the bishop some of the secrets of alchemy which he learned during his captivity in Algeria. In turn the bishop shared these secrets with some of the cardinals. At the same time Vincent took advantage of this opportunity to engage in some further studies and to become involved in some pastoral experience at the Holy Spirit Hospital. It does not appear that he had any contact with the Pope who at that time was Paul V. It was most probable that it was during this time that he came to some people who led him to advise M. Codoing in 1642: *You see, Monsieur, you and I allow ourselves to be carried away too much by our own opinions. You, however, are in a place where an exceptional reserve and circumspections are necessary. I have always heard that the Italians are the most cautious people in the world and the most distrustful of individuals who act too quickly. Caution, patience, and gentleness resolve everything with them, in time. Because they know that we French act too quickly, they leave us out in the cold for a long time without making friends with us*<sup>2</sup>. Disillusioned by the empty promises, Vincent left Rome and returned to Paris.

The years between 1610 and 1625 were years of discouragement and searching. They were also years of discovery and encounter. In 1617 the movement of the Spirit was revealed as Vincent preached in Folleville and as a result the popular missions and the Confraternities of Charity were initiated. From these works there arose a plan to establish a foundation that would come to be known as the Congregation of the Mission.

We can frame Vincent's relationship with the Holy See in three general lines:

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<sup>1</sup> CCD I: 111-112; SVP.ES I: 176; SVP I: 115.

<sup>2</sup> CCD II: 266-267; SVP.ES II: 197; SVP II: 235.

- Vincent and the Congregation of the Mission;
- Vincent and the missions *ad gentes*;
- Vincent and Jansenism.

## 1. Vincent and the Congregation of the Mission

The year 1622 was most significant for Vincent de Paul. In 1622 he was appointed by Francis de Sales (who died later in that same year) as superior of the Visitation Sisters in Paris, an opportunity to utilize his gift as a spiritual teacher. At the urging of Madame de Gondi, Vincent initiated the ministry of popular missions and was assisted in this work by other priests. There were no guarantees, however, that this ministry could be maintained. Thus the de Gondi family offered Vincent forty-five thousand livres and the College des Bons-Enfants in order to create a stable foundation that would provide continuity to the popular missions. This work had been initiated in 1617 but the contract was not signed until April, 1625. During those eight years Vincent and M. Portail and a few other priests had acquired much experience in preaching these missions. The only thing lacking was a legal foundation for this ministry and in order to obtain said approbation Vincent became involved with the Holy See.

Vincent knew that the approval of the Archbishop of Paris was not enough. He wanted a more stable foundation and for that he needed the approval of Rome. In 1627 Vincent petitioned the Propagation of the Faith for the first time and requested two things: a general blessing and the customary faculties that were granted to other institutes for the missions. After a consultation with the Nuncio this request was put off. Urban VII was the Pope at that time.

The following year Vincent presented another petition but this time his request was broader and included granting him the rights that were normally bestowed on founders of religious groups and exemption from the local Ordinaries except in those areas that pertain to the missions. These two requests received a negative response because his request supposed the creation of a new religious order.

Like a good Gasconian Vincent did not waiver and in 1631 he counseled M. Du Coudray: *You must make it understood that the poor are being damned for want of knowing the things necessary for salvation, and for lack of confession. If His Holiness were aware of this necessity, he would have no rest until he had done all he could to set things right. It is the knowledge we had of this situation that brought about the establishment of the company, so as to remedy it in some way. In order to do this, we must live in a congregation and observe five things as essential for this purpose: 1] leave to the bishops the power of sending*

*the Missionaries into the part of the diocese they choose; 2] the above-mentioned priests are to be subject to the pastors where they go to give the mission, for its duration; 3] they are to take nothing from those poor people, but to live at their own expense; 4] they are neither to preach, nor catechize, nor hear confessions in cities where there is an archbishopric, a bishopric, or a presidial court, except in the case of ordinands and those who will make retreats in the house; 5] the Superior in the Company is to have complete control over it; and these five maxims are to be as it were the basic principles of this Congregation.... So, stand firm and make them understand that we have had this in mind for many long years and have had experience with it<sup>3</sup>.*

These matters were of such interest to the general public that King Louis XIII wrote to Pope Urban VIII in almost identical words: *"Most Holy Father, the good results and great edification our subjects in rural areas are receiving from the kind assistance and instruction given them by the Priests of the Mission, founded to go from village to village to preach, exhort, hear confessions, and catechize the poor common people, without accepting any worldly remuneration whatsoever, causes us to desire that this Mission be formed into an Institution that will grow and endure into the future. That is why we write this letter to Your Holiness to implore you with all our devotion that it may be your good pleasure to favor and support by your authority such a holy, praiseworthy, and useful plan, establishing the Mission of these priests as a formal Congregation, in accordance with the requests that will be made in this regard on our behalf by M. de Béthune our Ambassador, whom we have entrusted with them. We ask God, Most Holy Father, to keep you and maintain Your Holiness for years to come in the government and preservation of Holy Mother the Church"*<sup>4</sup>.

After some negative and suspicious, jealous maneuvers of other religious institutes, Vincent had recourse to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars and through the mediation of said Congregation obtained the desired approval for his Institute. The joy of Vincent and his companions became a fervent act of thanksgiving.

After some negotiations, Urban VIII approved the new Congregation on January 12, 1633 with the publication of the Bull *Salvatoris Nostri*. In this document the three objectives of the Congregation are recognized:

- a) to assist its members and people living in the country areas attain salvation;

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<sup>3</sup> CCD I: 112-113; SVP.ES I: 176-177; SVP I: 115-116.

<sup>4</sup> CCD XIIIa: 243; SVP.ES X: 264-165; SVP XIII: 219.

- b) to honor the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation and cultivate a particular devotion to the Virgin;
- c) to assist ordinands.

Vincent's plan was almost complete; the only things needed were approval of the vows and the Statute on Poverty. These would be the icing on the cake but the new Pope, Innocent X, refused these requests. In fact, the relationship with the Vatican became more difficult during this period. This Pope was famous for being opposed to religious communities and during his pontificate he favored the suppression of small convents and abbeys where the observance of the Rule was no longer possible and where the ministry of evangelization was no longer being carried out. This, however, was not Vincent's situation and it was within this context that the following words were attributed to Vincent: *We can expect nothing from this Pope and will have to await another.* These words present an apt description of Roman diplomacy.

In 1655 Alexander VII was elected Pope. He was very aware of the activities of the Congregation within the Church and he was favorably disposed toward the Missionaries. Soon after his election, on September 22, 1655 he published the brief *Ex commissa nobis*, which approved vows for the Congregation. Then on August 12, 1659 the brief *Alias nos* was published and with this the Statute on the vow of poverty was ratified. In 1659 the Pope ordered the ordinands in Rome to make their ordination retreat in the house of the Congregation located in Montecitorio (a building which still exists and is currently the seat of the Italian Chamber of Deputies).

We can understand Vincent's joy when this Pope was elected, one from whom much good was expected: *O wretch that I am, pouncing on my food, devouring it like those just mentioned, what reason I have to humble myself.... It has pleased Our Lord to give us a Pope. I received this news when I was on my way to the meeting. Cardinal Mazarin's sister sent it to the Visitation Nuns in the faubourg Saint-Jacques, and they had someone inform me. He's a good Pope, very knowledgeable about contemporary affairs, and has held the opposite opinion to the ones that have been condemned. The Priests of the Mission will please offer a Holy Mass of thanksgiving, etc. tomorrow, and our Brothers will assist at it and receive Holy Communion next Sunday for the same intention. The Ladies of Charity are to receive Holy Communion tomorrow for that intention<sup>5</sup>.*

It is easy to see how this Pope became part of Vincent's conference (December 19, 1659) on obedience: *But to whom do we owe obedience?*

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<sup>5</sup> CCD XI: 171; SVP.ES XI: 103; SVP XI: 179.

*The Rule begins with Our Holy Father, the Pope; he is the common father of all Christians, the visible head of the Church, the vicar of Jesus Christ, the successor of Saint Peter; we owe him obedience, we who are in the world to instruct the people in the obedience they, as well as we, should have for this universal shepherd of our souls. It is up to us to show them the example of this. Therefore, let us give ourselves to God to obey him faithfully, and receive gladly what will come from Him. It is to him, in the person of the saint to whom Our Lord said, "Peter, feed my lambs, feed my sheep," that this same Savior has given the keys of His Church. He is, as it were, another species of man, so far is he above others. Consequently, we must consider him in Our Lord and Our Lord in him<sup>6</sup>.*

This same thought was communicated to the Daughters when during September 1655 Vincent explained to them the Common Rule: *People who speak of doing God's will understand by this will his commandments and those of his Church, which oblige us to obey the Pope, bishops, and others who have received authority from them<sup>7</sup>.*

## **2. Vincent and the mission *ad gentes***

In matters that concerned the Congregation of the Mission it was Vincent who had recourse to Rome as he attempted to convince the Vatican of the worthiness of his cause. In matters, however, that concerned the missions *ad gentes* negotiations moved in the opposite direction.

In 1622 Rome created the Propagation of Faith to promote the Church's concern with regard to the missions *ad gentes*. Rome wanted to break the Spanish and Portuguese hold on these missions and to do this it needed personnel who were not citizens of those countries.

The Roman Pontiff ratified the missionary character of the Congregation, a mission that was based on the mission of Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor and that involved the Missionaries in the preaching of missions to the people and in other ministries proper to the Institute. Missions *ad gentes* were mentioned in the Papal Bull but no specific commitment was assumed in this area. Even so, certain phrases in the Bull opened the path for other works that *are in conformity with the Rule*, recognizing of course that *the Superior General will have complete superiority and authority over all the houses of the Congregation of the Mission, wherever they have been established*

<sup>6</sup> CCD XII: 350; SVP.ES XI: 692; SVP XI: 179.

<sup>7</sup> CCD X: 86; SVP.ES IX: 734; SVP X: 107.

and that *the Superior General has the power to send or recall the missionaries to any place.*

The Propagation of Faith requested the Congregation to assume responsibility for certain territories where the Church had not yet been established and the Missionaries responded enthusiastically to these requests. Vincent himself imagined a world that extended beyond the borders of France.

Through the Missionaries who were living in Rome, Bishop Ignoli, the secretary of the Propagation, proposed certain missions that Vincent referred to in a letter that he wrote to M. Lebreton: *I admire the Congregation's care for the missions and I pray the sovereign shepherd and Master of the missions to draw glory from it*<sup>8</sup>.

In the meantime requests had been received to send Missionaries to Istanbul (1634); Brazil (1640); Persia (1640); the Far East (1644); North Africa: Tunis (1645), Algeria (1646); Ireland (1646); Arabia (1647); Madagascar (1648); Canada (1650); Poland (at the request of Queen Louise-Marie de Gonzague, 1651); Switzerland (1654); Lebanon (1656). Even though Vincent would have liked to have been able to send Missionaries to each of these places only a few of these requests received a favorable response: North Africa, Ireland, Madagascar and Poland.

In 1640 Vincent wrote to M. Louis Lebreton: *What shall I say about Bishop Ingoli's suggestion? Nothing certainly, Monsieur, but that I accept it, with all the reverence and humility in my power... I have been to celebrate Holy Mass. This is the thought that came to me: because the power to send persons ad gentes resides, on earth, in the person of His Holiness alone... all priests have the obligation to obey him in that regard. According to that maxim, which seems reasonable to me, I offered this Little Company to God, to His Divine Majesty, to go wherever His Holiness commands*<sup>9</sup>.

Two years later he wrote: *This Little Company is established in this disposition that, when His Holiness chooses to send it a capite ad calcem to those countries, it will drop everything and go most willingly*<sup>10</sup>.

In 1646 Vincent rejoiced as he witnessed the expansion of the Church and the universal vocation of the Company. But he could not hide his concern for the de-Christianization of the Old World: *I must admit that I am, I think, extremely attached to and zealous for the propagation of the Church in infidel lands, for fear that God might gradually do*

<sup>8</sup> CCD I: 538; SVP.ES I: 539; SVP I: 548.

<sup>9</sup> CCD II: 64-65; SVP.ES II: 214; SVP II: 256.

<sup>10</sup> CCD II: 288; SVP.ES II: 214; SVP II: 256.



*away with it here*<sup>11</sup>. A short time later Vincent admitted to the same missionary: *Who will assure us that God is not calling us right now to Persia? This must not be conjectured from the fact that our houses are not full, for the ones that have more men do not produce the most fruit.... You know, Monsieur, how long the Sacred Congregation has had its eyes on us, how often it has approached us, and how slowly we have moved so as not to involve anything human in the decision on this holy endeavor. However, since we are being pressured once again both by letter and by the Nuncio, I no longer have any doubt that this must be done*<sup>12</sup>.

Vincent was enthusiastic about the missions and in 1648 he decided to accept the mission in Madagascar. As a result of Vincent's commentaries and the reading of the chronicles of the missionaries in the refectory, many confreres also became enthused about the missions. In 1657 Vincent became very emotional when he said in his conference: *We should be ready and willing to come and go wherever God pleases, whether to the Indies or elsewhere; lastly, to devote ourselves willingly to the service of our neighbor and to extend the empire of Jesus Christ in souls; and I myself, old and infirm as I am, must, nonetheless, have this disposition, even to go to the Indies to win souls to God there, although I were to die on the way or on board ship*<sup>13</sup>.

Vincent's zeal reached mystical heights when during the repetition of prayer he spoke to a priest who had been sent to Madagascar as though he were present there in front of him and when in reality this confrere had died.

He spoke to the Daughters of Charity: *I know that people more than six hundred leagues away are asking for you, Sisters; I have had letters from them; yes, people more than six hundred leagues away are thinking of you; and if Queens are requesting you there, I know other persons who are also asking for you overseas*<sup>14</sup>. Vincent was referring to the requests he had received from the Queen of Poland and M. Nacquart who asked Vincent to send Daughters to Madagascar.

All of this shows that Vincent and the Holy See frequently discussed the matter of missions *ad gentes*. At times these requests were made directly to Vincent, at other times these requests were communicated to Vincent by the Missionaries living in Rome and then there were other times when these requests were communicated by the Nuncio in Paris.

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<sup>11</sup> CCD III: 40; SVP.ES III: 37; SVP III: 35.

<sup>12</sup> CCD III:164-165; SVP.ES III: 143; SVP III: 153-154.

<sup>13</sup> CCD XI: 357; SVP.ES XI: 281; SVP XI: 402.

<sup>14</sup> CCD IX: 409; SVP.ES IX: 472; SVP IX: 564.



### 3. Vincent and Jansenism

Jansenism was a problem that was specifically French and the Holy See would intervene in this situation that threatened to get out of control. Vincent used his influence and conviction to settle this controversy.

Jansenism arose from the publication of a book written by Cornelius Jansen entitled *Augustinus* which was said to be based on the writings of Saint Augustine. In France, Jansenism came into prominence due to Jean Duvergier, who was known as the Abbot of Saint-Cyran (a title that was given to him by the Bishop of Potiers). Cornelius and Jean became friends while they were studying in Paris. After completing his studies, Cornelius returned to Holland where he was ordained a priest and appointed the bishop of Ypres.

The ideas presented in Janssen's book were very similar to those presented by Calvin or perhaps it is better to say that the abbot of Saint-Cyran said that Calvin was correct in his position. The abbot and Vincent knew one another since they were both members of an elite group of religious and spiritual leaders in Paris and in 1624 they began to collaborate with one another. Vincent valued the abbot's knowledge and graciously accepted his assistance in founding the Congregation of the Mission and in acquiring the property of Saint-Lazare. At some point Vincent began to feel that the abbot's ideas were dangerous and jeopardized the Church's doctrine. Later Vincent would tell M. Dehorny, a Missionary in Rome who found Janssen's ideas attractive, that the abbot did not accept the teaching of the councils.

In 1637 Vincent went to the abbot's house and became engaged in a lengthy and enlightening discussion. This conversation marked the end of their relationship. The abbot wrote a treatise on humility and in this work he attacked Vincent, stating that this missionary was ignorant and incapable of directing priests and seminarians. At the same time Vincent wrote a treatise on grace that was not published but shown to a few of his friends.

Here we will not discuss the doctrinal aspects of Jansenism but rather will focus on Vincent's intervention that was intended to bring calmness and peace to those involved in this controversy. When Vincent intervened he had stated that he was willing to lay down his life for the spouse of Christ. In light of that statement the following words of Vincent are most curious: *On the request as to whether I heard M. de Saint-Cyran say that the Pope and most Bishops, Pastors, etc. do not constitute the true Church, lacking a vocation and the spirit of grace, I reply that I never heard him say what is contained in the said request, except for one time, when he said that many Bishops were children of the*

*Court and had no vocation*<sup>15</sup>. This was a statement Vincent made during the trial of the abbot in which Vincent had no desire to be his accuser. During intimate conversations with his confreres, however, he stated: *All my life I have been afraid of finding myself at the start of some heresy. I saw the great havoc wrought by that of Luther and Calvin and how many persons of all kinds and conditions had sucked in its pernicious venom by wanting to taste the false sweetness of their so-called Reformation. I have always been afraid of finding myself enveloped in the errors of some new doctrine before realizing it. Yes, I have feared that all my life*<sup>16</sup>.

When this new doctrine began to spread, Vincent felt he had to act. He gathered together at Saint-Lazare a group of important individuals who redacted a document in which they put forth five propositions that they considered to be the basis of the Jansenist doctrine and that were contained in Janssen's book (this book, however, was not mentioned by name). The text that was sent to the Holy See was the following:

1. Given their limitations and the fact that they lack the grace necessary to accomplish this, it is impossible for the faithful to keep certain of God's commandments, no matter how much they would wish to do so or try to observe them.
2. Given the state of fallen human nature, promptings of divine grace are never resisted.
3. Given man's fallen state, for him to gain or to lose merit it is not necessary for him to have inner freedom; it is enough that he be free from external constraint.
4. The semi-pelagians admitted the need for interior, prevenient grace, for all actions, even for the first stirrings of faith. Their heresy consisted in claiming that the nature of this grace was such that the human will could either cooperate with it or resist it.
5. To say that Jesus Christ died, or shed his blood for all men together, is semi-pelagianism.

Signatures then had to be gathered in support of the petition favoring the condemnation of these propositions. Vincent asked individuals whom he knew to sign the petition and even though Vincent became discouraged at different times during this process he did not give in to these feelings.

The next phase was developed in Rome. We know that Vincent had planned the tactics that should be followed, advised the delegates and

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<sup>15</sup> CCD XIIIa: 108; SVP.ES X: 110-111; SVP XIII: 91.

<sup>16</sup> CCD XI: 30-31; SVP.ES XI: 730; SVP XI: 37.

supported them financially. He also assisted them in finding lodging. The delegates, in turn, continued to inform Vincent about the progress of the negotiations and at different times asked for his advice.

Even before the papal Bull was published on June 9, 1633, Vincent had received news about the condemnation of the five propositions. With great joy Vincent communicated this news to his community and his friends.

But the problem continued since the Jansenists said that the propositions were certainly able to be condemned but these propositions did not represent Jansenism nor were they part of Augustinian thinking.

On April 2, 1657 Vincent wrote to Jean Des Lions, the dean of Senlis and a fervent Jansenist *Enclosed also is the Bull of our Holy Father the Pope, confirming those of Innocent X and the other Popes who have condemned the opinions of the time. I think you find, Monsieur, that it leaves you no room for doubt, after the acceptance and publication made by our Prelates, who have met so often on this subject, and recently, by the Assembly of the Clergy, who had a report printed – which I would have sent you, except that I think you have already seen it – and, finally, after the censure by the Sorbonne and the letter written to you as ordered by our Holy Father. In line with that, Monsieur, I hope that this time you will give the glory to God and the edification of his Church that everyone expects of you in these circumstances. If you wait any longer, it is to be feared that the evil spirit, who is so adroit in evading the truth, may subtly put you in the situation in which you will no longer have the fortitude to do this because you have availed yourself of grace. This grace has been prompting you for so long a time by such gentle and powerful means that I have never heard that God has used similar means for anyone else with regard to this matter<sup>17</sup>.*

To those who felt that this situation could only be resolved by an Ecumenical Council, Vincent wrote: *You say that the zeal of each of the two parties in maintaining its own opinion leaves little hope for perfect union between them. Yet, this goal must be pursued, which obliges me to point out to you that no union can be attained when there is a diversity and opposition of opinions in matters of faith and religion, unless a third party is consulted. When there are no Councils, this can only be the Pope. Anyone who is unwilling to bring about union in this manner is incapable of union and, apart from that, the latter is not even to be desired. Laws must never be made compatible with crimes, no more than, lying should be in harmony with the truth.... As for referring the matter to an Ecumenical Council, how can one be convoked during these*

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<sup>17</sup> CCD VI: 290-291; SVP.ES VI: 264; SVP VI: 266-267.

*wars?... do not fear that the Pope will not be obeyed, as he should be, when he has made a pronouncement*<sup>18</sup>.

Despite Vincent's efforts the controversy was not resolved. New actors appeared: Pascal with his famous *Pensees*, A. Arnaut and his book on frequent communion and Pashasius Quesnel. Clement XI resolved the question with the publication of the Bull *Unigenitus*. Jansenism, however, influenced some members of the Congregation and also influenced popular piety until the end of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>18</sup> CCD IV: 210, 214; SVP.ES IV: 200-204; SVP IV: 204-210.