

# STUDY

## The Influence of St Vincent Ferrer on St Vincent de Paul

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St Vincent Ferrer

Even before his birth at Valencia in Spain, it seemed that Vincent Ferrer was predestined by God to accomplish great things<sup>1</sup>. A Dominican said prophetically to his father, “I congratulate you William. In a few days you will have a son who will become a prodigy of learning and sanctity [...] The world will resound with the fame of his wondrous

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<sup>1</sup>On his father’s side, his family was originally from Britain. His name was sometimes spelt Ferrer and at others Ferrier.

deeds; he will fill heaven with joy and hell with terror. He will put on the habit which I wear, and will be received in the Church with universal joy as one of its first apostles". Vincent did join the Dominicans at the age of twenty two, became a doctor of theology, and began to teach and preach. During this time he wrote a *Treatise on the Spiritual Life* (hereafter *TOSL*)<sup>2</sup> which mainly had the members of the Dominican Order in mind. It is a succinct, practical, and demanding summary of how to live a life of Christian perfection. In spite of his obvious holiness of life, Vincent was accused of heresy because he questioned the prevailing view when he taught that Judas may have gone to purgatory rather than hell. The charge was dismissed by his mentor, the antipope Benedict XIII, who burned the Inquisition's dossier and made Vincent his confessor.

### **Evangelist Extraordinaire**

During a time of serious illness in 1399, Vincent had a vision of Christ standing between Sts Dominic and Francis, who told him to go forth and preach repentance and the immanence of the end times. That religious experience kick-started one of the most extraordinary missionary outreaches in the history of the Church. For the next twenty years, Vincent travelled tirelessly the length and breadth of Europe preaching in places such as Marseilles, Geneva, Lausanne, Bologna and Freiburg. Although some books say that he visited Britain and Ireland, there is no documentary evidence that he did so. Popularly known as "The angel of judgement", Vincent was a crisis preacher who urged the people to turn back to the Lord before it was too late. He also preached on the immanent coming of the Antichrist. Nearly 600 years after his death, the Judgment he preached has not come to pass. Perhaps it was averted as a result of his effective evangelisation.

Each day, Vincent celebrated Mass, and preached at length to thousands of people. We know how he spoke because as many as 400 of his sermons are still extant. A selection of them have been published in English<sup>3</sup>. He was evangelical in style. He knew all the scriptures by heart and often quoted them. He never referred to secular authors. As he explained, nowhere did Jesus say preach Ovid, Virgil or Homer.

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<sup>2</sup>Loreto Publications, Fitzwilliam (NH) 2006. Cf. Ven. Julienne Morrell (1593-1653), a commentary on *A Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, Newman Press, Westminster (MD) 1951.

<sup>3</sup>*A Christology From the Sermons of St Vincent Ferrer*, Blackfriars, London 1954.

Clearly, Vincent's ministry was blessed by God. Everywhere he went, he was accompanied by up to fifty priests and sometimes thousands of people. Although he had no means of amplification, even those on the edge of vast crowds of 50,000 people or more, said that they could hear him clearly. Finally, not only was he instrumental in the conversion of countless thousands of nominally Christian people, he also won over tens of thousands of Jews and Moslems to the faith. Vincent also got involved in political matters. He had the special gift of reconciling enemies and was often called upon to act as judge and peacemaker. He counselled princes and settled disputes for families and those in high governmental positions.

Vincent had great admiration for his fellow Dominican, St. Thomas Aquinas, and often referred to his writings. Thomas believed that the gifts of the Spirit which are listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10 were given in order to evangelise effectively. There are charisms of revelation, proclamation and demonstration<sup>4</sup>. Vincent Ferrer was an outstanding example of what Thomas had in mind. He seemed to exercise most of the gifts mentioned by Paul. For instance, he regularly received revelation of a prophetic kind. Not only could he read hearts, he often foretold future events. For instance, in 1375, he said to starving crowds in Barcelona, "Have courage, and be glad, for this very night two vessels will arrive in this port laden with wheat". People were sceptical about this prediction because a storm was raging at sea. But everything happened as Vincent had foretold. He proclaimed the Gospel with the aid of supernatural help. In the course of his canonisation process it was reported that although he always spoke in his own native dialect, people of other languages understood every word Vincent spoke without interpretation. As his canonization process also attested, he demonstrated the truth of the merciful love he proclaimed by means of deeds of power. It is estimated that over a period of twenty years he performed more than 50,000 healings, exorcism and miracles, including more than thirty raisings from the dead.

Because St. Vincent's heart was moved to compassion by the economic plight of the people, he built hospitals, asylums, refuges and even bridges. The divisions and heresies in the church caused him great anguish of spirit. He believed that a revival of faith and morals depended upon the restoration of church unity and effective preaching. Although he supported the Avignon Popes, he came to see that his mentor Benedict XIII, was not the true successor of Peter. Eventually his prayers were answered when the Council of Constance (1414-1417)

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<sup>4</sup>PATRICK COLLINS, C.M., "St Thomas Aquinas on the Evangelistic Nature of the Gifts of the Spirit", in *The Gifts of the Spirit and the New Evangelisation*, Columba, Dublin 2009, pp. 56-72.

reunited the church under Pope Martin V. Two years afterwards, worn out by his gargantuan efforts, Vincent died, as St. Collette DeBoilet (1381-1447) had foretold, at Vannes in Brittany. As he himself had prophesised more than once during his lifetime, he was canonized by Pope Calixtus III in 1455.

### **Vincent de Paul influenced by Vincent Ferrer**

When I was reading about the life and works of Vincent Ferrer, I was surprised to find that some of his biographers mentioned that he had a significant influence on St. Vincent de Paul. In his book, *St Vincent Ferrer: The Angel of the Judgment*, Andrew Pradel, O.P. claimed that the Spanish saint influenced “blessed Nicholas Factor, a Franciscan and the great St. Vincent de Paul [...] St. Vincent acknowledged St. Vincent Ferrer as his own special patron. He made his life a daily study and had constantly in his hands the *Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, in order that he might conform thereto not only his own heart and actions, but also those of the priests of his institute”<sup>5</sup>. In another book, entitled, *St. Vincent Ferrer, His Life, Spiritual Teaching, and Practical Devotion*, Pradel, reiterated what he has said in his other book and added, “St. Vincent de Paul gloried in St. Vincent Ferrer as his patron; and we can well conceive that the examples of charity in the model would not be without its influence on the holy priest who essayed to walk in his footsteps”<sup>6</sup>. Pradel says that a biographer named Antonio Teoli, O.P., who had a major biography of Vincent Ferrer published in Rome in 1735, had mentioned that the Spanish saint had influenced St. Vincent de Paul.

When I read these claims I wondered if any of the reputable biographies of St. Vincent de Paul endorsed this point of view. Bishop Louis Abelly, who knew the founder of the Congregation of the Mission, says, “He honoured Saint Vincent Ferrer, and it was noticed that on many of his retreats he read from the book written by this saint. He was so strongly influenced by what he had read about this saint’s life and teachings that he often quoted them in the talks he gave to his community. He imitated this saint, particularly in his great zeal for the conversion of sinners and for the salvation of souls”<sup>7</sup>. In the twentieth

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<sup>5</sup>Tan, Rockford (IL) 2000, pp. 185-186.

<sup>6</sup>R. Washbourne, London 1875, p. 98.

<sup>7</sup>LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, Vol. 3, New City Press, New York 1993, p. 94. There is an interesting footnote on this page which says that one of the reasons for accepting the date 1580 for the saint’s birth is that his birthday would fall on the feast of Vincent Ferrer.

century, Pierre Coste said of St. Vincent de Paul, "His devotion extended to [...] St. Vincent Ferrer, author of a *Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, which he loved to read"<sup>8</sup>. These quotations raise two questions. Firstly, to what extent was Vincent de Paul influenced by the life and teachings of Vincent Ferrer? Secondly, did Vincent de Paul refer to Vincent Ferrer in his talks and writings?

### **Both Vincents Lived During Times of Crisis**

In a certain sense there were some parallels between the lives of the two men in so far as both of them lived at times when severe problems were evident in secular society and the Church. Vincent Ferrer lived in the late middle ages when the continent of Europe was in deep trouble. Firstly, the black death (1347-1351), had ravaged every country, including Spain, and resulted in the loss of a third of the population. Secondly, the hundred years war (1337-1453) between England and France not only led to the martyrdom of St Joan of Arc (1412-1431), it had a widespread destructive and destabilizing effect. Thirdly, because so many people had died as a result of bubonic plague and violence, the economy declined and poverty increased. Fourthly, the Church was convulsed by the great schism which lasted from 1378 to 1417, and it was undermined by the heresies of people like John Wycliffe (1330-1384) and John Huss (1372-1415). These scandalous situations, compromised ecclesiastical authority, divided the faithful, and weakened spirituality.

Vincent de Paul lived at the beginning of the age of reason, when civil society and the church were once again in trouble. During his youth, France was devastated by the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598) which were fought between Catholic and Huguenot factions. It is estimated that during this period between 2 and 4 million people died as a result of a combination of famine, disease and combat. Sometime later France was convulsed by a civil war known as the Fronde (1648-1653). As we know from the writings of St. Vincent it led to the dislocation of large numbers of people, hardship and famine. From a religious point of view, the Protestant Reformation had divided Christian Europe, including France. Although the Council of Trent had initiated a counter Reformation, by issuing many decrees which advocated reform and renewal, very few of them had been implemented in seventeenth century France. As a result, there were obvious signs of decline in clerical and lay life. There was also the problem of Jansenism,

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<sup>8</sup>PIERRE COSTE, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. 3, New City Press, New York 1987, p. 305.

a Catholic version of Calvinist puritanism which stressed predestination. It was considered to be heretical by the church and duly condemned.

So it is not surprising that Vincent de Paul would have seen the response of Vincent Ferrer to the problems of his day, by means of evangelisation and Church renewal, as a template which would have been relevant in the France of his time. Indeed, on one occasion Canon Richard Dognon of Verdun wrote to St. Vincent de Paul and said, "For the good of our century, God has passed on to you by a metempsychosis<sup>9</sup>, which he alone can bring about, the spirit, affections, and design, together with the name of the great Patron of missionaries, Saint Vincent Ferrer. The apostolic missions he instituted in his time are manifestly more necessary than they ever were before"<sup>10</sup>.

### Vincent de Paul's Interest in Vincent Ferrer

It is probable that Vincent had read one or more biographies of Vincent Ferrer. We know that shortly after Ferrer's death, the bishop of Lucera, Peter Ranzano wrote the first official account of the Dominican's remarkable life (1455). It was followed by other biographies, such as one by Francis Castiglione (1470), and another, written in French, by Dominican Bernard Guyard (1634). It is quite possible that Vincent de Paul read this book. That said, it is unlikely that he had access to any of Vincent Ferrer's sermons<sup>11</sup>. However, we are sure that he did read and re-read the *TOSL*. While we know that people such as Pierre Berulle, Francis de Sales and Benet of Canfield influenced Vincent's spirituality, the fact that Vincent Ferrer also influenced him is often overlooked.

Vincent de Paul used to refer to his namesake and quote his words, both in his letters and in the talks he gave to the Daughters of Charity and to the members of the Congregation of the Mission. There are no less than nine such quotations referred to in the general index of the French edition of the *Correspondence, Conferences and Documents* (hereafter *CED*), edited by Pierre Coste<sup>12</sup>. For example, Vincent de Paul wrote to Bernard Codoing about a business transaction which would require a knowledge of languages. He said, "God will give you the grace,

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<sup>9</sup>The passing of the soul at death into another body i.e. to be reincarnated.

<sup>10</sup>VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence – Conferences – Documents*, Vol. 1, New City Press, New York 1985, p. 152.

<sup>11</sup>Some of them are available at <http://www.svfparish.org/svfsermons/index.htm>

<sup>12</sup>Vol. XIV, Lecoffre, Paris 1925, p. 636.

if he wishes, to make yourself understood by foreigners, just as he gave it to Vincent Ferrer"<sup>13</sup>. In a conference Vincent gave to the priests of the Mission in May 1658, he spoke about the importance of deferring or condescending to the opinions of others in all things that are not sinful<sup>14</sup>. He then referred to the following words in the *TOSL*, "it is more advantageous to rule oneself by the will of another, provided it be good, although our own judgment may appear better and more perfect"<sup>15</sup>. In the course of a talk to his priests about seminaries, St. Vincent said, "St. Vincent Ferrer strove for sanctification so that God would one day raise up good priests and apostolic workers for the reform of the ecclesiastical state and for readying men for working for our perfection to cooperate in such a happy restoration when we see the ecclesiastical state now returning to what it should be"<sup>16</sup>. On another occasion Vincent said, "Let us work with a new love in the service of the poor, looking for the most destitute and abandoned among them. Let us recognize that before God they are our lords and masters, and we are unworthy to render them our small services"<sup>17</sup>. The striking phrase, "our lords and masters" seemed to have been borrowed from Vincent Ferrer who wrote, "we should have a humble and sincere regard for our brethren, and cheerfully submit to them as our lords and masters"<sup>18</sup>. In the light of references like these, it is surprising to find that some recent biographies, such as those of Jose Maria Roman<sup>19</sup> and Bernard Pujo<sup>20</sup>, seem to make no mention of St. Vincent Ferrer.

## The Two Vincents on Preaching

There is no doubt that St. Vincent Ferrer was a remarkably effective evangelical preacher. He described his understanding of this ministry in a chapter entitled, "On Preaching". In it he advised, "Use simple and familiar words in preaching and exhortation. To explain in detail what you mean; and so far as possible, illustrate what you say with some

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<sup>13</sup>VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence – Conferences – Documents*, Vol. 2, cit., p. 232.

<sup>14</sup>CED, X, 482.

<sup>15</sup>TOSL, cit., p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>CED, XI, 7-8, & quoted by ABELLY, Vol. 2, cit., p. 254.

<sup>17</sup>CED, XI, 393, & quoted by THOMAS MCKENNA, *Praying With Vincent de Paul*, St. Mary's Press, Winona (MIN) 1994, pp. 59-60.

<sup>18</sup>TOSL, cit., p. 38.

<sup>19</sup>ST VINCENT DE PAUL, *A Biography*, Melisende, London 1999.

<sup>20</sup>VINCENT DE PAUL, *The Trailblazer*, Notre Dame University, Notre Dame (IN) 2003.

examples, in order that the sinner, finding his conscience guilty of the same sins which you reprehend, may feel as if you were speaking only to him. Do this, however in such a way, that your words, so to speak, may appear to come from the heart, without being mixed with any movement of indignation or pride, and to spring from the bowels of compassion, from the tender love of a father, who is grieved at the faults of his children”<sup>21</sup>. When one reads the sermons of Vincent Ferrer it is clear that he put these principles into practice. Furthermore, a number of points will probably strike anyone who reads the *TOSL*. Firstly, it contains virtually no quotations, either scriptural, patristic or contemporary. Secondly, the style is very simple and clear, and tends to speak briefly about the nature of the topic under discussion, e.g. Christian perfection, while going on to mention motives and means of practicing it<sup>22</sup>.

Authors such as Abbe Arnaud d’Angel<sup>23</sup>, Jacques Delarue<sup>24</sup>, and Jose Maria Roman<sup>25</sup> include interesting sections on Vincent de Paul’s views on preaching. They show how implicit in the various things Vincent de Paul said about preaching over the years, was the “little method”, which he said was the method of Jesus Christ himself. He exclaimed on one occasion, “Hurrah for simplicity, and for the ‘little method’ which is in fact, the most excellent method and one that brings more glory because it moves hearts more than all this speechifying which only irritates the listener”<sup>26</sup>. The method consists of three interrelated parts which need to be varied depending of the subject under consideration such as a virtue, the life of a saint, a parable etc. Firstly, it deals with the nature of the subject under discussion, e.g. salvation. Secondly, the preacher suggests motives for acting, e.g., why a person should desire to experience salvation, e.g. sorrow for offending the Lord, and fear of losing heaven. Thirdly, the preacher deals with the means of doing something practical and specific, e.g. trusting in the free, unmerited gift of God’s mercy, and making a good general confession.

Anyone who reads Vincent Ferrer’s *TOSL* will notice that the little method comprising of nature, motives, and means, was implicit in the way he wrote. Furthermore, many things Vincent de Paul said about preaching seem to echo points that Vincent Ferrer had already made.

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<sup>21</sup>TOSL, cit., p. 24.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. TOSL, cit., pp. 30-32; 40-41.

<sup>23</sup>SAINT VINCENT, *A Guide for Priests*, Burns Oates, London 1932, pp. 106-133.

<sup>24</sup>*The Missionary Ideal of the Priest According to Vincent de Paul*, Vincentians, Philadelphia 1993, pp. 121-128.

<sup>25</sup>ST VINCENT DE PAUL, *A Biography*, cit., pp. 348-351.

<sup>26</sup>CED, XI, 286.



We can look at a few examples. Firstly, as has already been noted, Vincent Ferrer did not quote secular authors. For his part, Vincent de Paul admonished preachers who tried “to cause wonderment by filling their sermons with a great variety of things such as extracts from philosophy, mathematics, medicine, jurisprudence, quotations from Jewish Rabbis, Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, and Chaldaic words [...] in a vain display of knowledge”<sup>27</sup>. On one occasion, Vincent de Paul said, “Do not use quotations from the profane authors, unless you use them as steppingstones to the Holy Scripture”<sup>28</sup>. Secondly, Vincent Ferrer warned preachers not to speak in a spirit of pride. Vincent de Paul repeatedly warned against the same danger, “we must remain faithful”, he said, “to the simplicity and humility of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. He could have done startling things and spoken momentous words, but he did not do so”<sup>29</sup>. Thirdly, Vincent Ferrer said that preaching aimed to help sinners to become aware of their sins in a way that would lead to repentance. Vincent de Paul said, “Let us never desire to satisfy ourselves, but to satisfy God, to win souls, and to lead people to repentance, because all else is nothing but vanity and pride”<sup>30</sup>. Fourthly, Vincent Ferrer stressed the importance of preaching the truth in a spirit of compassion like a loving father or mother. Vincent de Paul quoted his patron when he said, “St. Vincent Ferrer says that there is no means of profiting by preaching if one does not preach from the depths of compassion”<sup>31</sup>. On another occasion he said something similar, “We should use compassionate language to make our neighbours aware that we truly have their interests and sufferings at heart”<sup>32</sup>. Fifthly, Vincent Ferrer recommended preachers to illustrate what they meant by everyday examples. Vincent de Paul said something similar, “Notice how Jesus spoke in an understandable language, using the simple comparisons of a farmer, a field, a vine, a grain of mustard seed. This is how you must speak if you want to be understood by the people to whom you announce the word of God”<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted by DELARUE, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> CED XI, 50, & quoted in ABELLY, Vol. 2, cit., p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> CED, XII, 211-227, & quoted by ABELLY, Vol. 2, cit., p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> DELARUE, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence – Conferences – Documents*, Vol. 1, cit., p. 526.

<sup>32</sup> CED, XI, 77, & quoted by ABELLY, Vol. 3, cit., p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> CED, XI, 342-351, & quoted by ABELLY, Vol. 3, cit., p. 320.

## Conclusion

While the two Vincents were remarkable evangelists, each in his own distinctive way, there were obvious differences between them. Vincent Ferrer was an eschatological prophet, who focused on the presence of the antichrist and the immanence of the end times and general judgment. Vincent de Paul did not focus on any of these topics. Vincent Ferrer was a remarkable wonder worker, whereas, there is very little evidence that Vincent de Paul healed the sick or delivered them from evil spirits. Indeed there is an interesting discussion of the significance of deeds of power in the lives of saints in Bishop Prospero Lambertini's (1675-1758) four volume, *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione, et Beatorum Canonizatione*<sup>34</sup>. The author, who later became Pope Benedict XIV, mentioned the charismatic activities of Vincent Ferrer, such as the fact that St. Antonius (1389-1459), a Dominican Archbishop of Florence, testified during the canonization process that although Vincent spoke in his Spanish dialect he was understood by everyone<sup>35</sup>. Lambertini handled the canonization process of Vincent de Paul. Speaking about the latter he said, "Matthaeucci says, that beside heroic virtues, the promoters of the faith are accustomed to require, for the sake of greater precaution, some grace *gratis data*. I confess that when I was promoter of the faith, I did not omit to make that observation. I did so in the cause of St. Vincent de Paul and the prudent postulatores replied, that graces *gratis datae* were not necessary in order to form a safe judgment on his virtues, some however, of them were not wanting in the servant of God. These are their words: 'Although graces *gratis datae* are not necessary to prove heroic virtues, and therefore it is not necessary that St. Vincent de Paul should have been endowed with them in order to perceive that he had attained to heroic virtue; however, we will bring forward many matters of moment, from which it may be inferred that the servant of God was possessed of those gifts which are now the subject of discussion'"<sup>36</sup>. Unfortunately Lambertini did not offer examples of Vincent's charismatic powers. One could hazard a guess that he thought that Vincent had the gifts of the utterance of wisdom and knowledge, as well as the gifts of the discernment of spirits and seeing visions, as was evidenced by the prophetic image he saw at the time of Jane de Chantal's death<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Prato, Roma 1840.

<sup>35</sup> *Heroic Virtue*, Vol. 3, Richardson, London 1851, p. 224.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 97. Cf. PATRICK COLLINS, C.M., "Benedict XIV on the Link Between the Charisms, Holiness and Evangelisation", in *The Gifts of the Spirit and the New Evangelisation*, cit., pp. 73-90.

<sup>37</sup> ABELLY, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 283-284.

The findings of this article are intended to be indicative rather than conclusive. The subject of Vincent Ferrer's influence on St. Vincent de Paul's spirituality deserves a more rigorous treatment from a methodological and textual point of view than I have been able to provide. Even so, it is my belief that, taken together, the example of the two Vincents teaches us at least three relevant lessons at this time of crisis in Church and state. Firstly, our multiple problems, which are often the result of sinful forgetfulness of God, are a providential call to seek the Lord while he may still be found (cf. Is 55:6). Secondly, while Christians are right to stress the primacy of the loving mercy of God, they also need to refer, not only to the divine justice which will be exercised on the last day, but also to the possibility of eternal separation from God. Thirdly, when we share the Gospel in different ways, we can expect God to manifest his saving power and presence by means of charitable works, action for justice (e.g. the Vincentian family) and charismatic deeds of power (e.g. Vincent Ferrer). In this way we will help to usher in the new springtime spoken about by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

There is a very moving example of how the new springtime might come about in Abelly's graphic account of a Vincentian mission which was conducted in 1641. It took place as a result of the repeated requests of the duchess of Aiguillon. She appealed to Vincent to evangelise the faubourg Saint Germain des Pres in Paris which was a very deprived, run down, crime ridden area. As a result of their grace filled efforts, Abelly tells us that, "those who worked on this mission were astonished seeing the disproportion between the means used and the result attained. Besides the large crowds at their sermons and catechism instructions which they presented in the simple and familiar style suggested by Monsieur Vincent, they were filled with admiration at their results. They saw inveterate sinners, hardened usurers, fallen women, criminals who had spent their entire lives in crime, in a word, people without faith in God or anyone, throw themselves at their feet, their eyes bathed in tears, their hearts moved with sorrow for sins, begging mercy and forgiveness"<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 223-224.