

Put Out into the Deep: The Vincentian Way

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FOREWORD

My intervention today is not intended to revisit the theme of relations between St. Vincent and Islam. Such work has already remarkably been done by Father Yves Danjou in the session on Islam which was held in Lebanon in 1999 (cf. *Vincentiana* 43, n° 4/5). My much more modest objective is to show certain traits of Vincentian spirituality that could characterize our “putting out into the deep” in regard to dialogue with Muslim people. In other words, what I would like to do is to show how there is a Vincentian way to follow the message of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church in this domain, and that we Vincentians can make a unique contribution to this particular theme.

My focus will be the analogous; that of our little Vincentian boat, small in comparison with the large ship which represents the Church, but still a signal, an indicator of possible routes. We are akin to the little boats on the Bosphorus that travel in front of the large cruise ships to show them the best routes of passage.

The methodology that I will follow will be to extract some “things that are old and things that are new” from the treasures of Vincentian spirituality and of the Church, and to show how they helped me and were confirmed during my limited experience of living and working with Muslim people in Turkey. I hope that they can be of some help for you, too.

MOVING THE BOAT: THE SAIL

Let’s get on the Vincentian boat and let’s cast off. We are aware that the Lord calls us to navigate the boat that was given to us that we should not just simply float or navigate by sight. We have to leave the security of the shore, where we feel comfortable to go where we will meet the unknown. This is done by confronting the high seas and discovering new horizons and new “challenges” from God. We have to rid ourselves of our knowledge and certitudes, following His words,

to go fishing in full daylight after a night of a complete fruitless catch. Once we have lifted the anchor of our personal securities, of our personal opinions and of stereotypes and commonplaces that kept our boat firmly tied, we can now move the boat.

We have at our disposal a sail and two oars. Let us focus on the first. The sail is big enough to make us move rapidly, without using much energy. However, to have it really function well, the boat needs some wind, which is something that we cannot produce ourselves. This is something that has to be given to us. What we can do is to look for the wind and then intercept it and use its energy. I am certain that all of us here present, have felt and continue to feel in our lives the blowing of this wind, sometimes strong like during the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, other times gentle as the breeze that caressed Elisha on the mountain of Horeb. This is the wind that makes our hearts expand and fills them to the point that we sell everything we have in order to acquire this precious pearl. The love of Christ urges us and wants to continue to push us out into the world. *Caritas Christi urget nos*. It should be the love of Christ and nothing else. It seems to me that this should always be present in our relations with Muslim people.

If we want our dialogue to be fruitful and to be free from the dryness of conveniences and formalities, strategies and human techniques, we always have to be careful that there is the imprint of Christ's love, the same love that we have experienced and received. To build a relation of confidence and openness, it is important that we free ourselves as much as possible from our human reasoning, our calculation, our need to attain goals. I have personally experienced how sensitive our Muslim friends are on this point and how important it is to safeguard our dialogue from adding these things to it. Let me read an e-mail that I received some time ago from a Turkish friend that really made me think:

“Sadly, there is a lot of ignorance in my country. Before meeting you, I saw Christians as missionaries (people who proselytize). When I met you, you did not make any remarks about my religion and you did not make any comparisons. This really surprised me. Now, I look at Christians as normal people”.

I would add that it is important, not only that we should not make comparisons, but that we should not even think them! It is only the love of Christ that can guarantee the purity of our intentions and our words, which preserves our actions in freedom and in *holy indifference*. Let us reflect on these words of Saint Vincent:

“It isn't enough to do what God asks of us, but we should, in addition, do it for love of God [...] everything we do or suffer, if we don't do it or suffer it for love of God, is useless for us; even should we be

burned alive or give all our possessions to the poor, says Saint Paul, if we don't have charity and don't do or suffer for love of God, then all that is useless for us" (11, 384s.).

"God is an inexhaustible source of wisdom, light, and love; it is from Him we must draw what we say to others; we have to efface our own spirit and personal feelings to give place to the operations of grace, which alone enlightens and enkindles hearts; we must set ourselves aside in order to be in communion with God; we must consult Him to learn His language, and ask that He Himself speak in us and through us; then He will be doing His own work, and we won't spoil anything" (12, 13).

Pope Paul VI defined the dialogue as an internal drive of charity (ES 64). Truly, although dialogue is expressed by human words and actions, its origin transcends our humanity. It is found in the Will of God. It is again Pope Paul VI, who told us in the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* already cited, that the origin of the dialogue is in the mind of God Himself. Revelation itself, according to the mysterious divine plan, can be looked upon as a dialogue between God and man. It's a dialogue that has its culmination in the Incarnated Son of God. God never ceases to speak to mankind and in this dialogue He reveals something of Himself, of the mystery of His own life, of His own unique essence and trinity of persons (cf. ES 70).

Therefore, since dialogue comes from God, in order not to misunderstand its essence and its identity, we ought to constantly go beyond our human limitations to draw on and make our own the Spirit of God and to be clothed with the Spirit of God. This is what St. Vincent said to Father Antoine Durand, appointed superior of the seminary of Agde:

"[...] all human diligence can do here is to spoil everything, if God doesn't take a hand in it. No, Monsieur, neither philosophy, nor theology, nor discourses can act in souls; Jesus Christ must be involved in this with us – or we with Him – so that we may act in Him and He in us, that we may speak as he did and in His Spirit, as He himself was in His father, and preached the doctrine He had taught Him; those are the words of the Holy Scripture.

So, Monsieur, you must empty yourself of self in order to clothe yourself with Jesus Christ... we too, wretched creatures, even though we are only flesh, hay and thorns, yet if Our Lord imprints His own character on us, and gives us, so to speak, the sap of His Spirit and grace, uniting us to Him like the vine branches to the vine stock, we do the same as He did on earth – I mean we carry out divine actions..." (11, 311).

“We carry out divine actions”. That is the sign that we put out into the deep with our sails in full mast. We know well that this is not an easy thing to do. The “I” and our human reasoning quite often overtake us, and so we take down our sail and our little boat stops in dead calm. This is why we should often ask for the help of God, that He help us to purify our intentions, our words and our actions so that others may see Him through us.

Let me give a final consideration on the wind and on the sail. The gospel of Luke tells us that in light of the large number of fish, Simon Peter motioned to the others and a second boat came to their aid. Would it be possible to imagine that the same wind could blow on the sails of other boats and lead them too to put out into the deep? Father Andrea Santoro, a missionary priest in Trabzon, in Turkey, where he was martyred in February 2006, was convinced that: “In the end, the important thing is to bring in us the good that Jesus wants for all and to let Him reveal it through us” (Letters from Turkey, Rome, 2006, p. 172). To our Vincentian ears, these words sound very close to those of our founder:

“We’ve been chosen by God as instruments of His immense, paternal charity, which is intended to be established and to expand in souls” (12, 214).

Now, I believe that among the divine actions that the Lord enables us to carry out he asks us also to help others lift their sails and intercept the same wind that helps us move our boat. I think that this wind of love does not know any borders or limits and that sometimes if we only signal, other boats will help us. Here are some thoughts of my young friend from Istanbul:

“You talked to me of helping the poor, for example those who live in Africa. If I want, will you help me? Can you send me to these places to help them? Is this not only my dream? I will work for the Church, I know. Actually, I can also work for the Church: that is the house of the Lord, like the mosque. These days, I am thinking of my life: I have a job, I can buy things, I have a girlfriend whom I like a lot, whom I want to marry and have children with... but all that is ordinary things. Maybe, I can help other children and then my life will really make sense. I want to change something, I feel like my life is meaningless. And I also think that God has given us something that does not have limits and that we can share non-stop: it is love. Why then am I so selfish? I want to find a way to destroy my selfishness”.

MOVING THE BOAT: THE FIRST OAR

As I have already mentioned, our little boat, besides having a sail, also has two oars. The combined action of the sail and of the oars allows us to sail even faster, but this demands from us a constant effort and commitment. The harder we work the oars, the faster the boat will go. Let us now examine our oars, those that the Lord has equipped the Vincentian boat with and which He wants us to use. The first oar bears the name of **the Mystery of the Word made Flesh**. We know well the paramount position that the Incarnation had in the life and thinking of St. Vincent. He never ceased to stop contemplating the grandeur of this mystery:

“Only Our Lord... was so enamoured with the love of creatures as to leave the throne of His father to come to take a body subject to weaknesses” (12, 216).

Over and over he remarks how, in assuming human nature, the Son of God conformed with man and in doing so, more even than Saint Paul, Jesus was all to all.

“He not only adopted our natural human ways, but, in a certain sense, our moral ones as well: an understanding like ours, a way of comprehending physical things the way we do... which shows that He had the same thoughts about them as we do. He also had the same manner of acting; He walked like us and worked like us. In a word, in order to insert himself better among us, He became like us... He willed to appear and act like us in order to be loved. He willed to take on our nature in order that we might be united to Him” (12, 205 s.).

Specifically, in the abasement in becoming human, in the Son of God, who wanted to clothe himself in our weak humanity and become poor among the poor, St. Vincent sees the source and reason of our apostolate. Christ is really and effectively present in His suffering members.

He would say to the Daughters of Charity:

*“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’ll find God there [...] Go visit a chain gang, **you’ll** find God there. Look after those little children, you’ll 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 [...] considers them as done to him”* (9, 199).

And he reminded to his missionaries that:

“I must not judge a poor peasant man or woman by their appearance or their apparent intelligence, especially since very often they scarcely have the expression or the mind of rational persons, so crude and vulgar they are. But turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is represented to us by these poor people” (11, 26).

It seems to me that the insistence of St. Vincent in putting before us Christ as represented in human beings could help us not only in our service to the poor, but even more in our relationships with people different from us, namely the people who do not share our Christian faith. Often, we risk labeling someone on the basis of their religious creed: “That’s a Muslim!”. Other times, instead, we approach others with an instinctive sense of openness, in the name of a vague sense of benevolence and trust. As Vincentians, I think we are called to do more. We should train ourselves to “turn the medal” and see in the other, even in Muslims, the light of faith, the face of the Son of God. The Incarnation of the Son of Man is an oar; it seems to me, we should take advantage of, to advance in the sea of the world. If the Word wanted to become flesh and came to live among us, if he “*willed to take on our nature*” it means the face of Christ is represented in each human person, in a certain way. It remains for us to “open” our eyes, to understand his features.

The intuition of St. Vincent has been authoritatively confirmed by the doctrine of the Church. We can read these precious statements in the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, of Vatican Council II:

“By His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin” (GS 22).

No one can ignore the value and the weight especially of the first statement: “*By His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion **with every man***”. It is a statement that Pope John Paul II took and expanded in the first encyclical in his pontificate, *Redemptor Hominis*, of March, 1979:

“...man – every man without any exception whatever – has been redeemed by Christ, and because with man – with each man without any exception whatever – Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it” (RH 14).

The same thought has been presented in numerous discourses and meetings with people of the Muslim faith. Let’s think about the impact

of this truth when it comes to our relations with Muslims. How will our attitudes and our perspective change if we truly believe that with them too the Son of God has united Himself! Suddenly, we no longer look at them as strangers, as people far from us, “outside” of our world, or at the most as potential recipients of our message or of the service that we want to give them. We now relate to them as people who are “inside” the history of salvation, inside the love of God, inside the mystery of the Incarnation. They too, whether they know it or not, carry in themselves something of Christ. They become to us people who, even without being aware of it, have something to tell us about Jesus Christ. They reveal something of Him, some of His facets. How much then, will our interest towards them expand!

Personally, I have become more attentive and more curious in discovering the presence of Christ in people who do not know Him as the Son of God. It seems to me that “it counts more” to find this presence here, rather than where it will be logical and expected. It is a great joy for me to hear from the voice of my Muslim friends almost the echo of the words that Jesus said in the Gospels: “God wants to be found by those who are lost... He wants us next to Him... love is the most important key in His World”. These are the words of a Turkish friend.

Christian De Chergé, the prior of the famous community of Trappist monks of Tibhirine in Algeria, martyred in the spring of 1996, wrote:

“To enter into truthful dialogue we must accept, in the name of Christ, that Islam has something to tell us about Christ” (CHRISTIAN SALENSON [Ed.], *Prier 15 jours avec Christian de Chergé, prieur des moines de Tibhirine*).

Christian Salenson, commenting on these words writes:

“For a strange paradox, Christians receive Christ that they announce, precisely from those to whom they are giving the message. They do not know Christ exhaustively simply because He fully revealed himself at Nazareth, but they also receive Him from other believers and from different people”.

Yes, Christ has something to tell us even through our Muslim friends; not merely something interesting and important on religions, on brotherhood, on dialogue, but also something **on** himself, or rather, **of** himself. Let us take in our hands the oar of the Mystery of the Incarnation, let us meditate on it, on its implications, and let us strive to use it with renewed vigor. It will push us into the sea of the world, not only in our interfaith dialogue, but also in our knowledge of Our Lord.

MOVING THE BOAT: THE SECOND OAR

Let us now have a look at the second oar with which our boat is equipped. On it we can read: **the universal dimension of the mission**. If we look at all the activities and fields St. Vincent wanted his sons and daughters to be engaged in, we can't but be impressed with their variety and multiplicity. This is true both at the level of ministries: missions to the lower classes and *ad gentes*, seminaries, assistance to prisoners, to slaves, to orphans, to suffering people, to mentally challenged, to soldiers, to impoverished noble people etc., and at a geographical distribution level: France, Italy, Poland, Ireland, Madagascar. Truthfully, for St. Vincent, the mission did not know borders or limitations of expression. Even more importantly, he did not have any restrictions on recipients. He explained clearly this conviction to the Daughters of Charity:

"You have a vocation obliging you to help equally all sorts of persons: men, women, children, and in general every poor person who needs your assistance" (10, 363).

To the missionaries, with rightly famous words, he recalls that:

"Our vocation is to go, not just to one parish, not just to one diocese, but all over the world; and to do what? To set people's hearts on fire, to do what the Son of God did. He came to set the world on fire in order to inflame it with His love. What do we have to desire but that it may burn and consume everything" (12, 215).

On the other hand, St. Vincent strongly condemns the attitude of those who would like to narrow the horizons of thoughts and actions:

"But what sort of men will turn us away from those good works already begun? They'll be... men who seek only to enjoy themselves and, provided they have enough to eat, don't bother about anything else. And who else? They'll be – I'd rather not say it – they'll be men who coddle themselves... people who have only a narrow outlook, confining their perspective and plans to a certain circumference within which they shut themselves away, so to speak, in one point; they don't want to leave it, and if they're shown something outside it and go near to have a look, they immediately go back to their center, like snails into their shells" (12, 81).

There is no doubt, therefore, that in the eyes of the Saint both communities are called to open themselves, to "put out into the deep", to nurture a global vision and a universal perspective, to "form a strong, holy attachment to the service of God" (12, 82). It is the Almighty who

has given them this mission. For Saint Vincent, this is nothing but the very continuation and expansion of the mission of the Son of God, “to set the world on fire in order to inflame it with His love”. May the fire of God’s love touch all people in all nations and on all continents. May we reveal and make it present through our own lives, through our actions and words. May we make the face of God known and loved by everyone, without exception, since every human being needs and has a right to know this love. May our love be the pathway that they will come to know God’s love. Our mission is universal, because God’s offering of His love is universal, because the thirst after this love is within the hearts of every human being.

“We’ve been chosen by God as instruments of His immense, paternal charity, which is intended to be established and to expand in souls” (12, 214).

Annalena Tonelli, an Italian lay volunteer who gave her life in Somalia in 2003 so that the charity of God could establish itself among people who never knew it, said in her testimony: “After 34 years of proclaiming the Gospel with my life only, and with my burning desire to do this until the end, Muslims tell me that I will go to heaven like them. They say: we have the faith, and you have love”. She revealed love, she bore witness, and put it into practice in her life.

In the course of the history of the Church, as Fr. Robert P. Maloney said at his conference at the Vincentian Center of Permanent Formation, the “paradigm” of mission has been nuanced in many diverse ways: crusade, teaching, call to conversion, liberation, witness, inculturation, dialogue, pilgrimage, prophecy (*On Being a Missionary Today*, ROBERT P. MALONEY, *He Hears the Cry of the Poor*, 1995, p. 118s.).

Personally, the definition and program of the mission that I prefer are the ones given by St. Vincent about 350 years ago:

“It’s true, then, that I’m sent not only to love God but to make Him loved. It’s not enough for me to love God, if my neighbor doesn’t love Him” (12, 215).

I believe that this Vincentian “paradigm” will always remain modern and true. We are called to use this “oar” too, if we want to move to deep waters without fear.

St. Vincent wrote to Charles Nacquart, appointed to the mission of Madagascar:

“Go then, Monsieur, and since your mission is from God, through those who represent Him for you on earth, cast your nets boldly” (3/22/1648).

We too must go to the sea of the world casting the nets of the love of God, pushing us always to advance with full sails in the wind and rowing hard. It could very well happen that our actions could give very little or no fruit. Should we then feel discouraged, let us meditate on the words that Saint Vincent wrote to Father Anthony Fleury, who was sent on a difficult mission to Saintes:

“[You must] be convinced that God asks of you only that you cast your nets into the sea, and not that you catch the fish, because it is up to Him to make them go into the net. Have no doubt that He will do so if, having fished all night long despite the difficulties of the undertaking and the hardness of people’s hearts – almost all asleep to the things of God – you wait patiently for day to come, for the Sun of Justice to awaken them, and for His light to illuminate and warm them. To this work and patience, you must join humility, prayer, and good example; then you will see the glory of the Savior” (11/6/1658).

Allow me, in concluding my presentation, to share with you some of the occasions where I was able to see “the glory of the Savior” in a Muslim land. These were moments when I found the universality of our mission confirmed and corroborated.

In all simplicity I can say that during the time I spent in Turkey, I didn’t have any other goal or interest or desire in discussions with my Muslim friends other than this: to make known the love God has for each one of them, and to help them discover how much they are loved by His unconditional, freely given love. I was not so much concerned if they shared my beliefs in Jesus: I was more concerned that they felt Jesus’ love, that this love could reach them through myself, and that the image that they had of God opened and became more complete: that they not only respected or feared God, but that they came to love Him.

One day one of my young friends asked me in amazement: “Why do you worry about me? I am not even a Christian. Why do you waste time with me, listening to my ordinary things and problems? You should take care of young Christians!”. I could reply to him: “Because we are all, even you, creatures of God, and we all have the right to His love”.

The same young person, on another occasion, shared with me this personal thought that instantly paid me back for all the labor I had done with the sail and the oars, deprived of my certainties. He said to me: “I always prayed to God: Please, show me the right way, do not allow me to go astray and lose your way... And He made me meet you... and now I love Him very, very much”.

I acknowledge that I am privileged. The Lord knew that I would be in Turkey for a short time only and granted me graces in a concentrated and intense time. I certainly do not claim that it happens like this all the time or that these feed-backs be so evident. But since my presentation may sound a bit idealistic or naive, I decided to share with you some of the blessings that God has given to me in concrete experiences because I am firmly convinced that, as I read somewhere, "All that exists is by definition possible".

Thank you for your attention and patience in listening to me.