

St. Vincent de Paul and Lay Ministry

*by John Prager, C.M.
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One of the biggest challenges facing the Catholic Church at the beginning of the new millennium is the situation of the laity and lay ministry. Great advances have been made since Vatican II. But, there has been resistance to lay participation in ministry and decision-making in the Church. The Holy See has given conflicting signals about the role of lay ministers. There are many questions being raised about lay ministry by pastors, theologians and the lay men and women themselves. Many of these questions touch the Vincentian Family and will affect the way we collaborate in the future.

So, it is a legitimate question at the beginning of this presentation to ask: why go back to the 17th century? We cannot expect St. Vincent to have all of the answers for the problems of today. There are some similarities between the post-Tridentine Church which Vincent knew and the post-Vatican II Church that is our own. But, there are also many differences. It is too simplistic to say: “Vincent did this, therefore we will do the same.”

Whenever we look back to the past for insight into present-day realities there is a danger of creating something that never existed. That is particularly true for the topic of today’s conference because St. Vincent never gives a systematic presentation of his ideas on lay ministry. It is easy enough to avoid the data which contradicts my point of view and create a St. Vincent as I wish him to be, rather than as he was. I have tried to keep that in mind with this presentation.

I think St. Vincent is a starting point. He lived the Vincentian charism in the 17th century with certain sensitivities toward the problems of his time. For his followers in the 21st century he indicates a direction. We need take up some of those Vincentian sensitivities and look at them from our own perspective. Some of the saint’s insights need to be developed in a new context and perhaps taken in new directions. In this presentation I just want to point out some of the Vincentian sensitivities which might orient our own collaboration with lay ministers.

1. A Missionary Ecclesiology¹

¹ Some of these ideas were developed in another article: “St. Vincent and the Laity,” *Vincentiana* 29 (1985), pp. 306-316.

The place of the laity in the Church is fundamentally an ecclesiological question. The way one understands the Church will indicate the way one understands its ministers and members.² That was just as true in Vincent's time as today. The New Testament presents many images of the Church. Perhaps it is an oversimplification, but for the sake of brevity I would like to reduce the images to two general themes: those that are aimed at community building, or inner-oriented and those whose thrust is missionary, or oriented outward. These two models are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. Christian communities need to look out as well in; missionaries inevitably form communities. Nonetheless, in practice, one or the other thrust will be emphasized.

Vincent de Paul was active in the years after the Council of Trent. Like most of his contemporaries in the age of the Catholic Reform, the saint was influenced by the decisions of Trent. Many of his projects (clerical reform, missions, etc) grew out of the concerns of the Council.

The fathers at Trent never directly addressed the issue of lay ministry. Their agenda was affected by the need to reform abuses in the Church and the struggle with Protestantism. The strong criticisms by the Protestant reformers of the Catholic sacramental system and practice moved the bishops to focus on priestly ministry. The need to reform abuses caused them to ask the question: How do we organize the Christian community better? The response of the Council centered around a well organized community, directed by the hierarchy and a better trained clergy. The ecclesiology of the Council was inner-directed. In that context the laity became passive recipients of ministry.

Vincent shared some of the concerns of the post-Tridentine reformers. But his own missionary experience colored his ecclesiology. The fundamental question for him became not, how do we organize the community, but rather, how do we evangelize the poor? It is a shift to a missionary model of the Church. That missionary ecclesiology in turn raised the question of lay ministry. St. Vincent began to understand the interest of lay men and women in service as an opportunity to go out to the poor in new ways. So, he begins to find ways to include them in ministry.

Lay Ministry: Threat or Opportunity?

St Vincent once wrote:

Our little Company has given itself to God for the corporal and spiritual service of the poor, and this from its beginnings, so that at

² Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, (NY: Harper, 1974), p. 150ff.

the same time that it was working for the salvation of souls in the missions, it was looking for a way to assist the sick with the Confraternities of Charity.... The Ladies of Charity of Paris are also a testimony to the grace of our vocation to contribute by them to a greater number of good works within and outside the city (SV VIII, 238).

He goes on to state that the Daughters of Charity are a means given us by God *to do through their hands what we cannot do with our own* (SV VIII, 239).

In this interesting letter to Jacques de la Fosse, St. Vincent is describing the unity among the different groups that flows from the Vincentian charism. Even more interesting is the fact that he is pointing out that vocation of the laity. He recognizes that they have a vocation rooted in baptism and the common call to follow Jesus, evangelizing the poor (SV XIII, 793-794). They participate in the mission of Christ because they do what he did (SV XIII, 809). Lay ministry becomes a golden opportunity and not a threat.

Since Vatican II lay ministry has made great strides. But it has also met with great resistance in some quarters, even within the Vincentian Family. Most of the resistance has arisen because openness to lay participation in the Church always means rethinking the role of the hierarchy and repositioning the clergy. For some people those changes are a threat to status, authority and lifestyle. So, the reaction has been for some to look for ways to maintain the status quo. You can see this in some of the recent theological reflection which emphasizes the ontological differences between clerics and laity and the almost exclusive emphasis on the secular role of the laity.

If lay ministry in the Church and in the Vincentian Family is going to take on a new face in the new millennium, it has to begin with an adequate starting point. Vincent de Paul points us in the same direction as the Second Vatican Council. The Council began its reflection on the Church by emphasizing the common Christian vocation before addressing the question of priestly and lay ministry. The two great symbols mentioned in the conciliar documents are the People of God and the Priesthood of all believers (*LG* 35). The common grounding in baptism paves the way for an adequate understanding of all followers of Jesus, lay or clerics. All are called to discipleship and all share in Christ's ministry as priest, prophet and king.³

Christifideles Laici reiterates the Council's teaching that the Church has a secular dimension because it lives in the world and is concerned about the

³ Kenan Osborne, *Ministry: Lay Ministry in The Roman Catholic Church* (Paulist, 1992), p. 537.

renewal of the temporal order. All are called to participate in this secular dimension, but for the laity this is their particular place for living out their vocation (*CL 15*). I would just like to point out that the official documents of the Church highlight the secular activity of the laity, but do not limit them to that sphere. The same documents also mention the possibility of lay participation in the Church as ministers. So, their service is not solely **ad extra** but also **ad intra**. They have a role in the Church as well as in the world. Some theologies have attempted to exclude the laity from having an effective voice in the Church by over-emphasizing the secular character of the lay vocation. That distorts not only the vision of lay ministry, but also clerical ministry.

2. Vincentian Sensitivities

I would like to point out some of the Vincentian sensitivities which might be helpful today for developing lay ministry.

A. The Experience of the Poor

The fundamental Vincentian experience is the encounter with Christ present in the poor. That was the crucible in which St. Vincent discovered the direction for his own life and the lives of his followers. Every one of the Vincentian institutions — Daughters of Charity, Congregation of the Mission and Confraternities of Charity — has as its goal the corporal and spiritual service of the poor. Vincent leads people to the poor. That is why he insists that the members of the Confraternity visit the poor in their homes (*SV XII, 523-524*). These visits enable the members to know the poor and see reality from a different angle, the perspective of the people on the margins. He wants people to go out to the periphery of society and encounter the poor who dwell there.

B Integral Liberation

The encounter with the poor should lead to solidarity with the afflicted members of Christ. Spiritual and corporal service are not two separate ends, but rather different parts of a holistic evangelization. It is a response to the needs of our brothers and sisters on all levels.

According to St Vincent: *It can be said that to evangelize the poor is not only to be understood as teaching the mysteries necessary for salvation, but rather making the Gospel effective (SV XII, 84).*

Solidarity with the poor is the concrete expression of Christian charity. That charity takes multiple forms: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, community organization, defense of human rights, the works of justice. Vincent

begins with the needs of the poor and develops an appropriate response. In each case his concern is to liberate people from the evil which afflicts their lives. It is Good News because it responds to the bad news the poor experience daily.

C. Vincentian Spirituality

In St. Vincent's experience the encounter with the poor led to his encounter with Christ. By leading his followers to the poor, he leads them to Christ. He wants them to find Christ in the poor. That is never a self-evident event. The poor are *sacraments* of Christ. That is why St. Vincent will emphasize the importance of prayer and reflection (SV X, 822). They are the means for discovering Christ in the situations of ministry.

Vincentian spirituality is secular. That means that one comes to holiness in the world of the poor and through relationships with them. As one reflects on the encounter with Christ and the poor, one becomes aware of the need to grow in charity, humility and simplicity. That is what Vincent means when he says that the Vincentian laity need to acquire the virtues necessary for their state (SV X, 823).

This secular, Vincentian spirituality is the greatest gift we can share with the Vincentian laity. That does not mean reading them a conference from St. Vincent. Rather, following St. Vincent's example, that means helping them to discover Christ's presence in their experience of service to the poor.

D. Creating Spaces

The early Confraternities of Charity, and later the Ladies of Charity, were creative experiments in lay ministry. The post-Tridentine Church was not noted for including lay people in ministry. St. Vincent creates spaces for them to work and gives them useful and meaningful ministry. He goes beyond the expected limits and creates something new and vibrant. They begin to do things that had not often been done before.

In order to do that he had to change expectations, to explore new paths and to create new structures. Including them in a meaningful way meant repositioning himself as servant of the poor. He does not make all of the decisions. He does not do all of the work. He consults them on everything, giving them a voice in the process of making decisions. In the case of the Confraternities, most of the responsibility for the direction and ministry of the group falls on the members. He trusts the lay ministers because he views them as collaborators in the same evangelizing mission. So, he is not too concerned about maintaining his authority and position. He looks for ways to open spaces for the

laity.

Opening spaces for the laity involves more than finding new jobs for them to do. It means being humble enough to step back and allow the laity to step forward. It means changing attitudes and actions among the laity, but also among the clergy and religious.

E. Women in Ministry

Women in the 17th century had two alternatives: matrimony or the monastery. There was no recognized form of ministry for laywomen. Vincent de Paul knew that situation. *For eight hundred years women have had no public office in the Church*, he tells the Ladies of Charity (SV XIII, 809-810). But, he goes on to say: *In the present moment, this same Providence is directing itself to some of you in order to provide for the needs of the sick in the hospital* (SV XII, 810). God himself is calling women to ministry and discipleship. They have a mission in the Church equal to that of the men. So, he begins to look for ways to include them in the service of the poor.

The Church of our own day has been criticized for insensitivity to women and their concerns. One might rightly ask: *How can the Vincentian Family discover new ways to include women in its mission as equal collaborators?*

F. Formation

Vincent's role in the formation of the clergy is well known. He also contributed to the formation of lay ministers. He did that mostly through his conferences, homilies and letters. In the process he shared a broad vision. He spoke to them about the theology and practice of service. He offered new insights into the Gospel, the teaching of the Church and following Jesus. Little by little, he hoped to make them more capable as ministers.

Lack of formation is one of the biggest roadblocks to lay participation in ministry.⁴ If we intend in the Vincentian Family to truly collaborate then we have to provide better formation. Vincent's example of offering a broader vision points the way. *How can we provide a grounding in the Vincentian tradition, the social teaching of the Church and other things necessary for lay ministers?*

G A Sense of Community

Vincent de Paul never sent people to work alone. Unorganized, solitary

⁴ W. Rademacher, *Lay Ministry: A Theological, Spiritual, Pastoral Handbook* (New York: Crossroads, 1991)

charity tends to fall apart quickly. He provided structures that would enable people to work as a team. The beginnings of the Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon were an attempt to organize lay people to work together.

Vincent's concern is not simply pastoral effectiveness. He tells the Ladies of Charity that they will *love each other as sisters whom God has united in the bond of love* (SV XIII, 422). They have to pray for one another and *warm each other with the warmth of God* (SV XIII, 771). He is trying to create a common spirit, a sense of belonging, which will animate all of the members.

There is a dimension of community that needs to be developed at the local level. The members of any Vincentian group have to create a common spirit through shared values, history and experiences. The means are many and varied: meetings, shared prayer, pastoral reflection, retreats, etc. But, there is also a need to create a sense of belonging to the wider Vincentian Family. Ways of working together have to be explored. More than anything else, opportunities for knowing the members of the other branches of the Family have to be provided.

Conclusion

Vincent de Paul gives us many examples of collaboration with lay ministers. As the Vincentian Family looks to recapture that collaborative spirit, reflection on his example can provide us with some useful elements which can be developed in new ways today.