

Love is Creative Even to Infinity **— On the Eucharist in the Vincentian Tradition —**

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Within our Family, we often cite the saying of St. Vincent: “Love is creative even to infinity.”¹ Ordinarily, we use this citation to motivate others to be creative pastorally, to respond to new forms of poverty, to be inventive in new formation programs for lay leaders and for the clergy, to investigate ways of rooting out the causes of poverty. But apt as this rhetorical use of Vincent’s words might be, their actual context was quite different. They refer to the institution of the Eucharist. Vincent, in speaking to a dying brother in 1645, exhorted him to think of God’s mercy. After describing many of the signs of God’s tender love, he told the brother that Jesus, foreseeing his death, did not want to leave his followers alone. He feared that in his absence their hearts would grow cold. And so, he tells the brother, “since love is creative even to infinity ... he instituted this venerable sacrament which serves as food and drink for us ... Because love is eager to do everything it can, he so willed it.”²

In this article I offer some reflections on the Eucharist in the Vincentian tradition.³ Following a methodology I have used on many other occasions, I will divide these reflections into three parts:

- I. The Eucharist in the life and writings of St. Vincent
- II. Some horizon shifts between the 17th and 20th centuries
- III. Some reflections, in a Vincentian context, on the Eucharist today

I. The Eucharist in the Life And Writings of St. Vincent

Vincent was not a systematic theologian. His works rarely articulate an orderly, well-developed theological analysis of the questions he is addressing. Most of his letters and conferences aim at motivating his audience and suggesting practical ways

¹SV XI, 146.

²SV XI, 146.

³Somewhat surprisingly, the bibliography on St. Vincent and the Eucharist is not abundant. I found the following works particularly helpful: Rafael Sáinz, “Eucaristía” in *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Vicenciana* (Salamanca: CEME, 1995) 227-232; Jean-Pierre Renouard, “L’Eucharistie à la lumière de la spiritualité de Saint Vincent” in *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France* (No. 178; July 2001) 16-23; Etienne Diebold, “Notre 'héritage eucharistique' selon Saint Vincent” in *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France* (No. 79; April 1981) 1-10. There are many other brief treatments of this matter in biographies of St. Vincent and other books on his spirituality.

of living out the theme that he is writing or speaking about. Only occasionally, as when addressing the Daughters of Charity about mortification and about prayer, does he offer detailed explanations about a subject, but even these presentations are not original; they simply follow the standard authors of the time.

While from a theoretical point of view Vincent is seldom innovative, his talks and writings show eminent common sense, deep conviction, instinctive insight into human nature, and much insistence about putting things into practice. Vincent's reflections on the Eucharist illustrate this well. Below I offer eight of the principal points he touches on in scattered treatments of the Eucharist. In doing so, I make no effort to systematize what Vincent, I suspect, never intended to systematize.

1. The Eucharist is the center of “religion” and of “devotion.”

For Vincent, the Eucharist is the Lord's testament to his Church. It is the ultimate sign of his love, the source from which the ongoing life of the Church springs. It is also the center of “religion”⁴ and the foundation of “devotion,”⁵ joining us to Christ's love of God his Father.

“Religion” and “devotion” have special meanings in Vincent's writings, as well as in those of many of his contemporaries. With notable precision Vincent states in one of his letters that Jesus' psychology is caught up in two all-consuming directions, “his filial relationship (*religion*, in French) with the Father and his charity toward the neighbor.”⁶ Bérulle, Olier, and other members of the French School speak of “religion” as the basic response of the human person before God, an attitude of adoration, of total consecration of oneself to God.⁷ In a parallel manner St. Vincent, in an early sermon on Communion, speaks of the Eucharist as the “true foundation and center of religion.”⁸

Speaking to the Daughters of Charity, he also calls the Eucharist “the center of devotion.”⁹ Here, Francis de Sales' influence on Vincent seems evident. Francis stresses the heart, describing devotion as prompt, eager, active love.¹⁰ This contrasts somewhat from Bérulle's more sober use of the term “religion.”¹¹ Vincent assimilated

⁴SV XIII, 32.

⁵SV IX, 5.

⁶SV VI, 393.

⁷Raymond Deville, *L'École française de spiritualité* (Paris: Desclée, 1987) 103-104.

⁸SV XIII, 32.

⁹SV IX, 5.

¹⁰André Dodin, *François de Sales - Vincent de Paul, les deux amis* (Paris: O.E.I.L., 1984) 18.

¹¹One finds a similar emphasis on “devotion” in the writing of John Eudes. Cf., *Bérulle and the French School, Selected Writings*, edited with an introduction by William M. Thompson (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 39.

both Bérulle's and Francis' thought and vocabulary in speaking about the Eucharist.

2. It is a seed of the resurrection.¹²

Recalling the sixth chapter of John's gospel, Vincent states that we will rise to new and unending life if we are nourished by the body and blood of the Lord. He reminds his listeners, however, that they must not simply receive the Eucharist, but must receive it well. Citing the words of St. Paul,¹³ he states that those who receive the Eucharist unworthily are guilty of the death of the Lord.

His emphasis on the Eucharist as a sharing in Jesus' risen life is rather striking since, while Vincent often writes of the cross,¹⁴ references to the resurrection are relatively rare in his works. In the second of two early sermons on Communion, Vincent, speaking about the Last Supper and also making an allusion to John's sixth chapter, states, "from this we conclude that we will rise and will have eternal life" if we partake of the Lord's flesh.¹⁵

3. It is not just the priest who offers the Eucharistic sacrifice. All who take part do so.¹⁶

Vincent places strong emphasis on the dispositions of those who join in the Eucharist. He tells the Daughters of Charity to go to Mass every day, but to do so with great devotion. He recalls to them the example of Madame Pavillon, whose devotion everyone in her parish admired. She walked in the presence of God, he states. When at Mass, she seemed almost insensible to everything else.¹⁷

In this context, Vincent expresses his desire that the sisters be well instructed about the meaning of the Eucharist. In language that rings well in a post-Vatican II context, he insists on active participation, stating that all who take part in the Eucharist offer the sacrifice of the Lord, not just the priest.¹⁸

To encourage others to participate well in the Eucharist, Vincent puts great emphasis on preparation. With charming imagery, he states in one of the few sermons of his which are extant:

¹²SV XIII, 34.

¹³1 Cor 11:27-29.

¹⁴Cf. Robert P. Maloney, *He Hears the Cry of the Poor* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1995) 30-51.

¹⁵SV XIII, 34.

¹⁶SV IX, 5.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

Whoever who has to receive someone greater than himself is troubled and takes great care in thinking of how to receive him worthily. He prepares his house, cleans it, decorates it, arranges it, gives orders that there be nothing ugly in it. He has to send to the butcher for meat, to the hunt for game, and there are a thousand other cares that he has. Yet, for Our Lord, none of that is necessary: no work, nor embarrassment; but, without moving, each one can dispose himself, thinking only in his heart to empty the trash of his soul by contrition and by making a firm proposal to offend God no longer.¹⁹

4. The Eucharist involves praise and thanksgiving.²⁰

Vincent encourages the priests and brothers of the Congregation to use the celebration of the Eucharist as an occasion for giving thanks to God for the daily gifts that he bestows on the Congregation. He speaks of the Eucharist as a source of “praise and glory.”²¹

He tells the Daughters of Charity that, if we participate well in the Eucharist, we will be careful to render thanks to God. Vincent adds that, if we are faithful in giving thanks at the Eucharist, we will continually draw down on ourselves new grace and will ascend to a higher degree of perfection and love.²²

5. It is food²³ and medicine,²⁴ a school of love and a source of peace.

Vincent frequently uses the word “nourishment”²⁵ when he speaks of the Eucharist. Just as bread and wine nourish the body, so too do the consecrated gifts nourish the soul.

The Eucharist too for Vincent is an antidote, a medicine, a remedy²⁶ for our spiritual weakness. He also describes the Eucharist as a source of pardon for sinners.²⁷

¹⁹SV XIII, 37.

²⁰SV XI, 165.

²¹SV III, 371.

²²SV IX, 339.

²³SV XIII, 34.

²⁴SV III, 371; XIII, 32.

²⁵SV XIII, 34.

²⁶SV III, 371.

²⁷*Ibid.*

Vincent states that the Eucharist is the “most efficacious remedy” against spiritual ills.²⁸

He tells the Daughters that they must go to the Eucharist to study “love, mutual support, cordiality.”²⁹ At the school of the Eucharist they will learn all the virtues that are necessary to help the poor.

Speaking of the Eucharist, St. Vincent tells the Daughters of Charity: “What a grace, my daughters! to be certain that we are regarded by God, considered by God, loved by God.”³⁰

The Eucharist will be, he also tells the Daughters, a source of peace and tranquillity of heart for them. It will give them confidence that they are truly united with God.³¹ On the contrary, Vincent often warns against receiving Communion when the sisters live in discord,³² citing Matthew 5:23-24: “If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother or sister has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

6. It makes us one with God.³³

Vincent tells the Daughters of Charity that, if we receive the Eucharist well, we become “*une même chose*” with God. He speaks very eloquently: “My Daughters, one of the benefits we derive from making a good Communion is that we become one with God. What! a poor Daughter of Charity, who before her communion is merely what she is, that is to say, a thing not worth very much, now becomes one with God! Ah! my daughters, who would be willing to neglect such a boon? Oh! what a grace! What do you think it is, my daughters, but a pledge of eternity! Could we, my dear sisters, comprehend anything grander! Oh, now, it is impossible for anything greater than that a poor wretched creature is united with God; oh! may he be forever blessed!”³⁴

7. It is the source of effective evangelization.³⁵

²⁸SV IX, 298.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰SV IX, 333.

³¹SV IX, 237.

³²SV IX, 101.

³³SV IX, 237.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵SV IX, 239; cf. also, IX, 339.

Vincent tells the Daughters that it is at the Eucharist they will really learn how to love: “Go to the Eucharist in the name of God! It is there that you must go in order to study Love!”³⁶ He also says to them: “When you see a Sister of Charity serve the sick with love, gentleness and great care, you can say without hesitation: ‘this sister has communicated well.’”³⁷ He says similarly to the members of the Congregation: “Do you not feel, my brothers, do you not feel this divine fire burning within you when you have received the adorable body of Jesus Christ in Communion?”³⁸

Vincent often tells the Daughters of Charity that they should serve the poor not just corporally, but spiritually too. The Eucharist will provide them with the wisdom and courage they need in order to bring words of faith, hope and consolation to the abandoned. In a conference given on January 22, 1646, St. Vincent states: “Do you think, my daughters, that God merely expects you to bring his poor a morsel of bread, a scrap of meat, some soup and medicine? Oh! no, no, no, my daughters, that was not his design when he chose you for all eternity to render him the services which you render him in the person of the poor; he expects you to provide for the needs of the soul as well as for those of the body. They are in need of the heavenly manna; they are in need of the Spirit of God, and where will you find it so that you may communicate it to them? In Holy Communion, my daughters.”³⁹

8. The fundamental disposition for celebrating the Eucharist is “a lively understanding of the love that God has shown us in this sacrament and a corresponding, reciprocal love on our part.”⁴⁰

Basically, St. Vincent urges those who are celebrating the Eucharist to have the mind of Christ, stating that we must conform ourselves, as far as possible, with Jesus as he offered himself in sacrifice to his eternal Father.⁴¹

Emphasizing this point at the end of a conference to the Daughters of Charity on October 22, 1646, St. Vincent prays aloud:

My Lord and my God, Jesus Christ, my Savior, most amiable and loving of all men, you who practiced charity and forbearance incomparably more than all men taken together, you who received more wrongs and insults and felt least resentment. Listen, if it should please you, to the most humble prayer we offer you, that you may be pleased to impart to this Company the spirit of charity with which you were inflamed and the

³⁶SV III, 298.

³⁷SV IX, 333.

³⁸Abelly, III, 77.

³⁹SV XI, 239.

⁴⁰SV XIII, 31.

⁴¹SV XI, 93.

*spirit of meekness and forbearance which you displayed toward your enemies, in order that, by the practice of these virtues, the eternal designs of the adorable will of God may be accomplished in this Company, so that it may glorify God by imitating you and win, by its example, souls to your service and, above all else, my God, that your Company, by mutual forbearance, may be pleasing to you.*⁴²

The Eucharist must be offered, St. Vincent emphasizes, in the same spirit in which Jesus offered himself to his Father.⁴³ In a conference to the priests and brothers of the Mission, Vincent states that, in celebrating the Eucharist, we must have, as far as possible, the dispositions that Jesus himself had in offering his sacrifice.⁴⁴ Here again he returns to the theme of devotion, stating that we must not just celebrate the Eucharist, but must do it with the greatest devotion possible.⁴⁵

II. Some Horizon Shifts Between the 17th and 20th Centuries

Enormous changes have taken place in Eucharistic theology since the time of St. Vincent. He lived in a post-Tridentine era when much theology, both on the Catholic and Protestant sides, had a decidedly polemical tone. We live in an ecumenical era in which the partners in dialogue are committed to greater mutual understanding.

During Vincent's lifetime a raging controversy took place concerning frequent communion, an issue resolved definitively only at the beginning of the 20st century. Vincent's friend, the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, falling under the spell of Jansenism, became one of the principal proponents of the need for extremely high dispositions for receiving communion and consequently the need to keep putting it off. Vincent was called upon to testify against him⁴⁶ in 1639. In 1648 Vincent wrote a long letter to Jean Dehorgny in which he refutes, in considerable detail, the doctrine presented by another proponent of Jansenism, Antoine Arnauld, in his book *On Frequent Communion*,⁴⁷ in which the latter repeats many of the ideas of Saint-Cyran. It is interesting to note that Vincent, contrary to the currents of his time, recommended frequent and even daily communion.

For the sake of brevity, let me mention here just three of the most significant

⁴²SV IX, 298-299.

⁴³SV XI, 93.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵SV IX, 5.

⁴⁶SV XIII, 86ff.

⁴⁷SV III, 362ff.

horizon shifts influencing this question that have taken place between the 17th and 20th centuries.

1. Modern scriptural studies.

Since Vincent's time, methodology in biblical interpretation has changed notably. A number of factors have contributed to this shift: the rediscovery of ancient pre-biblical, biblical, and post-biblical texts; the development of a historical-critical methodology; archeological investigation; and ecumenical dialogue in regard to biblical questions, particularly with mainline Protestant churches. These developments have led to a deeper understanding of many biblical texts, including those concerning the Hebrew background for thanksgiving meals and the Eucharistic narratives in the New Testament.

We reaped the benefits of these changes mainly in the latter part of the 20th century. In the Catholic tradition, the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) opened the door to rich, renewed biblical scholarship, which in turn significantly influenced Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*). These documents placed strong emphasis on the revealed word, on the unity between word and sacrament, on the relationship between Church and sacrament, and on the Eucharist as an active, participative celebration of the death and resurrection of the Lord.⁴⁸

2. The liturgical movement.

St. Vincent was very concerned about liturgy. He noted that priests in his era often celebrated Mass badly and that they hardly knew how to hear confessions. As part of the retreats for ordinands, he prescribed that they receive instruction on celebrating the liturgy well. But, within this positive context, he was still very much a man of his time. The emphasis of the era was on the exact observance of rubrics. There was little stress on liturgy as "communal celebration." Much of liturgy was private; in community houses, priests celebrated individual Masses each day, perhaps with a server. Liturgical celebrations were often regarded more as part of the priest's "personal piety" than of his leadership of a local community in prayer.

The liturgical movement, beginning in the latter part of the 19th century, aimed at promoting the full, active participation of all members of the Christian assembly, each according to his or her role. Through persevering efforts, scholars and pastors

⁴⁸Some of the more important works on the Scriptural Foundations of Eucharistic Theology are: Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Paulist Press, 1987); Jean Delorme et al., *The Eucharist in the New Testament: A Symposium*, trans. E. M. Stewart (Baltimore: Helicon, 1964); Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the Primitive Church* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1965); Edward Schweizer, *The Lord's Supper according to the New Testament*, trans. James Davis (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968).

like Prosper Guéranger, Lambert Beaudoin, Virgil Michel, Joseph Jungmann, Balthasar Fischer, H. A. Reinhold, Martin Hellriegel, Godfrey Diekmann, Frederick McManus Annibale Bugnini, Carlo Braga, and many others gradually renewed liturgical education and liturgical practice. The reforms that they promoted were adopted in Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*.

The liturgical movement⁴⁹ and the implementation of the Constitution on the Liturgy have changed attitudes and practices dramatically. The Constitution on the Liturgy proclaimed liturgy as the summit toward which the action of the Church tends and at the same time the fountain from which all virtue emanates.⁵⁰ The enormous energy that the Church has invested in liturgical reform over the last half century demonstrates how extremely important a role it plays in the life of the Christian community.⁵¹

In practice, the latter part of the 20th century saw remarkable changes in regard to the celebration of the Eucharist: the new rite of the Mass, vernacular liturgy, concelebration, communion under both kinds, a variety of Eucharistic prayers, a richer selection of scriptural readings, and many others.

3. Ecumenical dialogue.

The last 25 years have seen notable steps forward in building bridges and in mutual enrichment among Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist theological viewpoints concerning the Eucharist.⁵² The Eucharistic theology of the Orthodox Church, with its emphasis on communion (koinonia) has helped considerably in this dialogue.⁵³ From this theological perspective the Church celebrates and makes real, through the Eucharist, its communion with the Father, in the Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit. By the gift of Christ's Eucharistic love, the Church is freed from sin and its members are united with one another and with God. The community, called together by the Holy Spirit, gathers at the table of the Eucharist to celebrate a memorial sacrament of the saving death and resurrection of Christ.

⁴⁹For a very complete, detailed account of the pre-Vatican II stage of the liturgical movement as well as the conciliar and post-conciliar stages, cf. Annibale Bugnini, *La Riforma Liturgica* (Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche, 1983).

⁵⁰Sacrosanctum Concilium 10.

⁵¹The many official documents on this subject can be conveniently found in: Carlo Braga and Annibale Bugnini, *Documenta ad Instaurationem Liturgicam Spectantia 1903-1963* (Rome: CLV-Edizioni Liturgiche, 2000).

⁵²Cf. "The Eucharist: Final Report of the Joint Roman Catholic-Lutheran Commission, 1978," in *Growth in Agreement* 190-214; Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic International Study Commission, "Church and Justification: Understanding the Church in the Light of the Doctrine of Justification," no. 3, 3, *Information Service of the Secretariat for the Promoting of Christian Unity* 86 (1994) 128-81, at 142-43.

⁵³Cf. Joint International Commission for Roman Catholic/Orthodox Theological Dialogue, "The Church, the Eucharist and the Trinity," in *Origins* 12 (1982): 157-160.

Through ecumenical dialogue many long-standing divergences among the churches in regard to Eucharistic theology have already been overcome, and a formerly polemical atmosphere has been largely dissipated, at least among Catholics, Orthodox, and many mainstream Protestant churches.

III. Some Reflections, in a Vincentian Context, on the Eucharist Today

The new Constitutions of both the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity provide a brief, well-expressed compendium of the Eucharistic theology of Vatican II.

The text for the Congregation of the Mission reads:

Our life should be directed towards the daily celebration of the Lord's Supper as towards its summit, for from the Eucharist, as from a living source, flows the power of our apostolic activity and fraternal communion. Through the Eucharist, the death and resurrection of Christ are made present, we become in Christ a living offering, and the communion of the People of God is signified and brought about.⁵⁴

The Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity state:

Conscious of the vital importance of the Eucharist as the center of their life and mission, the sisters gather around it in a special way each day. There, Christians "are instructed by the word of God, refreshed at the table of the Lord's Body, and give him thanks" (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 48). In praising God, listening to his Word, entreating him, they do so not only in their own name but in the name of all mankind whose joys, hopes, sadness and anguish they bear (Gaudium et Spes, 1). They offer themselves with Jesus Christ in the mystery of his Paschal Sacrifice, so that finally God may be all in all.⁵⁵

As a supplement to these texts, I propose below some contemporary reflections on the Eucharist⁵⁶ for the members of our Vincentian Family, under six headings:

⁵⁴*Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission* 45, § 1.

⁵⁵*Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity* 2.12.

⁵⁶The reader might find the following works on contemporary Eucharistic Theology to be useful: Louis Bouyer, *Eucharist: The Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer*, trans. Charles Underhill Quinn (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968); Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Paulist Press, 1987); Enrico Mazza, *The Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1986); Nathan Mitchell, *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1982); David N. Power, *The Sacrifice We Offer: The Tridentine Dogma and Its Reinterpretation* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark; New York: Crossroad, 1987); Willy Rordorf et al., *The Eucharist of Early Christians*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1978); Edward Schillebeeckx, *The*

1. Gathering in the Spirit.

It is essential that Eucharistic theology be firmly rooted in the scriptures, in the great Eucharistic Prayers,⁵⁷ and in the accompanying symbolic actions which the Church has celebrated and handed on to us for almost two millennia.

From these sources, we are very conscious today that the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of the Church, gathered together in the Spirit to proclaim the death and resurrection of the Lord until he comes again.

The early Eucharistic Prayers of both the Eastern and Western Churches have in common, with some variations, the same basic structure: remembrance of the Lord (*anamnesis*) and invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*).⁵⁸ The narration of Jesus' institution of the Eucharist stands at the theological center of all the great Eucharistic Prayers: "On the night he was betrayed, he took bread, blessed it, broke it..." This narrative recounts the reason why we remember (*anamnesis*): Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of me"; it also re-presents what we do remember: Jesus' farewell meal with those whom he "loved to the end."⁵⁹ In conjunction with this narrative (sometimes before it and sometimes after it), the praying community calls upon (*epiclesis*) God the Father to send his Holy Spirit to sanctify the Eucharistic gifts and all those who receive them.

The traditional Eucharistic Prayers also share a common literary form of address: they are directed to the Father as the source of all gifts. With gratitude, those gathered together thank the Father for all that he has given us in Christ (remembrance), while calling upon him (invocation) to pour out his Spirit to sanctify the gifts of bread and wine, their recipients, and all humanity.⁶⁰

One of the newer Eucharistic Prayers⁶¹ illustrates rather clearly the basic structural elements found in the earlier Prayers (remembrance and invocation), as well as their common literary form of address (to the Father).

Eucharist (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968); Kevin Seasoltz, ed., *Living Bread, Saving Cup: Readings on the Eucharist*, rev. ed. (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1987). Many complete bibliographies on the theology of the Eucharist are available on Internet. Cf.: <http://camellia.shc.edu/theology/TheologyEucharist.htm>

⁵⁷David N. Power, "Eucharist," in *Systematic Theology, Roman Catholic Perspectives*, edited by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) II, 261ff.

⁵⁸Cf. A very interesting chart in John H. McKenna, *Eucharist and the Holy Spirit* (London: Alcuin Club Collections No. 57, 1975) 46-47.

⁵⁹Jn 13:1.

⁶⁰Edward Kilmartin, "Catholic Eucharistic Theology," in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 3, September 1994, 444.

⁶¹Eucharist Prayer for Various Needs and Occasions 4: Jesus the Compassion of God.

*Great and merciful Father, we ask you:
send down your Holy Spirit
to hallow these gifts of bread and wine,
that they may become for us
the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.
On the eve of his passion and death,
while at table with those he loved,
he took bread....*

While contemporary liturgy and theology place strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit, St. Vincent, who, like many others of his day, was deeply Christological, focuses very little on “pneumatology.” His extant writings rarely touch on the Holy Spirit and, even when they do, the references are made in passing and remain quite undeveloped.⁶²

St. Louise’s writings, on the other hand, often highlight the role of the Spirit, something remarkable in the context of the times. Her Pentecostal experience in 1623 was a turning point in her life and is part of the spiritual heritage that she has passed on to the Daughters of Charity.⁶³

So striking is Louise’s focus on the Holy Spirit that Calvet writes: “I dare to risk the word ‘pneumo-centrism’ to characterize the spirituality of Louise de Marillac. She is completely given over to the Spirit. She is a mystic of the Spirit. I merely cite for the reader – Calvet adds – these words: ‘The Spirit fills us with the pure love of God – the Spirit makes us docile to God and places us in the state of living the divine life.’”⁶⁴

Still, Louise’s “pneumo-centrism” is not specifically related to the Eucharist; it is more a facet of her own personal spirituality.

2. Recalling God’s saving acts in word and sacrament.

We know from anthropology that the identity of a people rests upon its story. Nations tell the stories of their founders or of a revolutionary struggle that brought them freedom. Such stories are commemorated on holidays and recounted at home

⁶²For an interesting article on this matter, cf. Benito Martínez, “Espíritu Santo” in *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Vicenciana* (Salamanca: CEME, 1995) 213-219.

⁶³“On the Feast of Pentecost, during holy Mass or while I was praying in the church, my mind was instantly freed of all doubt. I was assured ... that a time would come when I would be in a position to make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and that I would be part of a small community where others would do the same. I then understood that I would be in a place where I could help my neighbor but I did not understand how this would be possible since there was to be much coming and going. I was also assured that I should remain at peace concerning my director; that God would give me one whom he seemed to show me” (*Écrits Spirituels*, 3 [A. 2]).

⁶⁴Jean Calvet, *Sainte Louise de Marillac par elle-même* (Paris: Aubier, 1958) 204-205.

and in schools and history books. Often, a constitution sets down the guiding principles that gave birth to a nation and that will assure its continuity. For religions, foundational stories are recounted again and again by believers at home, in churches and schools and in books like the Bible or the Koran.

The Church rests upon the narrative of the death and resurrection of the Lord, which the Eucharist reenacts. It links to this narrative many other related stories: from the Old Testament, from the life of Jesus, from the early Christian community, from the first missions of the apostles. Other types of texts also accompany the narrative: wisdom literature, parables, hymns of praise and the stories of outstanding witnesses to the faith.

The celebration of the Eucharist, therefore, recalls God's saving deeds through word and sacramental rites. Word and sacrament are essentially linked; in fact, all sacraments use words to accompany and express the meaning of ritual signs. For that reason, the table ritual of the Eucharist is always accompanied by story and vocal prayer.

For the members of the Vincentian Family, it is important to note the huge emphasis that St. Vincent placed on the word of God. He was convinced that the word of God never fails. It is like a "house built upon rock."⁶⁵ He often begins the chapters of the rules he wrote, and many individual paragraphs, with a citation from scripture. He asks that a chapter of the New Testament be read by the members of his communities every day. In a colorful passage Abelly, his first biographer, notes how devoted St. Vincent was to listening to the word of God: "He seemed to suck meaning from passages of the scriptures as a baby sucks milk from its mother, and he extracted the core and substance from the scriptures so as to be strengthened and have his soul nourished by them — and he did this in such a way that in all his words and actions he appeared to be filled with Jesus Christ."⁶⁶ In a conference on the "Gospel Teachings," given to the members of the Congregation of the Mission on February 14, 1659, Vincent holds up Mary as the ideal listener to the word of God. "Better than anyone else," he states, "she penetrated its substance and showed how it should be lived."⁶⁷

Once again, however, the context for focus on the word is not precisely the Eucharist; rather, it is the private reading of scripture.

3. The great commemorative prayer of thanksgiving and intercession.

Basically, the word Eucharistic means "thanksgiving." The New Testament repeats the word often with precisely this meaning.⁶⁸

⁶⁵CR II, 1.

⁶⁶Abelly, Book III, 72-73.

⁶⁷SV XII, 129.

⁶⁸Cf. 1 Cor 11:24; Mk 8:6; 14:23; Mt 15:36; 26:27; Lk 22:17; 24:30; Jn 6:11; Mk 6:41; 14:22; Mt 14:19; 26:26; Lk 9:15; 22:19.

Actually, the earliest name found in the New Testament designating the Eucharist is the Lord's Supper.⁶⁹ A second, and later, New Testament name is the "Breaking of the Bread."⁷⁰ Like the name *Eucharist*, these names too bring out important aspects of the spirituality expressed by the rites. The name Lord's Supper identifies the basic symbol of the Eucharistic celebration: it is a memorial meal in which the Lord himself is present in the midst of his people. The name "Breaking of the Bread" emphasizes the Eucharist as a sharing event in which the Lord communicates his life to his disciples and in which they are united with one another in him.

But from the earliest time Christians saw the Eucharist as a thanksgiving meal, in continuity with similar Hebrew meals and prayers. The celebrant begins every Eucharistic Prayer by crying out:

Celebrant: *Let us give thanks to the Lord Our God*
Assembly: *It is right to give him thanks and praise*
Celebrant: *Father, All Powerful and Ever-living God,*
we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks...

All of the classical Eucharistic Prayers express words of gratitude to God the Father, focusing on the gifts of creation and redemption. They center on the gift of his Son, who gave his life for all whom he loves.

As mentioned in the first part of this article (I, 4), gratitude is one of the themes that St. Vincent touches on when speaking or writing about the Eucharist, but his emphasis does not fall precisely on the Eucharistic Prayer as a prayer of thanksgiving for God's faithful love in the works of creation and redemption. Rather, he encourages the confreres and sisters to thank God, while they are at the Eucharist, for the gifts that they and their communities have received. Still, thanksgiving is a very important theme in St. Vincent's life and prayer. With striking forcefulness, he states that ingratitude is the "crime of crimes."⁷¹

4. Memorial of Jesus' sacrificial death.

In the Eucharistic Prayers the celebrant proclaims the words of the Lord: "This is my body which is *given up* for you" and "this is the cup of my blood ... which will be *shed* for you and for all for the forgiveness of sin."

The Eucharist proclaims a body given up, blood poured out. It reenacts the Lord's handing over of himself for us. The Eucharistic celebration sweeps us up into

⁶⁹1 Cor 11:20.

⁷⁰Lk 24:35; Acts 2:42.

⁷¹SV III, 37.

the mystery of faith in which Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. It proclaims the death of the Lord until he comes, while drawing us into Jesus' self-giving love.

In the Eucharist we believe that the Lord gives himself to us in his whole person, body and blood, because he loves us. He shares himself with us in the intimacy of the deepest friendship, giving us his life, his mind, his heart. He is really and fully present to us and in us in self-giving love.

St. Vincent clearly places considerable emphasis on the Eucharist as sacrifice. He writes in the *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*: "There can be no better way of paying the best honor possible to these mysteries (the Trinity and the Incarnation) than proper devotion to, and use of, the Blessed Eucharist, sacrament and sacrifice. It includes, as it were, all the other mysteries of faith and, by itself, leads those who receive Communion respectfully, or celebrate Mass properly, to holiness and, ultimately, to everlasting glory. In this way, God, Unity and Trinity, and the Incarnate Word are paid the greatest honor."⁷² Vincent is so convinced of the impact of this "sacrament and sacrifice" in conforming us to Christ that he consistently recommends to the priests and brothers of the Mission and to the Daughters of Charity that they celebrate the Eucharist daily,⁷³ as do the present Constitutions of both groups.⁷⁴

As noted in the first section of this article, Vincent emphasizes strongly that it is not just the priest who offers sacrifice at the Eucharist, but all the participants.

5. Communion in Christ's body and blood.

The basic symbol of the Eucharistic elements is food and drink. As John's gospel puts it: "My flesh is real food, my blood is real drink. The one who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him."⁷⁵ The Eucharist is a meal in which Jesus offers us nourishment for life's journey. It is the bread of wayfarers, the source of strength for the people of God as we walk on pilgrimage toward the Kingdom.

The structure of the celebration and the words of the traditional Eucharistic Prayers make it evident that this sacramental action, a memorial meal, culminates in

⁷²CR X, 3.

⁷³CR X, 6; cf. SV IX, 5.

⁷⁴*Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission* 45 § 1; *Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity* 2.12.

⁷⁵Jn 6:55-56. While scholars debate the origins, and at times the meaning of a number of verses in John 6:22-59, there is little doubt that the final version of John's gospel has clear Eucharistic references, especially John 6:51c-58. Cf. Francis J. Moloney, "Johannine Theology" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990) 1426.

eating and drinking: “Take and eat,” “Take and drink.” In doing so we enter into deeper communion with the Lord and, through him, with one another as his people.

St. Vincent’s extant writings place a very strong emphasis on communion: communion with the Lord in the Eucharist, communion with one another in community, and communion with the poor. Contrary to the Jansenists, he emphasizes frequent communion, stating that the Eucharist makes us “like Jesus Christ”⁷⁶ and unites us with one another in his love.

Practices recommended by St. Vincent, like visits⁷⁷ to the Blessed Sacrament and adoration of the exposed Sacrament (an image of which appears at the front of the first edition of the *Common Rules of the Congregation* in 1658, accompanied by the words, “O Salutaris Hostia”), are ways of refocusing on communion with the Lord at other moments of the day, besides the celebration of the Eucharist. The present-day *Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission* recommend these and/or other forms of “Eucharistic devotion” as extensions of Eucharistic piety.⁷⁸

6. A community sent out especially to the poor.

If the symbols are food and drink within the context of a sacrificial meal which recalls Jesus’ death until he comes again, then the goal is unity in the Lord’s life and unity in his mission. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.”⁷⁹ The *Didache*, written around 107, states: “Just as this bread which we break, once scattered over the hills, has been gathered and made one, so may your Church too be assembled from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom.”⁸⁰

The life of the Lord drives us out on mission, especially to the poorest of the poor. The preface one of the newer Eucharistic Prayers puts it quite eloquently:

*Father of mercy, faithful God
it is fitting that we offer you praise.
You sent Jesus Christ your Son among us
as redeemer and Lord.
He was moved with compassion
for the poor and the powerless,
for the sick and the sinner;*

⁷⁶SV IX, 238.

⁷⁷CR X, 3.

⁷⁸S 19.

⁷⁹1 Cor 10:17.

⁸⁰Didache 9:4.

*he made himself neighbor to the oppressed.
By his words and actions he proclaimed to the world
that you care for us as a father cares for his children.*

It is extremely important not to separate the Eucharistic narrative from other New Testament discourses about the Christian table.⁸¹ The Gospel of Luke and the Book of the Acts help us put the Eucharist in the context of a gathering in which Word, prayer, food, and possessions were shared.⁸² Luke tells us in his gospel⁸³: “Whenever you give a lunch or dinner ... invite beggars and the crippled, the lame and the blind. You should be pleased that they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid in the resurrection of the just.” In the Book of the Acts, he writes: “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to prayers ... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need. Each day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exaltation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people.”⁸⁴

St. John Chrysostom focuses on the relationship between the Eucharist and the poor with challenging words:

Do you wish to honor Christ’s body? Then do not look down upon him when you notice him naked among the poor; nor should you honor him here, in the temple, with fancy offerings, if when you leave you abandon him to his coldness and nakedness. Because the same One who said, “This is my body,” and with his word made manifest everything that he said, also affirmed: “I was hungry, and you did not feed me,” and later,

⁸¹There is much interesting literature on the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church’s mission to the poor: Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 1977); William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (New York: Blackwell, 1998); James Dallen, “Liturgy and Justice for All” in *Worship* 65 (1991) 290-306; James L. Empereur and Christopher G. Kiesling, *Liturgy That Does Justice*, Theology and Life Series 33 (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press [A Michael Glazier Book], 1990); Peter E. Fink, “The Challenge of God’s Koinonia” in *Worship* 59 (1985) 386-404; John C. Haughey, ed., *The Faith that Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977); Monika K. Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976); David N. Power, “Worship after the Holocaust” in *Worship* 49 (1985) 447-455; Gail Ramshaw, “The Place of Lament Within Praise: Theses for Discussion” in *Worship* 61 (1987) 317-322; Herman Schmidt and David Power, eds., *Politics and Liturgy*, Concilium: Religion in the Seventies (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974); Catherine Vincie, “The Cry for Justice and the Eucharist” in *Worship* 68 (1994) 194-210; Geoffrey Wainwright, “Eucharist and/as Ethics” in *Worship* 62 (1988) 123-138; Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Liturgy, Justice, and Tears” in *ibid.* 386-403.

⁸²Cf. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Eucharist and Community in First Corinthians,” in *Worship* 50 (1976): 370-385; 51 (1977) 56-69; Gerd Theissen, “Social Integration and Sacramental Activity: An Analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34,” in his *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, trans. J. H. Schutz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 145-174.

⁸³Lk 14:12-13.

⁸⁴Acts 2:42-47; cf. also, Acts 4:32ff.

*“whatever you failed to do for one of these little ones, you failed to do for me.”*⁸⁵

In this era when the Church focuses in a renewed way on its preferential option for the poor, the Eucharist should renew our bonds with the poor of our own community as well as with those in distant lands. Paul, having been sent out on mission by the Council of Jerusalem to preach to the Gentiles, states⁸⁶: “The only stipulation was that we should be mindful of the poor — the one thing that I was making every effort to do.”

As mentioned in the first part of this article (I, 7), Vincent saw the Eucharist as the source of effective evangelization. In other words, the Eucharist, in his mind, is connected with life and mission. It is the fountain of the missionary energy and of the missionary virtues that his followers are to bring to the service of the poor.

While it is clear that Vincent’s theological perspective on the Eucharist was, as one would expect, very much influenced by his era, nonetheless, it has tones that ring quite well in the ears of a modern-day teacher or preacher. He insists on the need for all to participate actively. He highlights not just the Lord’s death but also his resurrection. He underlines the importance of praise and thanksgiving at the Eucharist. He sees the Eucharist as food and medicine for our journey as pilgrims. He urges frequent communion, stressing that reception of the body and blood of the Lord is the source of union with him and with one another, and the wellspring of our mission, especially to the poor.

With his usual practical clarity of vision, Vincent recognized and repeated again and again that good dispositions are crucial for participants in the Eucharist. Those who take part badly gain nothing,⁸⁷ those who take part well are transformed.

Speaking eloquently during the course of a conference given on August 18, 1647, St. Vincent exclaims in response to a comment by a Daughter of Charity:

Oh! what a valuable remark! that a person who has made a good Communion, does everything else well. If Elias, endowed with a twofold spirit, wrought such wonders, what will not a person do who has God within her, who is filled with God? She will not be acting of herself; she will be doing the actions of Jesus Christ: she will tend the sick with the charity of Jesus Christ; she will have the sweetness of Jesus Christ in all her life and conversation; she will have the patience of Jesus Christ under trials; will have the obedience of Jesus Christ. In short, my

⁸⁵Chrysostom, in his homilies, often points out the close connection between sharing in the Eucharist and caring for the poor. Cf. Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, XLIX.

⁸⁶Gal 2:10.

⁸⁷SV IX, 331.

*daughters, all her actions will no longer be those of a mere creature, they will be the actions of Jesus Christ.*⁸⁸

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⁸⁸SV IX, 332-333.