

# STUDY

## Simplicity Revisited

by Robert P. Maloney

*Superior General*

Everyone needs a guiding star, but the stars in the sky are countless. Saints have chosen different ones. Francis of Assisi fixed on the Divine Presence as he saw it in the gifts of creation, praising God in “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon.” Jerome focused on the scriptures: “Love the holy scriptures, and wisdom will love you.”<sup>1</sup> John Gabriel Perboyre’s star, I sense, was providence. “I love the mystery of providence,” he wrote.<sup>2</sup> For Catherine Labouré, Mary conceived without sin was the star leading her to Christ. For Vincent de Paul, truth, or what he called simplicity, became more and more, as the years of his life passed by, the star that guided him to know what to say and do.

I have often written about simplicity, sometimes at considerable length.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I will try not to repeat what I have said on other occasions, though I recognize that some repetition is inevitable. Rather, I will describe simplicity as a guiding star, a master key for the entire spiritual journey.

I will not disguise my motive for returning to this theme today: I become ever more convinced of its importance in the Vincentian spiritual journey. “It is the virtue I love most,” St. Vincent wrote to his confrere, François de Coudray.<sup>4</sup> “It is my gospel,” he told the Daughters of Charity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ST. JEROME, *EP* 130.20; CSEL 56.3.201.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, p. 119. A total of 102 letters were annotated and published by Joseph Van Den Brandt in a very limited edition at Beijing in 1940.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. “Five Characteristic Virtues: Yesterday and Today,” in R.P. MALONEY, *The Way of St. Vincent de Paul* (New York: New City Press, 1992) 37-69; “Simplicity in the Life of the Daughter of Charity,” in *He Hears the Cry of the Poor* (New York: New City Press, 1995) 144-151; “Sencillez,” in *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Vicenciana* (Salamanca: CEME, 1995) 565-570.

<sup>4</sup> SV I, 284.

<sup>5</sup> SV IX, 606.

There are many contemporary ways of describing simplicity: authenticity, integrity, genuineness, realness, passion for the truth. This article will focus first on simplicity as “being in the truth” with God, with oneself, with others, and with the created universe surrounding us. It will then examine some of the dilemmas involved in combining the simplicity of the dove with the prudence of the serpent.

### I. Simplicity as “Being in the Truth”

There is a wonderful freedom in those who live simply. They project joy and wholeness in blending integrity in life’s essential relationships: with God, with others, with oneself, and with the created universe. St. Vincent said, basically, that they are very lovable! One of the most popular hymns in the English-speaking world proclaims:

*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.<sup>6</sup>*

Here, in the first part of this article, I will examine the implications of “being in the truth” in the four basic relationships of the human person.

#### 1. *Being in the truth with God*

God is the center of our lives, the beginning and end of our being. Simplicity involves making God our ultimate concern, identifying our will with his. St. Vincent remarked to Louise de Marillac, rather wryly: “How easy it is to become a saint. All that is necessary is to do the will of God in everything.”<sup>7</sup>

For the simple person the Kingdom of God becomes the focal point that orients life, the ideal that integrates all that he or she is and does, the principle that unifies all sentiments, thoughts, words, acts. The simple person’s life finds its center in Jesus and the Kingdom he preached.

Of course, growth in simplicity before God is a lifelong process. Our sinfulness continually fractures, in greater or lesser degrees, our unity with God’s purposes. Limited objectives like power, sex, money, and self-promotion easily intrude on our single-minded pursuit of God’s Kingdom; even worse, they at times substitute for it. In our

<sup>6</sup> JOSEPH BRACKETT, “Simple Gifts” (1848).

<sup>7</sup> SV II, 36.

sinful condition, we are never able to pull our lives completely together as a masterpiece finished once and for all. Even those who seem to have it all together fall often, and at times badly. Our final integrity comes only through God's forgiving, healing love. It is a gift.

St. Vincent strongly emphasized purity of intention, seeking God in all things, and willing only what God wills. He wrote to Louise de Marillac: "Our Lord is a continual communion for those who are united to what he wills and does not will."<sup>8</sup> He tells a priest of the mission: "What shall we do in that regard but will what providence wills, and not will what it does not will?"<sup>9</sup> In the Vincentian tradition, many means have been suggested for growing in being in the truth with God: daily mental prayer and daily examination of conscience are among the most prominent.

In commenting on the simplicity and purity of intention that he had witnessed in the Shaker tradition, Thomas Merton once wrote, "The peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it."<sup>10</sup> That is a statement which is surely worth meditating on.

## 2. *Being in the truth with others*

The human person is fundamentally social. Human relationships are not just an add-on. They make us who we are, forming us gradually. Having friends, falling in love, building a family, joining a community, being part of a nation, an institution, a movement — all these forms of union with others are possible only if there is truth-filled communication. In fact, the English word *truth* is related etymologically to trust, faithfulness, covenant. Older English-speaking readers may recall the now archaic-sounding marriage promise: "I plight unto thee my *troth*," which we might translate today as: "I pledge to you my truth (my word, my trust, my commitment)."<sup>11</sup>

In this context (being in the truth with others), simplicity has its most obvious meaning: honesty. Trust in the word of another is the condition for life together, for friendship, marriage, community, business ventures, and all sorts of other relationships. The lie brings about the disintegration of communities, the fracture of marriages, even the downfall of governments. Often, lies are not just verbal; they

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<sup>8</sup> SV I, 233.

<sup>9</sup> SV VI, 476.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., Thomas Merton's introduction (p. XIII) to Edward Demming Andrews' *Religion in Wood* (Indiana University Press, 1966). This citation is further developed in a recent publication: THOMAS MERTON, *Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers* (Orbis Books, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> We still speak of a promise to marry as "betrothal."

are acted out. Marriages collapse through infidelity. Families break down through covert, competing interests. Friendships unravel through secret betrayal. Being in the truth keeps us together; falsehood tears us apart. To put it tersely: simplicity unites; duplicity divides.

In the Vincentian tradition we emphasize the need to *seek* the truth *with* others in community, and *with* the poor as our brothers and sisters. Today, as a means for being in the truth with others, we often stress the importance of *listening*, which is an aspect of humility. St. Vincent told François du Coudray that simplicity is linked with humility,<sup>12</sup> a virtue about which he stated: "How lovable you will be if God grants you this grace."<sup>13</sup>

### 3. *Being in the truth with oneself*

Thomas Merton once wrote: "We make ourselves real by telling the truth."<sup>14</sup> Truth lies at the core of the human person, straining to emerge. When we express the truth, we construct and reveal our true self. When we distort the truth, we damage not just our relationship with others, but the center of our own being too.

Being in the truth with oneself is, of course, vitally related to being in the truth with God and being in the truth with others, since the human person is essentially relational.

Nonetheless, there is an individuality, a distinctive giftedness, a personal vocation from God that we cannot renounce. One thinks immediately of Polonius' advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*:

*This above all — to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.*<sup>15</sup>

Simplicity in this context calls us to integrity, authenticity. But as we journey in quest of personal wholeness, most of us experience ourselves as rather fractured much of the time. We sense inner contradictions, a broken center, cracks in our personality, and even at times a falling apart. Philosophy, psychology, and sociology have reveled in describing the polarities that the human person senses within: body/mind, feeling/thinking, heart/head, unconscious/conscious.

<sup>12</sup> SV I, 144.

<sup>13</sup> SV XII, 204.

<sup>14</sup> THOMAS MERTON, *No Man Is An Island* (Kent: Burns and Oates, 1955) 166.

<sup>15</sup> *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 3.

Being true to oneself is not as easy as it might seem. Accurate self-knowledge is a rare gift, as Robert Burns so eloquently noted:

*O wad some Power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,  
An' foolish notion:  
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,  
An' ev'n devotion!*<sup>16</sup>

Knowing oneself accurately is essential in life. The philosopher Wittgenstein observed: "You cannot write anything about yourself that is more truthful than you yourself are. That is the difference between writing about yourself and writing about external objects. You write about yourself from your own height. You don't stand on stilts or on a ladder but on your bare feet."<sup>17</sup>

St. Vincent recommended regular confession and spiritual direction as very important means toward self-knowledge. A perceptive confessor or spiritual director can be a "mirror," so to speak, reflecting back to us what we are not be able to see on our own.

#### 4. *Being in the truth with the created universe that surrounds us*

Philosophers and theologians have recognized from the earliest times that human existence is inseparable from matter. We are not pure spirit, but have bodies. The philosopher Merleau-Ponty reminds us: "I am my body." We are also related to and dependent on the earth. In a certain sense (as the book of Genesis states in figurative language in the creation story), we come from the earth. Food, water, air, sunshine, and other elements are the nutrients that flow into our existence. If one adopts a historical or evolutionary point of view, it is all the more evident that we are related to the past and future of the world around us.

If we are to be in truth with God as the Creator, with ourselves as incomplete beings, and with others, especially the poor, we must also be in truth with the created universe that is our home. In other

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<sup>16</sup> ROBERT BURNS, *To a Louse. On Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet, At Church*, 1786. A modern translation renders the poem as follows:

*Oh, that God would give us the very smallest of gifts  
To be able to see ourselves as others see us  
It would save us time from many mistakes  
and foolish thoughts  
We would change the way we look and gesture  
and to how and what we apply our time and attention.*

<sup>17</sup> LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Culture and Value*, edited by G.H. von Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) 33e.

words, being fully human involves caring for the earth. Or, to put the matter in even broader terms, it means caring for the surrounding universe, whose proportions are staggering and, in fact, incomprehensible to us.

Bernhard Anderson, in a recent analysis of Old Testament Theology, writes:<sup>18</sup>

*The picture presented in the Priestly creation story is one of symmetrical order and aesthetic harmony. All of God's creatures, from the sun and moon that measure the times to the animals that creep on earth, have a particular function in the wondrous whole.*<sup>19</sup>

We have not yet fully developed a comprehensive ecological theology, but some of its foundation stones are quite visible and have been set for centuries in Christian tradition:

- the presence of God in all creation
- the goodness of all that God has made
- God's providence in accompanying history and ongoing creation
- the importance of gratitude, wonder, contemplation and care for God's gifts as a response of God's people.

Those who live closest to the land often see its importance more vividly than others. When, in 1851, the President of the United States, Franklin Pierce, proposed to buy two million acres of land from the Indian tribes around Puget Sound in the present State of

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<sup>18</sup> BERNHARD W. ANDERSON, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 89.

<sup>19</sup> Another recent Old Testament study, by WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, pp. 528-529), states:

*Creation, the network of living organisms that produces a viable context and "home" for the human community, is an outcome of Yahweh's generous, sovereign freedom.... It is Yahweh's will for this newly ordered world that it should be fruitful, invested with "the power of fertility." Yahweh has authorized in the world the inscrutable force of generosity, so that the earth can sustain all its members, and so that the earth has within itself the capacity for sustenance, nurture, and regeneration. This capacity for generosity is no human monopoly; it is assured that every genus and species of creation can "bring forth" according to its kind. The evident wonder and inexplicable gift of blessing evokes in Israel awed doxology, which is the appropriate response to the miracle of creation that enacts Yahweh's will for life:*

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*

Washington, Chief Seattle (after whom the state's principal city is named) reacted. His famous reflections are one of the most eloquent environmental statements ever made:

*How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?*

*Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist on the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experiences of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man....*

*We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony and man — all belong to the same family.*

*So, when the Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land, he asks much of us. The Great Chief sends word he will reserve us a place so that we can live comfortably to ourselves. He will be our father and we will be his children.*

*So, we will consider your offer to buy our land. But it will not be easy. For this land is sacred to us. This shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you the land, you must remember that it is sacred, and you must teach your children that it is sacred and that each ghostly reflection in the clear water of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.*

*The rivers are our brothers, they quench our thirst. The rivers carry our canoes, and feed our children. If we sell you our land, you must remember, and teach your children, that the rivers are our brothers and yours, and you must henceforth give the rivers the kindness you would give any brother.*

Chief Seattle's words were prophetic. Polluted rivers, contaminated air and depleted forests rank high among the problems of modern society. In this matter, as in so many others, immediate gratification often wins out over long-range goals. But when the environment is neglected, society pays a heavy price. Often, it is the poor who suffer most.

## II. On Blending the Simplicity of the Dove with the Prudence of the Serpent

Even for those with a brightly shining guiding star, Christian living is filled with paradoxes: initiative/obedience, flexibility/stability, listening/advising, animating/directing, creativity/humility, trusting/planning, serving/governing, simplicity/prudence. Matthew's gospel recognizes that the simplicity of the dove must cohabit, in the same person, with the prudence of the serpent.<sup>20</sup> In fact, we quickly learn in life that we cannot always speak the unabashed truth.

Human experience teaches us that virtues like truthfulness, charity, and respect for the privacy and good name of others at times "compete" with one another. In moments of apparent conflict, prudence enables us to balance and blend such competing virtues. St. Vincent knew this quite well. He recognized that there was a time for speaking and a time for remaining silent. He was often quite circumspect. In fact, he managed to collaborate for nearly a decade on the Council of Conscience with Cardinal Mazarin, who regarded Vincent as his enemy.

Upon close examination of his life and writings we find many instances where the simplicity of the dove is very much modified by the prudence of the serpent. In a letter written on a Friday morning, probably in 1639, he reproves Louise de Marillac for being over-protective of her son who was running into trouble, but he assures her that he will send someone over to the Bons Enfants, pretending that nothing had happened, to find out what is going on.<sup>21</sup> A year later he tells Lambert aux Couteaux that Louise would like him to take a trip to Angers to make a detailed visitation of her sisters while pretending that he is merely dropping in to say hello.<sup>22</sup> From these and other instances it is evident that Vincent was sometimes not averse to creating or cooperating in a little ruse. He was also quite eager, as experience teaches us is often necessary, to be silent about some aspects of the truth. In 1642 he tells Bernard Codoing, the superior in Rome,<sup>23</sup> that he is sending him some money from the Duchess of Aiguillon, but he cautions secrecy about the source of this money since people in Rome might be prejudiced against the Duchess because of her uncle, Cardinal Richelieu,<sup>24</sup> who had fallen out of favor there.

<sup>20</sup> Mt 10:16.

<sup>21</sup> SV I, 584.

<sup>22</sup> SV II, 66-67.

<sup>23</sup> SV II, 271.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. THOMAS DAVITT, "Some Less-Publicised Facets of Saint Vincent," in *Colloque* N° 5 (Spring 1982) 14-23.

Over the centuries moral theologians have written volumes on the dilemmas that arise in the context of truth-telling. Limitations of space make it impossible for me to provide, in this article, even a brief summary of those materials. Below, I simply offer a few reflections on three of the most common moral dilemmas that those committed to truth-telling face.

### 1. *Telling the truth in the context of other truths*

Truth derives from God. It is related to beauty. But the expression of “truths” can sometimes be ugly, cold, arrogant, angry. Declarations like “I’m just telling you the truth!” can be a facile excuse for harsh words or an escape-valve for pent-up rage.

In the Christian tradition truth and love are inseparable.<sup>25</sup> Growing in love involves penetrating to the truth of the beloved, coming to understand others not just on the surface but in their depths. Conversely, growing in truth involves moving toward deeper communion, overcoming differences, “looking for the larger truth that embraces my little truth and that of the other.”<sup>26</sup> There is a delicate interplay between mind and heart in the search for truth. For those with a highly intellectual formation, Pascal’s corrective can be very helpful: “The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things.”<sup>27</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry expresses the same conviction: “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”<sup>28</sup>

The problem is that people sometimes use “the truth” to massacre others. Under the pretext of being sincere, they destroy truth with “the truth.” In a striking essay, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was himself a martyr for the truth, wrote as follows:

*If it is detached from life and from its reference to the concrete other person, if “the truth is told” without taking into account to whom it is addressed, then this truth has only the appearance of truth, but it lacks its essential character.*

*It is only the cynic who claims “to speak the truth” at all times and in all places to all men in the same way, but who, in fact, displays nothing but a lifeless image of the truth. He dons the halo of the fanatical devotee of truth who can make no allowance for human weaknesses; but, in fact, he is destroying*

<sup>25</sup> Eph 4:15; cf. Col 3:14, 1 Cor 13:6.

<sup>26</sup> TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, *I Call You Friends* (New York: Continuum, 2001) 56.

<sup>27</sup> BLAISE PASCAL, *Pensées* (1660), paragraphs 277-278.

<sup>28</sup> ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY, *Le Petit Prince* (Gaillimard, 1943) chapter 21.

*the living truth between persons. He wounds shame, desecrates mystery, breaks confidence, betrays the community in which he lives, and laughs arrogantly at the devastation he has wrought and at the human weakness which "cannot bear the truth."*<sup>29</sup>

We must learn to speak the truth while taking other truths into account: the dignity of other persons, their human weakness and ours as well, the love that must characterize all Christian relationships. Our statement of a truth must blend with these other truths. Speaking the truth is therefore a delicate art rather than the wielding of a blunt instrument.

## 2. *Protecting private truths*

Very early in life we begin to recognize that it is sometimes harmful to *tell* the truth. Our parents teach us as children that some personal and family matters are private; others have no right to know about them. As we grow up, friends begin to entrust us with secrets. As different problems arise in our own lives, we ourselves sense the need to talk with someone, but only on the condition that what we say is kept utterly confidential. These universal human experiences have given rise to a whole body of ethical and legal literature concerning truth-telling, secrecy, and confidentiality. Confessors and spiritual directors, doctors and nurses, psychiatrists and counselors, lawyers, secretaries, journalists, and many others are bound, in varying circumstances and within various limits, to professional secrecy.

Paradoxically, we have a moral obligation to tell the *truth*, but we sometimes have a moral obligation not to *tell* the truth. So, how does one protect private, even "sacred" truths?

Silence, of course, is often the most effective method. In some cases too, in the face of inappropriate inquiries, we may be able to communicate, with a combination of gentleness and firmness, the delicacy of our situation: "I am sorry, I am really not free to talk about that. I hope you understand." Sometimes too, with a little bit of ingenuity, we may say something that some or all recognize as good-humoredly evasive.

But for centuries philosophers and theologians have pointed out that there are situations, posing a moral dilemma, where silence or evasion simply make matters worse and where the right course seems to be to dissimulate the truth. To resolve such moral dilemmas, Thomists, defining moral truth as correspondence between what we

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<sup>29</sup> DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, "What is Meant by Telling the 'Truth'?", in *Ethics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995) 360-361.

think and what we say, used the “broad mental reservation.”<sup>30</sup> Others, defining truth in relational terms (communication of what is in one’s mind to someone who has a right to know), permitted “false speech”<sup>31</sup> when utterly necessary to put off those who have no right

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<sup>30</sup> The Catholic moral tradition, even from the time of the Fathers of the Church, offered many examples of legitimate “equivocations” or, as they were later called, “broad mental reservations.” These are sometimes so subtle that it is difficult to distinguish them from a lie. But all moralists admitted that they were legitimate in certain circumstances. For example, they stated that when a confessor was asked if he knew whether someone had committed adultery he could respond: “I do not know,” which really means “I do not know about that with a knowledge that I can communicate to you.” Other responses suggested for awkward situations were: “He is not home,” which means “He is not home for you!” Or, in an example used in St. Augustine’s time and re-clothed in modern garb during the Nazi regime, when soldiers are looking for innocent people and come to the door to ask whether you have seen them or if they are inside, you could simply respond: “No!” or “I haven’t seen anybody,” which means “I haven’t seen anybody that I feel I should tell you about.” Some also argue that certain statements receive a special meaning from custom or from the circumstances in which they are uttered. For example, when a prisoner pleads “not guilty” in a court of justice, everyone concerned understands what is meant. When a statesman, a priest, a doctor, or a lawyer is asked impertinent questions to which he cannot respond without a breach of trust and he answers “I don’t know,” prudent people understand what this means too.

<sup>31</sup> Basically those who hold this point of view argue that context plays a crucial role in defining truth and in determining what is a lie. Since the purpose of speech is human communication, it cannot be legitimately forced. Those who make unjust inquiries are engaged in a form of violence. In this context, false speech is not a lie, since a lie is a failure to communicate what is in one’s mind to someone who has the right to know this information. Just as it is lawful to kill someone in self-defense, so in self-defense it is also lawful to disguise the truth. Thus, a false statement made to one who has no right to the truth is permissible. Of course, some are utterly opposed to this point of view. Among the most formidable opponents was Immanuel Kant who in his essay “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives,” found in *The Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, edited and translated by Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) stated:

“Truthfulness in statements which cannot be avoided is the formal duty of an individual to everyone, however great may be the disadvantage accruing to himself or to another. If, by telling an untruth, I do not wrong him who unjustly compels me to make a statement, nevertheless by this falsification, which must be called a lie (though not in a legal sense), I commit a wrong against duty generally in a most essential point. That is, so far as in me lies I cause that declarations should in general find no credence, and hence that all rights based on contracts should be void and lose their force, and this is a wrong done to mankind generally.

Thus the definition of a lie as merely an intentional untruthful declaration to another person does not require the additional

to know. Neither theory is ideal. Each, in fact, has notable weaknesses. But both recognize that at times there is a prevailing moral obligation to “protect” the truth and to put off importunate, inappropriate inquiries, even by misleading the inquirer.

In the end, strange though it may seem, one must “learn” to tell the truth. Each word has its own place, its own time, its own audience. Much depends on who is calling me to speak and what entitles me to speak. One of the most poignant, and wise, lines in American literature is the statement in *The Scarlet Letter* that Hester Prynne makes to her daughter Pearl:

*“Hold thy peace, dear little Pearl!” whispered her mother. “We must not always talk in the market-place of what happens to us in the forest.”*<sup>32</sup>

Statements involve a relationship with the person being addressed and at times also with third parties. The truth must respect those relationships and nourish them. The nosy inquirer seeks to violate truth and to intrude on the relationships that truth nourishes. It is important to learn how to put such inquirers off, and to put them off well.

### 3. *Determining the pedagogy for presenting the truth*

Truths not only have their time, their place and their proper audience; they have their own particular pedagogy. Certain truths have their “moment” in history. Victor Hugo once pointed out that, when an idea’s time has come, not even armies can resist it.<sup>33</sup> But until that time “new” truths enter most minds and hearts slowly. As mothers and fathers instinctively know, the wise teacher must often wait for the right moment and the right place. I once gave a rather pacifist-sounding conference to a group of college students, who loved it. A few days later I gave the same conference to a parish

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condition that it must harm another, as jurists think proper in their definition (*medacium est falsiloquium in praeiudicium alterius*). For a lie always harms another; if not some other particular man, still it harms mankind generally, for it vitiates the source of life itself.”

<sup>32</sup> NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850, Chapter 22 “The Procession.”

<sup>33</sup> VICTOR HUGO, *The History of a Crime* (1877), Chapter 10. The entire text of this work can be found online at [www.gutenberg.net](http://www.gutenberg.net). Hugo’s actual text, often paraphrased or misquoted, comes right at the end of *The History of a Crime* and reads as follows: “Truth is the innermost part of God. What can be done against a revolution which has so much right on its side? Nothing. To love it. That is what the nations do. France offers herself, the world accepts her. The whole phenomenon lies in these few words. An invasion of armies can be resisted; an invasion of ideas cannot be resisted.”

group which hated it. The time and place were almost the same, but I learned rather painfully that a new audience often requires a new pedagogy.

*How* to present the truth is the key question. This question becomes all the more important as we grow in consciousness that our goal in speaking is not merely the transmission of data but communication and communion in the truth. From that perspective pedagogy is not just a clever, pragmatic means of packaging a “truth” well; rather, it is an integral part of communicating a truth to the other.

The often-anguished Emily Dickinson put it this way:

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind —.*<sup>34</sup>

This lesson is especially important for teachers. Some make the mistake of thinking that they have done their job when they have lectured for an hour, citing all the facts and uttering all the “truths.” But one must ask whether they have communicated truth to others, or whether they have simply uttered it in front of an audience which has not received the message. Method is important. A teacher must often reflect not only on the content that he or she wishes to communicate, but also on the most effective means for communicating it. The same is true of parents, friends, counselors, and many others who must at times communicate truths which they know will be difficult for the hearers to accept.

The Greek word for truth, ἀλήθεια, means “uncovering.” Speaking the truth opens us out. What lies within us comes forth. In speaking truthfully, we disclose what otherwise remains hidden in our depths. In Greek mythology, the goddess of truth who guides Parmenides puts two pathways before him: one of uncovering and one of hiding. It is only by “uncovering” that one’s true self emerges. The New Testament states this very clearly: “Put on a new self, created in God’s image, whose justice and holiness is born of truth.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> EMILY DICKINSON, *Poesie* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1995) 340.

<sup>35</sup> Eph 4:21.