

St. Vincent de Paul and the Bible *

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I present here a synthesis of what some of the well-known authors, renowned for their study of Vincent de Paul, have written on this topic. I do not pretend to write an in-depth study about St. Vincent and the Bible, but rather try to explain why the Sacred Scriptures were important for him. I have attempted to gather together some interesting data on this subject and order it in such a way that the reader will understand how our Founder used the Word of God in his personal life and in his ministry. Excuse me, my dear confreres and sisters, for any imperfection.

1. The Bible in the 17th Century

We know that the *Protestant Reformation* arose from the controversy that surrounded the authority of the Pope and bishops. Luther accepted only the authority of the Bible. The reformers, from the time of John Wycliffe († 1384), affirmed that the Bible ought to be interpreted literally and according to the authority of the Spirit and not according to the authority of human interpreters, including the Church's *Magisterium*. The literal sense of Scripture is the intention of the Holy Spirit and we ought to interpret it in faith in the same Spirit. According to Luther, we can understand the Scriptures only in the Spirit in which they were written and we can only find the Spirit present in the Scriptures. Therefore, Christians ought to have direct access to the Bible and to its true meaning since they are disposed to receive the light of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, according to Luther, the only authority is the Bible: *only Scripture*.

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The Church, at the Council of Trent, condemned the doctrine of free interpretation of the Bible and decreed that the Vulgate was the only authentic text, with all its books and parts. Since that time biblical commentaries, introductions and biblical theology have flourished. Yet the theology that was meant to respond to the Protestant ideas, minimized the importance of the Bible and highlighted the role of Tradition. The Bible was only the first of the “theological places” where one could find arguments to justify the doctrine of the Church. The exegete was only a technician who prepared the Scriptural arguments that the theologian could use in discussions with Protestants and atheists. Exegesis was only a servant of dogmatic theology and apologetics. The 17th century marked the beginning of a search for the literal meaning of the sacred text. In this search, all the means that were at the disposal of reason were used: comparing the Bible with other literary works of the Ancient Middle East, the findings of archeology, etc. In this way, the Jewish philosopher, B. Spinoza, attempted to interpret the Bible with rationalistic presuppositions. In 1678, the Oratorian, R. Simon, published *A Critical History of the Old Testament*, a work in which he made a critical-literary and historical analysis of the Bible. A group of traditional Catholics, however, led by Bossuet, had this book placed on the Index of Prohibited Books. It was within this context that Vincent de Paul lived and worked (1581-1660).

2. Vincent de Paul and the Bible

The young Vincent was initiated into the mysteries of the faith in his home. His mother was his first catechist. The faith was transmitted from one generation to the next in a familiar environment. At home he learned how to pray and received his first lessons in the faith. The use of the Bible in family catechesis was greatly minimized. The majority of people did not have access to the sacred text which was only available in the Latin edition of the Vulgate. It was not a common practice to have a copy of the Bible in the home. The Bible was only in the hands of the great theologians and was used primarily in controversies with the reformers. Its use, therefore, was primarily apologetical. Nevertheless, Vincent, like many others of his time, was acquainted with the “Sacred History,” that is, in his childhood he learned about the more important events of the History of Salvation: the vocation of Abraham, the sacrifice of Isaac, the Exodus, the reign of David and Solomon, the prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus. Besides his family, his participation in the parish at Dax contributed to his biblical formation. His paternal uncle, Etienne, prior of Poymartet, near Goubera, also had an important role in this area. In summary, the young Vincent had his first contact with the Word of God in the family, in the preaching of the pastor of Dax, and in the reflections of his uncle.

In 1604, Vincent obtained his theology degree. Naturally, during the time of his theological studies he had much contact with the Bible. As already mentioned, at this time the use of Scripture was used apologetically in theological studies. The Bible was used to prove the great truths of the faith. We do not know if, as a theological student, Vincent had great knowledge of the Scriptures. The theology of the time was scholastic, very methodical and not very existential.

As a priest he continued to be nourished by the Scriptures, but indirectly, through the text of the lectionary and the liturgical hours. We might ask: What breviary was in use at that time? How much did it cost? When Vincent died, two volumes of the breviary were found in his room. They measured 18.5 cm by 12 cm; they were printed in 1656 and each volume weighed a little over 1550 grams — because of their weight (something more than three kilos) they would have been difficult to carry.

“A critical reading of Vincent’s life reveals that prior to 1617, that is, before he was 36 years old, Vincent did not use the Bible very much and we might suppose that he had little knowledge of it. He speaks of God, Providence, the Virgin Mary, but the name of Jesus appears for the first time in October 1617 in the *Rule for the Charity at Châtillon*.”¹ Vincent’s arrival in Paris marked a change in his life. During three or four years he was concerned with obtaining a benefice. This period in his life might be seen as a time of postulancy. Fr. de Bérulle was his protector and dreamed of him becoming a member of the recently established Oratorians.

Two well-known events transformed Vincent’s life: the accusation of theft and his dark night of the soul. It was during this time that he decided to give his life to God in service of the poor. God responded by giving him interior peace. Christ revealed himself to Vincent in the poor peasant at Gannes. It was there that he was able to “view the other side of the coin” and see events with the eyes of God. The dying peasant of Gannes led Vincent to focus on Jesus Christ whom he saw in the poor.

The year 1617 marked a radical transformation in the life of Vincent. In January of that year, he discovered the missionary Christ in Folleville. In August of the same year, he found Christ, the servant of the poor in Châtillon. These two events likewise mark a new way of seeing the Scriptures. Two biblical texts will become the foundation of his spirituality and ministry: 1) Luke 4:18 ff.: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives*

¹ A. DODIN, “Monsieur Vincent de Paul et la Bible,” in *Le Grand Siècle et la Bible*, Beauchesne, Paris, 1989, pp. 218-219.

and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. Vincent used this text eight times to define the mission of Christ and the Congregation. These words would also become the motto of the Congregation. 2) Matthew 25:40: *Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.* This text appears in the *Rule for the Charities* that he wrote and also in the *Common Rule* of the Congregation.

We can say that for Vincent, the discovery of Christ present in the poor was at the same time a discovery of God in the Sacred Scriptures. The Christ discovered in the Gospels is a Christ committed to the poor and the forgotten people. The Christ he met in Gannes sets before Vincent's eyes a reality that he never dreamed possible. The poor run the risk of losing their salvation. The mysterious and transcendent God that Vincent knew in the *Rule of Perfection* of Benedict of Canfield invited him to love God by giving himself to the poor. Thus it can be said that the poor brought Vincent to Christ, and this Christ is revealed in Scripture. Each day Vincent read from the New Testament and obliged his confreres to do the same: *The priests and all the students are to read a chapter of the New Testament, reverencing this book as the norm of Christian holiness. For greater benefit this reading should be done kneeling, with head uncovered, and praying, at least at the end, on these three themes: 1° reverence for the truths contained in the chapter; 2° desire to have the same spirit in which Christ or the saints taught them; 3° determination to put into practice the advice or commands contained in it, as well as the examples of virtue.*²

3. How Vincent used the Bible

It is truly an ambitious undertaking to present the relationship between Vincent and the Bible. It would be necessary to search through eight volumes of his correspondence, two volumes of his conferences to the Daughters of Charity and two volumes of conferences to the Missionaries, all of which have been gathered together by Pierre Coste and fill 8,427 pages.

According to Fr. Vansteenkiste,³ in volumes IX and X (which contain the conferences to the Daughters of Charity), there are 164 explicit references to the Sacred Scriptures — 23 references to the Old Testament and 141 to the New Testament. In addition there are 1,755 implicit references — 428 references to the Old Testament

² *Common Rules*, X, 8

³ M. VANSTEENKISTE, "Monsieur Vincent et la Bible," in *Bulletin de la Société Borda*, n. 388.

and 1,327 to the New Testament. Furthermore, according to Jean-Pierre Renouard,⁴ volume XI and XII (conferences to the Missionaries) contain 127 references to the Old Testament and 203 to the New Testament (and this is without counting references that are repeated). These numbers indicate that Vincent used the Bible with great frequency.

Of the 73 books in the Bible, Vincent cites 38 of 46 Old Testament books and 24 of 27 New Testament books. He does not make reference to the Old Testament books of 1 Chronicles, Ezra, Esther, 1 Maccabees, Ruth, Habakkuk, Obadiah, and Haggai, nor to the New Testament Books of Philemon, 2 and 3 John. When he refers to the Bible he uses an introductory phrase such as: “as Scripture says,” “as God says,” “as Our Lord says,” “as St. Paul says,” etc.

Vincent did not use biblical language in a uniform way, always with the same objective or intention. He referred to the Bible from memory and was not concerned with using the exact words. For example, in the conferences he refers to Romans 12:10 on four occasions, but always with little differences. At other times, he uses distinct biblical references but places them together as one single reference: *When he [Vincent] explains the Rule to the Daughters of Charity and the Missionaries, he cites the Biblical text exactly and includes the reference in his explanation. These, however, are very rare instances. His more common method is to cite the Bible as a gloss, a living gloss, a spiritual gloss... usually wonderfully adapted and accommodated to the situation.*⁵

In this way Vincent seems to be like the New Testament writers who freely referred to the texts of the Old Testament. His manner of referring to the Sacred Scriptures is based on the literal sense of the Scriptures and not on the exact historical sense of the text. He is more concerned with the moral sense of the text, that is, with the immediate application of the text. For example, in the conference of June 1642 “On obedience,” he freely cites the text of Matthew 26:52-54: *Jesus Christ preferred holy obedience to life itself. Did he not say to St. Peter, who wished to prevent the Jews from arresting him: “Are you unwilling that I should do the will of God, my Father, which is to obey the soldiers, Pilate and the executioners? And were it not that this most holy will must be fulfilled, would not legions of angels come to deliver me?”*⁶

⁴ JEAN-PIERRE RENOARD, “La Parola de Dio in San Vincenzo,” in *Annali della Missione*, 99, 1992, p. 149 ff.

⁵ A. DODIN, “Saint Paul et Saint Vincent de Paul,” Dax, 1936-1937.

⁶ Conference to the Daughters of Charity, “On Obedience,” June, 1642, I:61; C.E.D., IX:66. The citation of the French edition, *Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents*, will be C.E.D. followed by the volume and page number. The present English edition of this same work, *Correspondence*,

“In light of these frequent references and allusions to the Bible, we can imagine that Vincent ‘studied’ the Bible in the deepest sense of the word ‘study.’ He frequently consulted the Bible, selected passages, and imbued himself with these texts in order to illuminate and simplify the theoretical system of the supernatural life.”⁷

4. The Old Testament

Vincent saw no division between the two testaments. Besides the teachings of the Old Testament books, Vincent referred to specific persons of the Old Covenant, taking examples from their life. He focused his attention on four persons: Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses.

On 11 occasions Vincent referred to the life and the fall of Adam: ten times to the Daughters of Charity and once to the Missionaries.⁸ He focused on Adam’s disobedience and the consequences of this action for the human race: *Adam brought death to the body and caused the death of the soul by sin.*⁹

At times he makes interesting commentaries: *Adam disobeyed God by eating the apple and from this two great evils have sprung; because, just as man was unwilling to subject himself to his Creator, the soul also lost its power to rule.*¹⁰ He then stated that *Adam had*

Conferences, Documents will use the abbreviation C.C.D., followed by volume and page number. Since the conferences to the Daughters and the Missionaries have not been translated into English, I have used the work *Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul [to the Missionaries]*, Pierre Coste, C.M. [translated by Joseph Leonard, C.M.]. This is a one volume edition. When referring to the conferences to the Daughters, I have used *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Daughters]*, translated by Joseph Leonard, a four-volume edition. Thus after the title of the conference, the volume and page number follow.

⁷ M. VANSTEENKISTE, *op. cit.*

⁸ *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Daughters of Charity]*, “On the Jubilee,” 15 October 1641, I:43-44; “To Four Sisters who were sent to Sedan,” 23 July 1654, III:2-3; “On Temptations,” 24 August 1654, III:13-14; “On Mortification of the Senses,” 3 January 1655, III:48-49; “On Obedience,” 23 May 1655, III:70-72; “On the Jubilee,” 14 December 1656, III:204-205; “On Persons to whom temptations may be mentioned; relations with externs; the duty of secrecy,” 6 January 1658, IV:75-76; “On mutual charity and the duty of reconciliation,” 4 March 1658, IV:90-91; “On Holy Indifference,” 8 December 1659, IV:296-297; *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Missionaries]*, “Repetition of Prayer,” 15 November 1656, 352-353; *C.E.D.*, IX:47, X, 2, 17, 55, 80, 81, 232, 448, 466, 695, XI:54.

⁹ *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Daughters of Charity]*, “To four Sisters who were sent to Sedan,” 23 July 1654, III:2; *C.E.D.*, X:2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, “On mortification of the senses,” 3 January 1655, III:49; *C.E.D.*, X:55, 448.

*done penance and bewailed his sin for more than 900 years.*¹¹ Note that Genesis 4:1 states that Adam lived for 930 years.

On five occasions Vincent made reference to the patriarch Noah.¹² He focused on two facts: the construction of the ark and Noah's activity. On 25 May 1642, while speaking to the Daughters of Charity, he said: *Do you know, Sisters, how long Noah took to build the ark and to make it as perfect as it should be? A hundred years. Oh Savior of our souls! Oh my dear sisters! If, to build the ark, in which only eight persons were saved from the Deluge, so much time was required, how much do you think is needed to strengthen and preserve this Company into which such a great number of souls will enter and save themselves from the deluge of the world.*¹³

Referring to St. Clement's letter to the Corinthians, Vincent says that Noah was the prophet and preacher of repentance: *God determines to punish the world; he sends a universal deluge to chastise the horrible sins that were being committed. And yet, what does he then do. He inspires Noah with the idea of building an ark, and Noah took a hundred years to build it. Why do you think it was God's will that he should take so long to build this ark if not to see whether the world would be converted, if it would do penance, if men would profit by what Noah said to them, speaking from the window of his ark, crying in a loud voice, according to some authors: "Do penance, ask pardon of God."*¹⁴

Abraham is the perfect example of obedience. He followed Divine Providence step by step. In fact, he left his own country in order to sacrifice his only son: *To this end, remember Abraham, to whom God had promised to people the whole earth from his son. And nevertheless, God commands him to sacrifice this son. If Abraham puts his son to death, how shall God accomplish his promise? Abraham, however, who had accustomed his soul to do the will of God, set about executing this order without troubling himself about anything else. It is for God to look to it (he might say). If I execute his commands he will accomplish his promise. But how? I know not. It is enough that he is all-powerful. I am going to offer to him what is dearest to me on earth, since he wills it. But this is my only son! No matter! But by depriving*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, "On Temptations," 24 August 1654, III:14; C.E.D., X:17.

¹² C.C.D., III:187-188; *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Daughters of Charity]*, "On the faults and failings of the past year," 6 January 1642, I:51; "On Preservation of the Company," 25 May 1854, II:296; *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Missionaries]*, "Repetition of Prayer," 15 November 1656, 352; C.E.D., III:183; IX:56, 696; XI:377.

¹³ *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Daughters of Charity]*, "On Preservation of the Company," 25 May 1654, II:296; C.E.D., IX:,696.

¹⁴ *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Missionaries]*, "Repetition of Prayer," 15 November 1656, 352-353; C.E.D., XI:377.

*this child of life, I deprive God of the means of fulfilling his promise. It is all the same. He wills it so, and it must be done. But if I preserve my boy, my generation shall be blessed; God has said it. Yes, but he has also said that I am to put him to death. He has declared it to me. I will obey, come what may. And I shall still have hope in his words. Admire this confidence. He is nowise concerned for what is to happen. Yet the thing touches him to the heart, but he hopes that all will end well since God has part in the affair. Why have not we the same confidence and the same hope, if we leave to God the care of all that regards us, and prefer what he commands us?*¹⁵

Vincent refers to Moses more than 25 times. He points out that Moses, like Melchizedek who had no parents or genealogy, was an abandoned child. But above all, Moses was the mediator, chosen by God to transmit the Law and intercede for the Israelites during battle: *Wonderful power of mental prayer! My Daughters, for that was how Moses prayed, with his hands uplifted to heaven, without saying a word: and this was potent enough to win a battle for those for whom he prayed. The Holy Scriptures also tell us that Moses was one day before God, and did not utter a word. And he heard the voice of God, "Moses let me alone for you are forcing me to do what I do not wish to do. This people is ungrateful and rebellious to my law; I wish to destroy them, and you want to save them. Why do you force me? Depart, and let me do what I desire." You see, my Daughters — do you not — how God feels himself constrained by prayer, and by mental prayer, for Moses did not say a word, and yet his prayer was so well heard that God said to him, "Let me alone; you want me to do what I do not wish to do."*¹⁶

Many times he referred to Moses as the lawgiver, remembering especially those who opposed his orders and were punished by God (cf. Numbers 17:5-14): *In the Old Law we have the example of Korah, Dathan and Abiram who were swallowed up by the earth because they murmured against Moses.*¹⁷

Vincent also referred to the passage where Miriam rebels against her brother Moses because he had married a Cushite woman. She became a snow-white leper and then, through the intercession of Moses, was cured (cf. Numbers 12:1-15): *His own sister was covered with leprosy for having criticized his actions.*¹⁸ For Vincent, Moses was a model lawgiver and founder.

¹⁵ *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Missionaries]*, "On the Maxim, Seek First the Kingdom of God," 21 February 1659, 479-480; *C.C.D.*, III:187-188; *C.E.D.*, III:183; XI:376; XII:138.

¹⁶ *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Daughters of Charity]*, "Conference on Prayer," 31 May 1648, II:50-51; *C.E.D.*, IX:418.

¹⁷ *C.C.D.*, XIIIb:351; *C.E.D.*, XIII:728.

¹⁸ *C.C.D.*, XIIIb:351; *C.E.D.*, XIII,728.

5. The New Testament

The majority of Vincent's biblical references come from the New Testament. The second chapter of the Common Rules for the Missionaries contains 37 New Testament references in just 14 paragraphs. In his works there are about 400 explicit references to the Gospels and more than 1,000 allusions to Jesus' life. The Gospel was part of his horizon. Speaking to his sons and daughters, he always referred to some evangelical maxim or some action of Jesus Christ. Therefore, he always chose the most important references to give a foundation to his explanations: *we are then, by his mercy, both quite prepared and quite bound to observe these maxims, if they are not contrary to our Institute.*¹⁹

Vincent centered on Jesus' mission rather than his parables and miracles: evangelize the poor in accordance with the text of Isaiah 61. This influenced him to place on the seal of the Congregation the image of Jesus as missionary. He adopted as a motto for the Congregation: "The Lord has sent me to evangelize the poor" and called his institute the Congregation of the Mission: *Holy Scripture teaches us that our Lord Jesus Christ, having been sent to the world to save the human race, began first of all to do and then to teach.*²⁰

Vincent referred to the gospel of Matthew most often: 351 times. Vincent utilized this gospel in its ecclesial dimension when he wanted to encourage, catechize, and teach the Daughters and the Missionaries. After Matthew, Luke follows. Vincent used this gospel when speaking of the mission, the poor and the Virgin Mary. Vincent found in Paul the source for his baptismal spirituality. He referred to Paul when he would speak about the necessity of conforming our lives to that of Christ, putting aside the old man and transforming ourselves as we clothe ourselves in the new Adam. Fr. Dodin wrote that: "The spirituality of the mission is not based on a theology of priesthood but on an identification with Christ through baptism."²¹

One of the elderly missionaries of the Congregation noted that Vincent was very devout during the celebration of Mass, especially during the reading of the Gospel. Others noted that when he found a passage that began with the words: "Amen, amen, I say to you..." he became more attentive to the words and his voice became more devout: "He seemed to absorb the meaning of the words of the

¹⁹ *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul [to the Missionaries]*, "On the Maxims of the Gospel," 14 February 1659, 651-652; C.E.D., XII:129.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, "On the End of the Congregation of the Mission," 6 December 1658, 596; C.E.D., XII:73.

²¹ A. DODIN, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Paris, 1947, p. 23.

Sacred Scripture, nurturing his soul with the substance of the text just as a child is nurtured by his mother's milk. Thus it seemed that all his actions were filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ."²²

6. Sharing the Word

According to Vincent it would be a serious error to read the Sacred Scriptures to obtain a more powerful arsenal to use in arguments or to make one's preaching more attractive: above all it is necessary to guard against reading the Scriptures as some type of study, saying: this passage will be good for such and such an occasion. In this way the Scriptures only serve to exalt oneself.

For Vincent, the two most important uses of the Scriptures are preaching and catechizing. He created the "Little Method," a style of preaching that is simple, clear, familiar and yet at the same time done with force and charity. The objective of this method was "to explain the truths of the Gospel with familiar examples." Preaching ought to revolve around three key words: nature, motive and means. He was convinced that this style of preaching would enable the Missionaries to draw closer to the poor.

In the area of catechetics he used "the little catechism" for children and "the great catechism" for adults, but taught in the presence of children.

Conclusion

What would a saint be without the Bible? Only a great leader like Mohammad or Buddha.... St. Vincent was, like so many other saints, a man of the Gospels. St. Francis de Sales called him "a walking gospel." Vincent read the Gospels in a very real and concrete way. According to him, we are able to obtain fruit from any biblical text if we meditate on it or if we explain it well.²³ He saw the Bible as his support, and said that all things can be disputed *except those which have been determined by Sacred Scripture*.²⁴ He was opposed to using the Scriptures in a polemical way. Reading his conferences and his letters, we begin to feel like the disciples of Emmaus: hearts burning while "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interprets for us the Scriptures." It is not important whether Vincent used the historical-critical or the structuralist or the psychoanalytical or the materialist method. The result is what truly matters: "Our hearts burning within us" (Luke 24:32).

(CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M., translator)

²² ABELLY, III, 72-73.

²³ C.E.D., XII:135.

²⁴ C.E.D., II:30.