

The Theological Foundation of Vincentian Spirituality in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission

by Bernard Jean Koch, C.M.

1. In the Common Rules

According to the Bull which established our Congregation, we are bound to honor in a special way the Most Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, mysteries beyond words. We should therefore try to carry this out most faithfully and, if possible, in every way, but especially in these three ways, etc. (Common Rules X, 2).

There can be no better way of paying the best honor possible to these mysteries 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, etc. (Common Rules X, 3).

Because this Bull also expressly recommends it, and for other reasons as well, we should likewise have special devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary. Confreres, therefore, both individually and collectively, should, with God's help, try to carry this out perfectly, etc. (Common Rules X, 4).

2. A first question

A first question may be asked: do the *Rules* or *Customs* or *Constitutions* of some religious Orders or other institutes mention the great mysteries of the Faith, Trinity, Incarnation, Eucharist, as the fundamental principles of the spiritual life? Or is it rare, or even proper just to Monsieur Vincent?

The number of these Institutes is vast. Here is rapid analysis of some of them:

Saint PACHOMIUS died in 346, and only some fragments remain that allow us to perceive that later versions, such as the one that Saint Jerome worked on, are reliable. They regulate common life and prayer, but there is nothing about theology.

Saint BASIL, 330-379, wrote two *Rules*. In the Long Rule, Chapter 6, 1¹ possibly inspired CR II, 2, of Vincent: "This is what we must follow if we renounce ourselves and carry the Cross of Christ... to prepare oneself to suffer death for Christ," and apparently nothing else, not even in the Short Rule. His *Ascetical Constitutions* begin in this way: "Each action and each word of our Savior Jesus Christ is the rule of piety and virtue."² Is Vincent's expression "Jesus, who began to do and then to teach" possibly an echo of this? But there is never any mention of the Holy Trinity. Certainly, he composed many theological works and produced a great deepening in the theology of the Holy Spirit, but he never mentioned this in his *Rules*.

Saint AUGUSTINE, died in 430, left us a *Rule*, his Letter 211, written to religious women, and paragraphs five to ten are an adaptation of a Rule for monks.³ It begins, 1-4, with an exhortation to unity following divisions in the community, and continues by directives on the common life, virtues, prayer, obedience, the behavior of superiors, but there is no theological paragraph. It is true that Saint Augustine would preach to them. Only God knows with what depth he preached and wrote of the Trinity, but this does not appear in this letter.

The *Rule* of Saint BENEDICT, who lived circa 480-547, is certainly the best known. The introduction is an invitation to listen to the voice of the Lord. The remainder, after norms for virtue and piety, based on numerous citations from Holy Scripture, is a set of rules for organization of common life, the Divine Office, and various questions of administration. There is no reference to the Holy Trinity or to the Incarnation.

We can also consult the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, which had various later revisions. The first ones were written by Saint IGNATIUS, but the last and definitive version received certain modifications by other members toward the end of his life.⁴

As to the Oratory of Jesus, in France, in whose beginnings Monsieur Vincent played a part from the end of November 1611 to

¹ MIGNE Greek, 31, 925A.

² MIGNE Greek, 31, 1325A.

³ MIGNE Latin, 33, 960 ff.

⁴ Available in French in an edition by Père Courel, 2 vols., Desclée de Brouwer, *Christus* no. 23 and 24; Spanish, among other editions, in *Obras*, manual edition, BAC, pp. 433-695, with all the versions of the particular rules.

his arrival at the parish of Clichy during 1612, BÉRULLE wrote a large number of small spiritual and theological works. His huge *Discours de l'Etat et des grandeurs de Jésus* has many pages on the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. He also wrote a *Rule for the Institution of the Oratory at its beginning*, which contains, like the others, an order of the day, rules for common life, exercises of piety, beginning with acts of adoration, offering, and intention toward Jesus Christ our Savior, and to honor the Blessed Virgin, particularly as Mother of God. This seems new and probably inspired Monsieur Vincent to some extent, since he gave his Congregation nearly exactly the same order of the day and of the week, and many practices of common life.

It seems clear that Monsieur Vincent is the only one, on the one hand, to put these four points at the head of the “Spiritual practices to be observed in the Congregation,” and on the other hand, to put the Incarnation, rather than “Our Lord Jesus Christ,” as central. He used only one word, of course, but the word is there, and if he did not write treatises about these practices, he gave conferences on them.

On the one hand, it is important to name the **Most Holy Trinity**, the fundamental truth of Christianity, which is not done by other Rules; and on the other hand, to describe the **Incarnation**, rather than **Jesus Christ**, is very significant, I would even say, typical, of the apostolic concerns of Monsieur Vincent. **Jesus Christ** designates certainly the person of Jesus, true man and true God, but in some way it is static, and his work of salvation is only hinted at, while to mention the **Incarnation** is something dynamic, showing not only the human-divine person of the Savior, but the movement of the Son of God sent by the Father to take on human nature. It also shows **his mission**, for since at least the time of Saint AUGUSTINE it has been recognized that the missions are not only from God to human beings, but from the Father to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.⁵

3. Saint Vincent commented on the truths at length during his Conferences

Unfortunately, all his conferences were not written down by his listeners at the beginning; it is only starting with 1645 that notes are more than two pages in length, and the most complete and faithful are those taken down by Brother Ducournau, beginning in 1656.

⁵ Saint AUGUSTINE, *De Trinitate*, Bk. II, sect. II, art. IV, 6 to V, 10, and Saint THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, Pars Prima, Quaestio 43, 8 Articles.

Worse, at the time of the sack of Saint Lazare on 13 July 1789, at the beginning of the Revolution, the day before the taking of the Bastille, everything was destroyed, from top to bottom; files and books were tossed out of the windows, along with a huge number of documents, particularly loose pages which were lost. Only some collection of copies could be gathered up again from the materials lying about.

Vincent's biography by Abelly gives us a large number of extracts from conferences whose originals disappeared on 13 July 1789, but they are not dated. In addition, Monsieur Vincent often referred to these mysteries in the thousands of talks on other subjects.

Finally, we can also know the subjects he treated, thanks to two confreres who wrote down at least the titles during the last ten years of his life, and Pierre Coste brought together the two lists at the end of the complete conferences that have come down to us. The results are:

He spoke of the **Holy Trinity** on 24 May 1652, 23 May 1655, 25 May 1657, 14 June 1658. In addition, he mentioned it in passing in various talks, even during one of the Council meetings with the Daughters of Charity.

Conferences on the Holy Spirit took place to prepare for Pentecost: 26 May 1651, 17 May 1652, in 1655, 2 June 1656, 18 May 1657. He mentioned the Holy Spirit on many other occasions, and he directed a prayer to the Holy Spirit at the close of many of his letters.

His treatment of the **Incarnation** was to celebrate Christmas: 24 December 1650, 22 December 1651, 18 December 1654, 22 December 1656.

He spoke of the **Eucharist** either for the feast of Corpus Christi, or on other occasions: on frequent communion, around 1648, for Corpus Christi, 31 May 1652, on Mass and communion 28 June 1652, June 1653, 23 February, and 2 March 1657, 2 June 1657, 13 June 1659, 2 May 1660.

He apparently did not have a conference on the **Virgin Mary**, but he spoke about her relatively often, and very often with the Daughters of Charity.

The depth of what he said in two or three sentences, and what others wrote in several pages, makes us realize not only that he had studied and taught, but especially that he must have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, since theologians propose very profound analyses, but they are rather technical and intellectual. Vincent, on the other hand, was more living and animated.

4. The Holy Trinity

The few texts that have come down to us allow us to think that Saint Vincent had the magnificent pages of Saint AUGUSTINE and Saint THOMAS concerning the relations among the divine Persons, the “processions,” their circulation of love, for which theologians have used, without translating it, the lovely image of Saint John of Damascus, “the chorus of the round dance,” *perichoresis* in Greek, and “circumincession” for the Latins, both strange words to designate a dynamic and poetic life. Saint THOMAS, however, fortunately used the simple word “circulation.”⁶

For Saint THOMAS, our God, infinitely perfect, is certainly unchangeable, but he is not immobile or inactive or solitary. He is constantly at work, as Jesus said in John 5:17, and unceasingly creates other beings; and the Father sends the Son and the Spirit, the divine Missions. Monsieur Vincent, a Molinist concerning predestination, is Thomist for the rest, and he was able to speak in a few sentences about the relations among the divine Persons and their activities, what Saint THOMAS took the two first articles in Question I of the *Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia* to say.

God is active in Himself, by that which the first Creeds called processions, the Son proceeds from the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as from a single source. Procession bespeaks motion, *procedere* in Latin, that is, to walk ahead, to advance. And the procession of the Son by the Father is a generation. He is engendered. In the case of the Holy Spirit, it is a “spiration.” And this movement also comes in return, as in a dialogue without time, eternal. The Son is eternally engendered while breathing out the Spirit with the Father, which is return of love.

The only passage that has come down to us was said to the Daughters of Charity on 28 November 1649, in the conference on the reasons for working to earn a part of their livelihood:⁷

... that God himself works incessantly, has worked incessantly, and will work incessantly.

He works from all eternity within himself by the eternal generation of His Son, whom He will never cease to beget. The Father and the Son have never stopped loving each other, and this mutual love has eternally produced the Holy Spirit, by whom all graces have been, are, and will be distributed to us.

⁶ Cf. *Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia*, Question 9, article 9.

⁷ SV IX, 489-490, conf. 42.

Vincent continues concerning the work of Creation:

God also works incessantly from outside himself in the creation and preservation of this great universe, in the movements of the heavens, in the influences of the stars, in the productions of land and sea, in the nature of the atmosphere, in the regulation of the seasons, and in all that beautiful order we observe in nature, which would be destroyed and return to nothingness if God was not constantly guiding it.

In addition to this general work, He toils with each individual: with the craftsman in his shop, with the woman in her household, with the ant and the bee to do their collecting, and He does so constantly and continually.

And why does He labor? For us, dear Sisters, only for us, to preserve our lives and to procure for us everything we need. Eh quoi! if a God, Emperor of the entire world, has never for a single moment stopped working interiorly and exteriorly ever since the world has been the world, and even in the lowliest of earth's productions, with which He cooperates, how much more reasonable that we, who are His creatures, should work, as He has said, in the sweat of our brow!

Vincent passes very quickly not to the work of Creation, but to the **presence of the Trinity in creatures**, especially by grace, by his indwelling in the hearts of the baptized, which should imitate according to their nature the union of the three Persons.

The first passage that we have on this aspect comes from a Daughter of Charity, which shows us that they had well interiorized the teachings of Monsieur Vincent. It was on 26 April 1643, in a conference on unity:⁸

“Union,” said another Sister, “is the image of the Most Blessed Trinity which is composed of three Divine Persons, united by love. If we are closely united, we will all be of one will and in complete harmony. Disunion, on the contrary, would give us a picture of hell, where the demons live in perpetual discord and hatred.”

Another time, during the Council meeting of the Sisters, Saint Louise had suggested that the Sisters mutually help one another. Vincent then began a lengthy exposé that was simultaneously both theological and practical, which was certainly not easy for everyone to follow. Nevertheless, it was one of the Sisters who took notes, on 19 June 1647:⁹

⁸ SV IX, 98, conf. 14.

⁹ SV XIII, 633-634, doc. 159.

For a long time I have been hoping — and I really do wish — that our Sisters would reach such a degree of respect among themselves that persons outside the Community would never know which one is the Sister Servant; for, Sisters, since God is but One in Himself, and in God there are three Persons, without the Father being greater than the Son or the Son being greater than the Holy Spirit, it should be the same for Daughters of Charity. They should be the image of the Most Holy Trinity; and even though they are several, they should form but one heart and one mind. Among the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity, even though their operations are diverse and attributed to each one in particular, they are related to one another, without implying that to attribute wisdom to the Son and goodness to the Holy Spirit deprives the Father of these two attributes, or that the Third Person lacks the power of the Father or the wisdom of the Son. In like manner, among the Daughters of Charity the Sister who is with those who are poor must be in close contact with the Sister who looks after the children, and vice-versa.

Furthermore, I wish that, in this respect, our Sisters might conform themselves to the Most Holy Trinity so that, as the Father gives Himself entirely to the Son, and the Son entirely to the Father from whom proceeds the Holy Spirit, likewise the Sisters might be totally one for the other to produce the works of charity attributed to the Holy Spirit, in order to have a kinship with the Most Holy Trinity. For Sisters, you can see that the person who says charity says God. You are Daughters of Charity; therefore, as far as possible, you should conform yourselves to the image of God. This is the goal of all Communities that aspire to perfection.

The creative action of the Holy Trinity is also Providence, but even more, God is love, and love tends to spread out, to diffuse itself. The Trinity associates its creatures, especially human beings, in the activity of Providence. This is a genuine spirituality of the management of material goods that Vincent is teaching, something rare or absent in spiritual authors. The references are these: 28 April 1638, to Antoine Portail,¹⁰ in 1656, Advice to Antoine Durand,¹¹ to the Daughters of Charity, 11 November 1657,¹² and 21 February 1659.¹³

We cite only the clearest passage, spoken to the Missioners, on 13 December 1658:¹⁴

¹⁰ SV I, 475, letter 322.

¹¹ SV I, 350, letter 242.

¹² SV X, 332, conf. 85.

¹³ SV XII, 142, conf. 198.

¹⁴ SV XII, 110-111, conf. 196.

O my God! necessity obliges us to possess those perishable goods and to preserve for the Company what Our Lord has bestowed on it, but we should apply ourselves to this in the manner in which God applies Himself to the production and conservation of temporal things for the adornment of the world and the nourishment of His creatures in such wise that He takes care to provide for even an insect; neither does this interfere with His interior operations by which the Son is begotten and from which the Holy Spirit proceeds. And these latter operations in no way involve the omission of the former.¹⁵ As, then, it is God's good pleasure to provide plants, animals, and men with food, those who hold office in this little universe of the Company should likewise provide for the needs of the individuals who compose it. It certainly must be done, O my God. Otherwise, all that Your Providence has given for their maintenance would perish, Your service would cease, and we could no longer go and preach the Gospel gratuitously to the poor.

This inter-Trinitarian activity of the Persons is completed by the **Creation** of other beings than God, the **Divine Missions**, as the prologue to Saint John teaches: the Word was God, and through him all things were made. Besides creation, the Word was sent to restore humanity degraded by sin; this is the **Incarnation**, which will be mentioned below.

Before that, however, we will content ourselves with two passages on the Mission of the Holy Spirit. On 30 July 1651 he wrote to Anne Hardemont, Sister Servant at Hennebont:¹⁶

¹⁵ Saint THOMAS AQUINAS taught this explicitly in the *Quæstiones Disputatæ De Veritate*, question 2, article 2, ad 2. *Deus maxime ad essentiam suam redit quia omnibus providens ac per hoc in omnia quodam modo exiens et procedens, in se ipso fixus et immistus ceteris permanet.*

God returns in his essence, since being complete Providence for all beings, and thus going out and proceeding in a certain way in all things, he rests stable in himself and intimately linked to others.

The profound reason for this is given in the *Quæstiones Disputatæ, De Potentia*, q. 2, art. 6: in God, the unique and simple being, there are no truly distinct powers (the power of engendering the Persons and the power of creating), and so they are not separable, distinguished only by different acts. The Persons, on the other hand, do not make three gods, but they are truly distinct, since they are not powers but relations. This is why the Persons are coeternal, although creation is not eternal.

Once again, we can understand that Vincent was a penetrating and informed theologian.

Of course, this thought is found very likely in many other ancient authors.

¹⁶ SV IV, 235-236, letter 1389.

In a word, live together as having but one heart and one soul so that by this union of spirit you may be a true image of the unity of God, since your number represents the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity.

*I pray for this to **the Holy Spirit, who is the union of the Father and the Son, that He may be yours likewise** and give you profound peace in the midst of contradictions and difficulties, which can only be frequent among the poor.*

He often recalled the Holy Spirit in his letters in the form of brief invocations. Besides the indwelling of the Holy Trinity in the soul, he recalled also that of the Holy Spirit. In his Conferences, he moved very easily from “the spirit of Our Lord,” in the sense of “mentality,” to the Spirit as a Person. Finally, on other occasions he joins the two points, as in this text to the confreres, 13 December 1658, where he moves from the simple “state of sanctifying grace,” to what we call the mystical life, the action of God in us.

He commented on articles 2 and 3 of the first chapter of the Common Rules, concerning the members of the Company and their work:¹⁷

The rule then says that, to do this, as well as to tend to our own perfection, we must clothe ourselves with the Spirit of Jesus Christ.... This means that if we are to be perfect and help the people fruitfully, if we are to serve ecclesiastics well... of ourselves we can do nothing. We must be filled and animated with this Spirit of Jesus Christ.

To understand this clearly, it is essential to know that His Spirit is poured forth into all Christians who live according to the rules of the Christian religion....

But what is this spirit thus diffused? When we say that the Spirit of Our Lord is in such a person or in such actions, what do we mean? Is it that the Holy Spirit in Person is poured forth upon them? Yes, the Holy Spirit, in Person is poured forth into the souls of the just and abides personally in them. When it is said that the Holy Spirit is in anyone, we mean that the Holy Spirit, abiding in such a person, bestows on him the same inclinations and the same dispositions as Jesus Christ had on earth, and causes him to act in the same way. I do not say with equal perfection, but according to the measure of the gifts of this Divine Spirit.

Finally, Monsieur Vincent was able to present in a living and profoundly theological way the traditional doctrine according to

¹⁷ SV XII, 107-108, conf. 196.

which the **Trinity dwells in the soul that lives by grace**. We have only one passage from Monsieur Vincent; it is very strong and dynamic for him, expressed in such clear terms that we feel that Vincent did not repeat something he had read, but he communicated the inspirations he had received. He was speaking to his confreres on one Pentecost (undated):¹⁸

If we love Our Lord, we will be loved by His Father, which is as much as to say that His Father will wish us well, and will do that in two ways: first, He will take pleasure in us, as a father with his child; second, He will give us His graces of faith, hope, and charity by the outpouring of His Holy Spirit, who will dwell in our souls, just as He gave it today to the Apostles and enabled them to perform the miracles they did.

The second advantage of loving Our Lord is that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit come into the soul that loves Our Lord, and this comes about: (1) through the enlightenment of our understanding; (2) through the interior intuitions He gives us of Their love by inspirations, the sacraments, etc.

The third effect of Our Lord's love is that not only God the Father loves these souls, and the Persons of the Blessed Trinity come into them, but They also remain in them. Therefore, the soul of the person who loves Our Lord is the dwelling place of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the place where the Father perpetually begets His Son and the Holy Spirit constantly proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Do we not understand that this was not presented as a simple unmoving presence, but that it was truly the interior operations of the Trinity, the processions and the relations of persons, that make the sort of heaven from which the Trinity reaches out to each one's soul in a state of grace, and that "charity" is truly this heaven?

5. The Incarnation

We no longer have the pre-Christmas conferences, but there are some expressions in his letters near this feast, as well as many other elevations in prayer.

¹⁸ SV XI, 44, conf. 26.

5.1. The sending of the Son by the Father

On 23 May 1655, speaking of obedience to the Sisters, he contemplates the sending, the Mission of the Son by the Father, **from the bosom of the Trinity**:¹⁹

When the Eternal Father willed to send His Son on earth, He put before Him all the things He would have to do and suffer. You know the life of Our Lord and how filled with suffering it was. His Father said to Him, "I will allow you to be despised and rejected by everyone; I will let Herod make you flee from the time you are a baby; I will permit that you be considered a madman and receive curses for your miracles; in short, I will allow all creatures to rebel against you.

That's what the Eternal Father set before His Son, who replied, Father, "I will do whatever you command me." This shows us that we should obey in all things generally.

5.2. Love and self-abasement

Regarding **the earthly aspect of the Incarnation**, he offers us several considerations.

First, **self-abasement** as Saint Paul presents this to the Philipians, 2:5-11. Following on Bérulle, Vincent loves to meditate on the annihilation of the Son of God. Three days before Christmas, 1656, Monsieur Vincent concludes a letter to a confrere in these terms:²⁰

We have no news except that of the coming Mystery, which will show us the Savior of the world annihilated, as it were, under the form of a child. I hope we will be together at the foot of His crib to ask Him to draw us with Him into His lowly state.

These terms, abasement, annihilation, occur often in his writings concerning Jesus and as a model for us. But they do not always have a somber or narrow cast to them. Very often Monsieur Vincent shows the great strength of love that moved God to this undertaking; we should also be united.

On New Year's Day 1644, during a conference on unity, one Sister got up to speak, and made the connection between **love and self-abasement**:²¹

¹⁹ SV X, 85-86, conf. 67.

²⁰ SV VI, 150, letter 2182.

²¹ SV IX, 144, conf. 17.

The first reason is that God has loved us so much and with so cordial a love that He willed to deliver himself up for us, and humbled himself to the point of making himself like a sinner.

We have a draft of a talk in which, during 1645, Vincent comforted a dying student:²²

This Lover of our hearts, seeing that sin had unfortunately ruined and effaced the resemblance, determined to break all the laws of nature in order to repair this havoc and did so with this wonderful additional favor that, not content with implanting in us a resemblance and mark of His Divinity, He even decided, with the same intention that we should love Him, to make Himself like unto us and even to clothe Himself with our human nature.

5.3. This heart of the Son of God...

The expression “Sacred Heart” was not used in Saint Vincent’s time, although there was, when he arrived at Châtillon les Dombes in 1617, a painting of the Sacred Heart on the altar of the side chapel of the Rosary (Notarial inventory). It said simply: “The heart of Jesus.” We read this ardent expression in his conference to the confreres, 22 August 1655:²³

Well now, let us ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart which will make us go everywhere, this Heart of the Son of God, the Heart of Our Lord, the Heart of Our Lord, the Heart of Our Lord, which will dispose us to go as He went and as He would have gone if His Eternal Wisdom had deemed it fitting to labor for the conversion of those poor nations.

He sent His Apostles to do that; He sends us, like them, to bear this divine fire everywhere, everywhere. Ignem veni mittere in terram, et quid volo nisi ut accendatur to bear this divine fire everywhere, this fire of love, of the fear of God, throughout the whole world: to Barbary, to the Indies, to Japan.

During a conference or in the middle of a letter, he would let slip some emotional expressions on Christ that are even more revealing since he never intended to write works of mysticism. We cite only one passage on the great love of Jesus for us, in the conference to his confreres, 13 December 1658:²⁴

²² SV XI, 145-147, conf. 102.

²³ SV XI, 291, conf. 135.

²⁴ SV XII, 109, conf. 196.

And His love, what was it? Oh! what love! O my Savior, what love did you not bear Your Father? Could He have a greater love of Him, Brothers, than to annihilate Himself for the Father? For Saint Paul, speaking of the birth of the Son of God on earth, says that He annihilated Himself. Could He manifest a greater love than by dying for love in the way in which He died? O love of my Savior! O love! thou art incomparably greater than the Angels could, or ever will, comprehend.

His humiliations were only love, His labors only love, His prayers only love, and all His interior and exterior operations were only reiterated acts of His love. His love gave Him a great contempt for the world, contempt for the spirit of the world, contempt for its goods, contempt for its pleasures, contempt for its honors.

*That is a description of the Spirit of Our Lord with which we should be clothed and, in one word, it is always to have a great esteem and a great love of God. He was so filled with it that He never did anything of Himself or to satisfy Himself; *Quae placita sunt ei facio semper*. I always do the Will of my Father. I always perform the actions and works that are pleasing to Him. And as it is by the Will of the Father that the Eternal Son despised the world, its goods, pleasures, and honors, so too it is by despising them as He did that we shall enter into His Spirit.*

It would also be good to reread the beautiful passage on charity, in his conference of 30 May, 1659 to his Missioners. We will recall only one sentence:²⁵

O Savior! O fount of love! Humbled even unto us and even unto an infamous punishment, who loved his neighbor more than you did? You came to lay yourself open to all our miseries, to take the form of a sinner, to lead a life of suffering, and to endure a disgraceful death for our sakes; is there love like to this?... But who could love with such surpassing love?

5.4. At the moment of his coming upon earth

It is noteworthy that Vincent de Paul, following the Fathers of the Church and Bérulle, did not regard the Incarnation only at the time of Christmas, but he reread his birth as taking place all during his life and at his Passion; this is already the spirituality of the Sisters of Gethsemane.

But Vincent also meditated about **the moment of his coming upon earth, in the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation**. On 26 Sep-

²⁵ SV XII, 264, conf. 207.

tember 1659, in a conference to his confreres on the Divine Office and the importance of praise, he insisted on the meaning of adoration, the recognition of the greatness of God, the virtue of religion, one of the marks of the French School of spirituality:²⁶

Do you know, Brothers, that the first act of religion is to praise God? Let us go further and say: praise even precedes sacrifice. A maxim says: prius est esse quam operari. A thing must exist before it operates. It must be in being before being sustained: prius est esse quam sustentari. We must recognize the essence and existence of God and have some knowledge of His perfections before offering sacrifices to Him. That is natural for, I ask you, to whom do you offer gifts? To the great, to princes and Kings. It is to them you render homage.

This is so true that God observed this order in the Incarnation. When the angel went to salute the Blessed Virgin, he began by acknowledging that she was replenished with the graces of Heaven: ... He recognized the fact then, and praised her as being full of grace.

And then what did he do? He made her the beautiful gift of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. The Holy Spirit, within her virginal womb formed a body. God created a soul, united it to this body. And immediately the Word united Himself to this soul and body by a wonderful union. And, in this manner, the Holy Spirit wrought the ineffable mystery of the Incarnation. Praise preceded sacrifice.

We can also meditate with him on the Passion during the course of a conference to the Missioners on meekness, 28 March 1659:²⁷

Let us reflect on this, Gentlemen. We shall find extraordinary acts of meekness surpassing the human understanding; and let us consider how He preserves this meekness throughout.

5.5. He insists that we live in Jesus

We should recall at least what he wrote on 1 May 1635 to his first companion in the Mission, Antoine Portail, on the occasion of a failed mission:²⁸

Remember, Monsieur, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of

²⁶ SV XII, 326-327, conf. 213.

²⁷ SV XII, 192-194, conf. 202.

²⁸ SV I, 295, letter 197.

Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ. Now, once these foundations have been laid, let us give ourselves up to contempt, to shame, to ignominy, and let us disclaim the honors people pay us, the good reputation and the applause they give us, and let us do nothing which has not that end in view. Let us work humbly and respectfully.... We do not believe a man because he is very learned but because we consider him good and love him.

We conclude with the fact that **our faith in the Incarnation should pour itself out in prayer**. Do we think about this every time we recite the Angelus, if we still recite it? Monsieur Vincent urged the Daughters of Charity to pay attention to it:²⁹

This is a prayer, Sisters, that's said to thank God for coming into the world to become incarnate to save us.... That's the meaning of the Angelus. Make the intention of thanking God for this great mystery every time you hear the bell ring.

6. He left us beautiful meditations on the Eucharist

We will be content only with the little summary of the Common Rules, X, 3:

There can be no better way of paying the best honor possible to these mysteries 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.

For these reasons, nothing should be more important to us than showing due honor to this sacrament and sacrifice. We are also to make a great effort to get everyone else to pay it similar honor and reverence. We should try, to the best of our ability, to achieve this by preventing, as far as we can, any lack of reverence in word or act, and by carefully teaching others what to believe about so great a mystery, and how they should honor it.

²⁹ SV X, 570, conf. 102.

7. He exhorts us to venerate the Virgin Mary

He recommended to his Missioners the attachment to the Virgin Mary, just after the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Holy Eucharist, in Common Rules, X, 4:

Because this Bull also expressly recommends it, and for other reasons as well, we should likewise have special devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary. Confreres, therefore, both individually and collectively, should, with God's help, try to carry this out perfectly: (1) by specially honoring every day this preeminent Mother of Christ, who is also our Mother; (2) by putting into practice, as far as possible, the same virtues as she did, particularly humility and chastity; (3) by enthusiastically encouraging others, whenever opportunity and means permit, to show her the greatest reverence and always to serve her loyally.

He often meditated on the virtues of Our Lady.

He certainly commented on **the Magnificat**, since what follows is not just a simple detached fragment, but rather the echo of more developed outpourings. On 24 July 1655, he had a very original and dynamic way of paraphrasing the canticle:³⁰

May the divine Goodness be pleased to give... a big heart, vast and ample! Magnificat anima mea Dominum! Our soul must magnify, must amplify God and, to that end, may God amplify our soul, may He give us the breadth of mind enough to see and truly recognize the greatness, the plenitude of the goodness and power of God...; such an amplitude of will as to make us embrace every opportunity of producing the glory of God. Yes, the Congregation of the Mission can do all things because we have within us the germ of the omnipotence of Jesus Christ.

There was no obligation of saying the rosary for the Missioners, since they have the Breviary, but he put it in the rule of the Daughters of Charity. The rosary began slowly, beginning with the Fathers of the Desert, for those who did not know how to read, and who recited the 150 Hail Mary's in the place of the 150 Psalms that the others would recite daily. Later, according to Saint Dominic, the meditation on the mysteries was added. For the missionaries to Madagascar, in 1650, Saint Vincent obtained various faculties, including number 23, of reciting the rosary or other prayers if they could not bring along the Breviary (which was a large and heavy

³⁰ SV XI, 203-204, conf. 125.

book).³¹ This clarifies what he explained to the Sisters on 8 December 1658, concerning the deep value of the rosary:³²

Now, you know how important it is to pray it well because, of all prayers, it is the only one — I mean the Pater Noster — that Our Lord taught His Apostles; at least it is the principal prayer that makes up the Rosary. “When you pray,” He said to them, “say, Our Father, who art in heaven, etc.” Let us imagine, Sisters, that He is here among us and is telling us to do the same.

The other prayer that makes up the Rosary is the Ave Maria, which was composed by the Holy Spirit. The angel began it by greeting the Blessed Virgin, and Saint Elizabeth composed part of it when she was visited by her cousin; the Church added the rest. So this prayer was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Accordingly, Sisters, the Rosary is a very efficacious prayer when it is well said.... And this is the means by which we see so many holy souls come together to praise God and the Blessed Virgin.

That, then, is how you will pray your Rosary, dear Sisters; but be very careful to do it well; it is your breviary.

We conclude with a sentence from the **consecration of the Daughters of Charity to the Blessed Virgin**, 8 August 1655, with a remarkably modern formula:³³

Holy Virgin, you who speak for those who have no tongue and who can not speak for themselves, these good Sisters and I entreat you to assist this Little Company.

Translation: JOHN EARL RYBOLT, C.M.

³¹ SV XIII, 321, doc. 101.

³² SV X, 620-621, conf. 107.

³³ SV X, 105, conf. 69.