

Vincent de Paul: Patron and Client

by Guy Norman Hartcher, C.M.

To understand M. Vincent de Paul as evangeliser and worker for the poor we must understand the socio-political world in which he lived. He was a worker of political charity, both liberated by, and constrained by, the French political world of his time. His life and work supports the hypothesis that the Vincentian charism is revolutionary in its aims, but that its methods work within the existing social structures, aiming to transform them in the service of the poor. Two elements of Vincent's society delineate the world in which he lived. They are the fundamentally hierarchical nature of the culture, and the patronage system which provided that culture with an operating system to replace the by-then almost defunct feudalism.

A fundamentally hierarchical society

As with most hierarchical societies, birth was the prime social locator in Vincent's world. How an individual fitted into society was determined by who their parents were. No matter what an individual's achievements were, that person was branded permanently by their birth status. The branding worked in both directions. Noble families which had been discredited or lost lands and funds were still able to trade on their status for at least a couple of generations. Peasants who had managed to lift themselves by talent and luck into the higher reaches of society were a curiosity and could be subject to overt and covert hostility, criticism and discrimination. When Cardinal Mazarin¹ mocked Vincent for his shabby dress at court² he was doing several things at once. He was scoring points against a sometime opponent in the unending political games in pursuit of dominance. He was 'keeping in his place' someone who represented a consistent political vision which Mazarin

¹ For relations between Vincent and Cardinal Mazarin see JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, London 1999, pp. 537-540.

² *Ibid.*, p. 540.

only occasionally shared. But the underlying reality was that Vincent was a peasant — once a peasant always a peasant — and therefore a legitimate target. And of course Vincent not only admitted, but actively volunteered his peasant status.³

Part of the reason a peasant was a target was that society understood the social order as divinely ordained. The perception was that each person was placed by God in the place which would serve them best in their quest for Heaven. So each person had to work towards their salvation in the context in which God had placed them.⁴

The Patronage System

The Church operated within that politico-social structure which was both feudal and Christian. Bishops swore allegiance to kings and in turn had both ecclesiastical and secular vassals who swore to them. At the same time the Church's feudal structure ran in parallel to the civil one, and in this, its own sphere, that particular structure applied to spiritual as well as material elements. The Investiture crisis⁵ of the eleventh century had clarified both what was owed to Caesar and what was due to God — although there always existed the potential for flare-ups in clashes of competing interests. But broadly speaking the political pattern within the church and between church and secular society had been set by the end of that century.

But Vincent de Paul lived centuries later, in the middle of the transition period during which a dying feudalism was gradually displaced by the early modern state. France was the pioneering state within which that transformation first occurred. And the socio-political tool by which that transition was managed was the patron-client relationship.⁶ That patronage system is both a survival of, and a successor to, the feudal system. Within the feudal system

³ ROMÁN, *op. cit.*, pp. 542-543 where to the Prince de Conde Vincent claims status as “son of a poor swineherd,” a lower status than his father actually occupied as a tenant farmer.

⁴ The best understanding of the social Ordo — GEORGES DUBY's classic *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, Chicago 1980, especially pp. 66-75.

⁵ UTA-RENATE BLUMENTHAL, *The Investiture Controversy: Church and Monarchy from the Ninth to the Twelfth Century*, Philadelphia 1988, especially pp. 106-134.

⁶ A clear and specific example of the workings of that relationship is to be found in DAVID S. LUX, *Patronage and Royal Science in Seventeenth Century France*, Ithaca 1989, pp. 9-22.

every lord was also a vassal — at least in theory. Except at the very lowest level, every vassal had vassals.⁷ And of course the rights and duties were very clearly spelled out for all participants. As the balance shifted towards the centre and the king acquired more power, different mechanisms were required for the exercise of those powers. This was not new in Vincent's century. However the bureaucratisation necessary for the development of the early modern state had not yet evolved to the point that it could carry the load. So an interim management system was needed.

The patronage system filled that need. It is not an exaggeration to say that patrons and their clients ran all levels of French society. As the ancestors of the kings had had vassals to carry out their commands, so seventeenth century kings had clients who met their needs. The royal family had families of clients, as well as individual clients, who served in return for protection and advancement. Some such relationships lasted for generations as vassalage had done. In other cases a talented individual would be "adopted" as a client; that service might last a lifetime, but it might only last a short time.

Higher level clients of course became patrons to clients of their own, extending power and protection over their clients in return for service.⁸ A successful client, who might have begun in quite a lowly position, performing lowly tasks for the patron, might move up the ladder, acquiring position, wealth, gifts, power, and serving the patron in ever more significant ways. The rewards which the client received were also the tools by which that client could work for the patron's aims at a higher level. And of course if the client was unsuccessful, either his tasks for the patron were reduced to a level at which he could succeed (and his position with it) or he could be discarded in a way that the vassal could not have been. Clientage was a much less formal (and much less clear) status than vassalage had been. The obligations of the client were unwritten, and varied all the time.

The evolution of the patronage system throughout this period was rapid. The efforts of the crown, especially during the reign of Louis XIV, and those of a particularly able court, headed by Cardinal Mazarin, ensured that constant variations on the basic method

⁷ ROBERT BARTLETT, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonisation and Cultural Change 950-1350*, London 1994, pp. 45-47 and 50-55.

⁸ A good analysis of the workings of political clientism is SHARON KETTERING, "Patronage and Politics During the Fronde," in *French Historical Studies* 14, No. 3, 1986, pp. 409-441.

appeared. Gradually the basics of a bureaucracy emerged, and as this happened, the need for clientage lessened in proportion.⁹

Vincent de Paul's involvement in the patronage system as patron did not include kinship elements. He seems never to have promoted the interests of his family in this way. For all the hopes his family had in his early career, his convictions did not allow him to be of assistance to them by the time his career had developed to the point that he could have been of benefit to them. As client he was often the beneficiary of kin relationships among his various patrons — the de Gondis for example.¹⁰

Another aspect of the system which needs to be noted in terms of Vincent's involvement is the role of clientage in bridging the local and the national,¹¹ both economically and politically. Families and individuals who were quite powerful in their own provinces could still be lacking in influence at court. Indeed, regional nobility who were quite dominant in their own region could be lacking in influence at the more stratified levels of royal government. Securing such influence could be done in either direction. A regional noble could acquire a client in the royal administration who could act as his or her information conduit and who could exert influence on his or her behalf. Alternatively he or she could acquire a patron either in the person of the king, a member of the royal family, or one of the royal ministers. For someone in the further reaches of the kingdom to create the right connection could be difficult, so the role of broker became important.¹² The broker's task was twofold. He or she¹³ conveyed information both up and down the patronage ladder, and often more importantly, made recommendations both as to policy and personnel. A client who could recommend a policy action which turned out to be successful gained significantly both in influence,

⁹ SHARON KETTERING, "Patronage and Politics During the Fronde," p. 437 of *Patronage*. Note in the same place Lawrence Stone's assertion that a similar process was occurring in England at the same time.

¹⁰ Note that Vincent's tense relationship with Cardinal Mazarin arose from Mazarin's conflicts and rivalries with the faction which numbered the de Gondis among its adherents.

¹¹ The activities of the Comte d'Alais in acting through letters to secure aid for his clients and friends (note the imprecise terminology — "friend" and "client" both use "ami") who lacked influence at court — p. 140 in SHARON KETTERING, "Friendship and Clientage in Early Modern France," in *Patronage*.

¹² SHARON KETTERING, "The Historical Development of Political Clientelism," VII, 425-426 in KETTERING, *Patronage*.

¹³ And wives, mothers and sisters often acted as sponsors and brokers — and not only within the family. See SHARON KETTERING, "The Patronage Power of Early Modern French Noblewomen," V, 817-841 in KETTERING, *Patronage*.

and often in the form of gifts and promotions. A client who recommended a candidate suitable for a particular post, and whose candidate did in fact work successfully, not only gained added influence with the patron. He or she also succeeded by having a protégé of theirs given the post. That new client of their shared patron owed a debt to the broker, a debt which the broker could reclaim in either information or other services at a later date. So the skill which in the modern world would be called “networking” was closely related to the skills needed by the successful broker in the clientage system.

Among the other roles played by the Council of Conscience was one of brokerage. The Council was advisory to the Queen, and it dealt with religious issues of general importance to her and to the realm. But the appointment of Bishops and Abbots and Abbesses was one of its most politically and religiously fraught responsibilities. Although Mazarin was the President of the Council and several Bishops were among its members, Vincent appears to have been among its most influential members, because of the regard the Queen had for him, her confessor. Vincent’s aim on the Council was to further the reform of the Church and the quality of its leadership. His was the innovation by which the Council adopted criteria according to which appointments could be made, such as the rule that a candidate for the episcopacy had to have been a priest for at least a year.¹⁴

It was not only Vincent’s spiritual stance which made him the Council’s most respected member. His connections around the kingdom, and the reports of his confreres who were involved in different Provinces with parish missions meant that he had knowledge, good and bad, of candidates from around the kingdom, rather than only those candidates whose families had court connections. His work on the Council also serves as an interesting example of the way in which the clientage system was gradually being transformed into a semi-permanent bureaucracy. The establishment of general criteria for appointment and the enforcement of those criteria are indicators of the growing professionalism of the government of the kingdom, and therefore of the passing of the client system.

Vincent’s involvement in the household of Queen Anne of Austria as a client of a female member of the royal family who had patronage to bestow, gave him a position of potential influence. The members of her household were both her servants and the doers of her will.

¹⁴ ROMÁN, *op. cit.*, p. 544.

Through them she maintained a level of independence of the Cardinal and the King, Long involvement in the household of one of the great families, the de Gondis, placed him in a position to wield influence through them and through their relatives and allies.

Patronage in Vincent's life

It is particularly notable that clergy often began their careers in the households of noble women. Richelieu himself began his rise to power and prominence when he was appointed as grand almoner in the household of Anne of Austria.¹⁵ It took some time and considerable manoeuvring before he was able to parlay that appointment into one in the household of Marie de Medici, a position which placed him closer to the centres of power. Vincent de Paul began as one of the secretaries in the household of Marguerite de Valois, first wife of Henri IV.¹⁶ While Marguerite was no longer Queen, she was still a powerful figure in French social and political life, and Vincent's success in securing a position in her court was his first successful move onto the national stage. He secured the position through a broker, although there are disputes over who the broker was, either M. Antoine de Clerc de la Foret or, according to Abelly, M. Charles du Fresne, the Queen's secretary.¹⁷ This was a major step towards a significant career.

In the meantime Vincent had endured the crisis of faith which transformed his life, and had adopted Cardinal Pierre de Berulle as his guide and patron. Presumably it was the faith-transformation which led Vincent to transfer his clientage from Marguerite de Valois to the Cardinal. De Berulle was certainly one of the most significant spiritual figures of the French church; it can be argued that he was the father of the French school of spirituality through his writings, his introduction of the reformed Carmelites into France, the group of reform-minded clergy whom he gathered around himself, and his founding in Paris of the Oratory, a French version of Philip Neri's Italian Oratory.¹⁸

It was through his patron, the Cardinal, that Vincent became Parish Priest of the parish of Clichy-la-Garenne, a prosperous country town in which he exercised pastoral ministry for the first

¹⁵ ELIZABETH MARVICK, *The Young Richelieu*, 173-175

¹⁶ SHARON KETTERING, "The Patronage Power of Early Modern French Noblewomen," *op. cit.*, p. 830.

¹⁷ ROMÁN, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹⁸ ROMÁN, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-98.

time. And then, barely a year later, again at the prompting of his patron, Vincent left the parish and became tutor to the children of Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi,¹⁹ Marquis of the Golden Isles, Count de Joigny, Baron de Montmirail, and General of the Galleys, and his wife Françoise Marguerite de Silly. For the rest of his life he remained a client of the de Gondi family. In the early years de Berulle continued to have influence on him, but quite quickly Vincent began to influence Mme de Gondi, and shortly thereafter her husband as well. Benefices were bestowed on him²⁰ — rewards for the successful client whose work is acknowledged by the patron. But by this time Vincent was a changed man. So much so that by the time he had his revelation at Folleville in 1617 his personal ambitions had been transformed into ambition for the Gospel. And of course it was not only Vincent who was stunned by the ignorance of people who risked damnation by not confessing their sins. Mme de Gondi was even more powerfully struck. So the famous mission sermon of January 25, 1617, from which date Vincent insisted the mission had begun, and in which he discovered his life goal of preaching the gospel to the rural poor, began the process out of which eight years later the Congregation of the Mission was founded. But this work of foundation was itself a work of his patrons. The founders of the Congregation legally were Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi and Mme Françoise Marguerite. The inspirations for the foundation were Mme de Gondi and Vincent. The contract and the funding, and the early opportunities were all provided by the de Gondis. While Vincent was director of the Congregation for life, he was still both tutor to the de Gondi children and later chaplain to the de Gondi family. This is a clear example of the way in which Vincent was to use the patronage system for the rest of his life. As the needs of the poor called him, so he would enlist his own patrons and other, auxiliary patrons in the service of those poor. The Duchess d'Aiguillon,²¹ the niece of Cardinal Richelieu, became a long-term secondary patron for the work of the Mission. Her funds and support were always available and frequently called upon as the work of the Mission spread through France in the 1630s and 1640s.

The de Gondi family²² themselves demonstrate the effective use of the patronage system. Italian in origin, Philippe Emmanuel's first French ancestor, his great-grandfather Antoine (Antonio), who had

¹⁹ PUJO, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-50.

²⁰ The parish of Gamaches in Rouen, and a canonry of Ecouis.

²¹ ROMÁN, *op. cit.*, pp. 292-294.

²² ROMÁN, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-109.

begun life as a Florentine banker, secured the family fortunes when he was appointed Steward to the young Dauphin Henry III early in the sixteenth century. In doing so he became a client of Queen Catherine de Medici. His wife reinforced the relationship by becoming the royal governess. The careers of two of their sons indicate the skill with which their parents had served their patron, and the continuing development of the family through the next few generations indicates that the talents and judgement were inherited in the family.²³

Antoine's eldest grandson Albert became Marquis, General of the Galleys and Marshall of France, and later in his life Duke de Retz. At different times he was Governor of three different Provinces.²⁴ In a step towards the promotion of the family which is too symmetrical to be other than deliberate, Antoine's second grandson Pierre became Bishop of Langres, and later Bishop of Paris. Sufficiently involved in royal politics to become a confidant of Henri IV, he was entrusted with the King's negotiations with Pope Clement VIII to secure pardon for his sin of heresy. Later he negotiated Henri's annulment of his marriage to Marguerite de Valois. For his reward for this success he became Cardinal de Retz.

Albert had ten children. In a further upwardly mobile career his son Charles, the second Duke de Retz, married a member of the royal family, Marguerite d'Orleans. Philippe Emmanuel inherited the secondary titles of Marquis of the Golden Isles and Count de Joigny, as well as the military career and Generalate of the Galleys.

The ecclesiastical side of the family "business" was continued by Albert's other two sons. Henri became Coadjutor Bishop to his uncle Pierre in 1596, succeeded him, and later became the first Cardinal de Retz. His younger brother Jean Francois became a Capuchin and succeeded Henri as Bishop of Paris in 1623. He became the first Archbishop of Paris when the see was promoted to Metropolitan status.

By the time Vincent became a client of the General of the Galleys the de Gondi family ranked among the Grand Seigneurs of the kingdom. Even though Philippe Emmanuel joined de Berulle's Oratory in 1627 after the death of his wife, he continued to exert influence on behalf of the family, on behalf of his client Vincent de Paul, and on behalf of the Oratory of his Superior the Cardinal.

²³ For an excellent, and complete, five generation family tree of the de Gondi family see the endpapers of J.H.M. SALMON, *Cardinal de Retz: The Anatomy of a Conspirator*, London 1969.

²⁴ Provence, Metz and Nantes.

From Vincent's point of view, even after the death of Mme de Gondi and the retirement of Philippe Emmanuel, as a client of the family he could still exert influence. Of particular importance in terms of the development of the Congregation of the Mission, the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity was the influence he could exert within the Archdiocese of Paris. A stream of approvals for the different Rules and other legal documents were readily available from Jean Francois, and then from Jean-Francois Paul, the second Cardinal de Retz and Coadjutor Archbishop of Paris from 1643. Vincent had been tutor to him as to Philippe Emmanuel's other sons. Jean-Francois Paul may be regarded as one of Vincent's failures. His ambition, his political manoeuvrings and his sexual liaisons made him a prince-bishop in the old style rather than in the reformed style of the Council of Trent. Nevertheless, his family relationship with Vincent and Vincent's interest in him and efforts on his behalf ensured that the Archbishop continued to act as Vincent's patron and supported his works in return for Vincent's clientage.

Vincent's apostolate to the galley slaves was one of the noblest and most frustrating of his many apostolic initiatives. It was also one in which the workings of clientism are readily visible. Vincent himself was appointed Chaplain Royal to the Galleys in 1619 and he remained in the position for the rest of his life. The appointment was made directly by the General of the Galleys, who was of course Vincent's patron. The galleys were one of the principal arms of French military influence in the Mediterranean, and as the century wore on and conflicts with Spain and problems caused to Mediterranean trade by corsairs from North Africa grew, the importance of the galleys grew too. The rowers of the galleys were criminals who were sentenced to a term at the oar. As the needs of the fleet grew, sentences were lengthened, and applied to more classes of crime to ensure that the fleet had sufficient oarsmen. The conditions were so severe that service on the galleys was very often equivalent to a death sentence.

In his customary manner Vincent initially moved slowly and gradually until he had appraised the extent of the problem and devised his own solution. Before 1639 his efforts were fragmented and were aimed at the improvement of the worst of the situations facing the prisoners²⁵ so that his efforts simply added to the list of those working on behalf of the convicted.

²⁵ The Missioners conducted missions for the prisoners in Paris before they were sent south to the galleys; he attempted several negotiations to secure visits by different charitable groups, and twice he secured better quarters in Paris for those awaiting transfer to Marseilles.

Then in 1639 a large bequest (6000 livres) from the estate of M. Corneul, President of the Ministry of Finance, and intended for the alleviation of the conditions of the galley slaves, provided both initial resource and impetus for a major assault on the whole problem. First the Daughters of Charity were sent in to look after the material welfare of the convicts, and a dangerous and difficult work it was. Then a major mission for all the galleys at once was launched in Marseilles. Five Vincentians led by Vincent's faithful collaborator M. Francois du Coudray were assisted by Jesuits and Oratorians and the bishop and clergy of the diocese. But these were exercises in crisis management. The next stage, following Vincent's usual pattern, was to permanently improve the situation. So two construction projects occupied the first half of the 1640s — the construction of a hospital for the convicts in Marseilles, and the establishment of a house of the Mission to provide permanent spiritual care for the galley slaves, including quinquennial missions. The position of Chaplain Royal, with the right of appointment of chaplains for the galleys, was vested in perpetuity in the Superior of the Congregation of the Mission, and delegated by Vincent to the priest in charge of the house in Marseilles.²⁶ The work continued to be difficult and dangerous. Daughters of Charity and Vincentians and some of the clergy who assisted in the initial mission (including the Bishop of Marseilles) died of various plagues and diseases caught from the convicts.

So much for the problem. How did the patronage system bear upon it? Vincent's initial appointment was an act of direct patronage by Philippe Emmanuel, General of the Galleys. The continuing work of providing actual chaplains was a work of patronage also — Vincent as patron appointed clergy clients of his to the posts. Some were Vincentians, some were local parish clergy. A significant variation in the usual operation of the system occurred after the retirement of Philippe Emmanuel when the de Gondis lost the position of General of the Galleys to the opposing faction led by Cardinal Richelieu, who bestowed it upon his nephew the Duke de Richelieu. In the normal course of events the Chaplaincy Royal would have changed hands also, to a client of the Duke. But by this time Vincent had achieved sufficient status that he could claim connections on all sides of the political and patronal struggle. In the reconstruction of the facilities for the galley slaves and their care Vincent acted as co-ordinator, and enlisted the services of patrons from all sides of the aristocratic scene. Thus the queen supplied

²⁶ ROMÁN, *op. cit.*, pp. 497-502.

funds as did the Duchess d'Aiguillon, and, probably through her agency, the Cardinal himself. With the crown, the King's chief minister, the Cardinal's party, and the opposition represented by Vincent himself and supported by Cardinal de Retz who had not yet begun to lose power, Vincent had enlisted all the major players in support of the great work. So Vincent once again took the prevailing model and reshaped it into a form which could achieve his hopes for it on behalf of the Gospel.

Writings about Vincent often seem to assume that he was an independent agent responsible only to Pope and King. But the examples I have cited (and they can be echoed in his other activities when they are closely analysed) show that he was enmeshed in a cooperative socio-political system. His skill in using the structural systems of government and society in support of his revolutionary goals is what made him so formidable. His spiritual sons and daughters need to learn his skills of cautious analysis and engagement in the equivalent political and social systems of the twenty-first century.