

# Political Charity and Vincentian Spirituality Today

by Charles Pan, C.M.

## **INTRODUCTION: THE STORY OF MY VINCENTIAN VOCATION**

Before I get into my topic, I would like to first share with all of you some of my own life experience. It was not until the last year of my Senior High School that I first came to know something about the Catholic Church. Fr. Hermans (a Dutch Vincentian priest working in Taiwan) was the one who brought and lead me to really know Jesus Christ. It was because of this Jesus crucified that I was attracted to want to be close to the altar and which inevitably led me to become interested the Priesthood.

Because of my relationship with Fr. Hermans, I chose to enter the Vincentians. And during my years as a seminarian preparing for the Priesthood I often asked myself the question: "Why has God called me to enter the Priesthood as a Vincentian?" For a long time, I prayed about this as I continued my studies. And still I was unable to really meet the Heart of Jesus. It was not until my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Theology — during the summer — when I was sent to a local hospital to take part in a CPE (CLINICAL PASTORAL EDUCATION) program — that I began to see the light. In the hospital where I worked, I came in contact with some of the poorest of the poor in Taiwan. It was in their presence that I lost the security of all my studies. Why? Because no one of these poor souls in this situation understood anything about the Theology I was professing. It was here I lost the safe and secure identity that I once possessed because in this situation no one really knew who I was. It was here that I lost my own sense of dignity because no one respected me simply because of the title I held. Finally, it was after I was rejected by a patient in that hospital 12 times that I saw myself as a big failure. And as I sat in the big lobby of that hospital 'licking my own wounds' and feeling sorry for myself I surprisingly discovered that in meeting many homeless people sleeping in the park or out on the street I was no different than they were. It was in this situation that I really experienced for the first time my own deep poverty. This kind of

poverty caused me to feel very uncomfortable, uneasy, and helpless. Although in my own reasoning I clearly knew that Jesus became one of us and was incarnated in the most useless and worthless of human beings, still in my own heart it was difficult to understand and fully comprehend why Jesus would incarnate Himself in these people. Every cell in my body was reacting against all that Jesus did in accepting the most pitiable of people. Helping or reaching out to these kinds of people, I can easily do. But accepting the reality that I am one of these rejected people and the poorest of the poor and that Jesus came to save and show compassion to me too was literally impossible for me to fathom and accept. Yet Jesus had chosen this way to show me how to reach out with love to others.

### **THE POLITICAL CHARITY OF JESUS CHRIST**

As an Apostle of Charity, Jesus Christ was the rule of the life of Vincent de Paul, and was considered as the center of his life and his whole activity. Jesus Christ is a model of perfect charity.

Jesus Christ is the sacrament of God the Father. The filial union of Jesus with the Father is expressed in the perfect love which he also made the principal commandment of the Gospel: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment" (Mt 22:37-38). As we know, to this commandment Jesus attached a second, "like the first," that of love of one's neighbor (cf. Mt 22:39). He proposed himself as a model of this love: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34). He taught and gave his followers a love patterned on his own model.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus did not live on his own behalf, but so that the world might be saved and the Kingdom of God might come. He said: "I came that men may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). Christ Jesus, "who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross." He was God's servant, certainly, but at the same time servant to his brothers and sisters, to give them life and to fulfill the kingdom of God among them by showing them the love of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Jesus Christ Is a Model of Perfect Love*, General Audience, August 31, 1988.

In a foundational text from St. Luke's gospel (4:16-21), we witness Jesus on a Sabbath day in his hometown Nazareth. "As he usually did," Jesus came to the synagogue for worship and he was invited to read. He took the scroll of Isaiah the prophet, searched out its mighty missionary text (61:1-2) and proclaimed: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord." Then, after a dramatic pause, Jesus made the astonishing announcement: "This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening" (Luke 4:18-21).

As Superior General, Fr. Gregory Gay comments about this text: Here we have a passionate social justice text, which Jesus deliberately chose to launch his work. So passionate was Jesus about justice and God's Kingdom, that he wanted the heavenly harvest to begin right here on earth, in and through him. The Kingdom of God is what life would be like on earth if God were in charge. It is God's dream, God's passion. Jesus was so passionate about fulfilling God's dream that he lived and died for it. It is the dream for this earth of Vincent de Paul's and of ours.

## **APOSTLE OF CHARITY: THE WAY OF VINCENT DE PAUL**

### **1. *The beginning:*<sup>2</sup>**

Before the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission in 1625, in spite of the wonderful interior journey and fruitful work, Vincent's life was defined in relationship to Bérulle and the Gondi family and temporary appointments arising from these relationships, such as his position as chaplain and almoner to Henry IV's former wife, Queen Marguerite de Valois; his service in the parishes of Clichy, Folleville, and Châtillon-les-Dombes; and his role as chaplain general to the galleys and missions on the Gondi estates. His one lasting initiative, prior to the founding of the Mission, was the establishment of the Confraternities of Charity beginning at Châtillon in 1617. With the founding of the Mission and the care of the Confraternities of Charity before him, his life's work was in place.

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<sup>2</sup> H.F. O'DONNELL, *Vincent de Paul: His Life and Way*, in F. RAYN - J.E. RYBOLT, ed., *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, and Writings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1995, pp. 24-25.

## **2. *The foundation of the congregation of the mission:***<sup>3</sup>

Once Vincent had gotten the aid from the Gondis to found the Congregation of the Mission, all his efforts went into obtaining official recognition. The archbishop of Paris recognized the new community on 24 April 1626. Seven years later, after considerable negotiation and a number of difficulties, the Congregation of the Mission received papal approval. The congregation grew slowly at first. In the early years of the congregation they had to rely on their neighbors to keep an eye on their residence, the Collège des Bons Enfants. By 1632 seven priests formed the congregation and they moved to larger quarters, the immense priory of Saint Lazare.

## **3. *The Response of new situation:***<sup>4</sup>

During these years, the development of the Confraternities of Charity occupied a place of primacy along with the development of the mission. From their beginning at Châtillon, the charities were organized at the local level and, consequently had the flexibility to respond to new situation as they arose. Beyond caring for the sick poor, as they had been founded to do, they began to respond to the needs of beggars, then of prisoners and galley convicts, and eventually of young indigent couples and victims of famine and war.

## **4. *The expansion of the work:***<sup>5</sup>

In 1628, when the bishop of Beauvais decided to have a few days of retreat for priesthood candidates to prepare them for ordination, he had come to this decision in conversation with Vincent, whom he then asked to take responsibility for the retreat. This was a great innovation at the time. In 1633, in collaboration with some priests of Paris, Vincent established the Tuesday Conferences. Vincent chaired the meetings, and after a period of prayer the priests shared their thoughts and convictions about what it meant to be a priest. Their interaction was mutually encouraging; on leaving these meetings, all felt charged with renewed zeal. The Tuesday Conferences bore great fruit in promoting high ideals of priesthood and in fostering mutual support among the priests. Many future bishops attended

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> H.F. O'DONNELL, *Vincent de Paul: His Life and Way*, in F. RAYN - J.E. RYBOLT, ed., *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, and Writings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1995, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

the conferences, which gave Vincent an opportunity to become acquainted with them firsthand as it gave them an opportunity to deepen and purify their priestly commitments.

### **5. *The foundation of the Daughters of Charity:*<sup>6</sup>**

In the work of charity what was needed was a heart, a soul, and an unconditional fidelity. In response to this need, Louis de Marillac recognized her mission and eventually, with Vincent, founded the Daughters of Charity. Vincent and Louise became father and mother to the Daughters of Charity.

### **6. *The new and Urgent Work:*<sup>7</sup>**

In 1638, Vincent undertook the care of abandoned children. In the beginning Vincent entrusted some of the children to Louise, and before long Vincent and Louise embraced the entire work. A dozen Daughters of Charity were assigned to this work and thirteen houses were built to receive the children.

### **7. *The first great crusade of charity:*<sup>8</sup>**

At the beginning of 1639, Vincent became aware of the extreme distress of the province of Lorraine, ravaged by war, famine and plague. He appealed to the Ladies of Charity, and during the next ten years he did not stop sending help. Centers of assistance were set up and funded to provide food and shelter for the hungry and homeless and to nurse the sick. From St. Lazare, Vincent exhorted, consoled, advised, and begged all to be patient. He organized missions for the refugees, received young women in danger, and mobilized assistance for the impoverished nobility of Lorraine. He also took advantage of his contacts with the prime minister, Cardinal Richelieu, and other influential people to plead for peace.

### **8. *The significant influence on Church and the royal family:*<sup>9</sup>**

In 1643, Vincent undertook an entirely new set of responsibilities. After the death of her husband, Louis XIII, and during the minority of Louis XIV, Queen Anne of Austria formed the Council of

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> H.F. O'DONNELL, *Vincent de Paul: His Life and Way*, in F. RAYN - J.E. RYBOLT, ed., *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, and Writings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1995, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Ecclesiastical Affairs, to which she immediately appointed Vincent. In these meetings Vincent exercised significant influence on the selection of good and worthy bishops, oversaw the renewal of monastic life, dealt with Jansenism, and was able to keep the plight of the people and the poor before the government of France.

After following the footprint of the charitable way of Vincent de Paul, we know that Vincent did a great deal of charitable work for the poor. One could say the entire basis of Vincent's spirit was to recognize in the poor the face of Christ, and to serve in the poor our Lord Jesus Christ. But we often neglect another aspect of his legacy. St. Vincent, however, has left us a particularly beautiful gift. That is his creativity which resulted in a methodology adapted to the times in which he lived, and which is still relevant in our time.

Vincent's zeal for the service of the poor was such that he appreciated the need to create sustainable ways of serving the poor. To do this, he had to humbly invite the collaboration of others. He had to inspire them through his spirituality and release in them their own creativity and talent for the service of the poor.

Not only this, he brought together all available resources for the service of the poor, old and young, men and women, clerics and laity, royal family and peasants, wealthy and poor, etc. All are mobilized to his task.

Vincent recognized the potential both of the laity and of women and their role in creating a just world. This is a new concept which emerges in him, at a time when there were few expectations of the laity, and women had an inferior place in society.

Vincent by these means planted a seed. In his lifetime this seed was already a flourishing sapling. He was himself very influential. Today that plant is a mature tree. There are 260 religious communities or lay organizations which bear his mark. In fact, one can see that much of the contemporary service of the poor in the Church is heavily influenced by this 17<sup>th</sup> century French Saint.

In the poor, Vincent saw and tried to console Christ himself. The message of Vincent has a source, a strength, and an unmistakable focal point which is specifically theological: it is born of Christ, it is nourished by the thirst for Christ, it tends towards Christ. Union with Jesus Christ: this is the goal of the untiring and insatiable search seen in the existential trajectory of Vincent de Paul. He is a man who always searches for the will of God and pays attention to it, and lives a Christocentric vocation in the Holy Spirit.

## COMING ALIVE TODAY

Vincent de Paul makes the perennial timeliness of the Gospel come alive. Each one is like a living parable of that phrase in the Letter to the Hebrews: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8). Today, just as two thousand years ago on the roads of Palestine, Christ is walking at our side and calling us: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mt 19:21). Today, as then, each and every person can rest his head on Jesus' breast and listen to the heartbeat of God's love for his creatures (cf. Jn 13:25). Now, let us see one concrete example, St. Anne's home which is alive with the spirit of political charity.

Father G. Beunen, C.M., came to Taiwan in 1951 from Holland. He took the post of Head of the Communications Department of the Vatican Embassy to Taiwan and head of the Dutch Vincentian Mission in Taiwan. He established the Catholic Parish of Shipai in 1962 and actively developed pastoral work at the Veteran's Hospital. When preaching around Taiwan, he saw many handicapped children living without proper care. The idea of setting up a nursing home just popped out of his head. However, there was not enough financial support in Taiwan. Father Beunen therefore came back to Holland to raise more funds. Finally, with more contributions from the churches and the kind-hearted people in Holland, Father Beunen built St. Anne's Home faithfully in 1972 in Taiwan.

Over these decades, the children receiving St. Anne's help increases. St. Anne's Home keeps facing the problem of insufficient financial and human resources. To congregate more resources from our society, St. Anne's Home officially registered in March of 1998.

The current Supervisor of St. Anne's Home, Father Van Aert, has followed the spirit Father Buneun insisted on, Jesus' words: "Whenever you did this to these little ones who are my brothers and sisters, you did it to me." He continues to provide a loving "home" where the seriously retarded children are well taken care of, where the children share the warmth of a family. In order for us to be of more service to the handicapped, we have established the Buneun Foundation.

In fact, St. Anne's Home was founded in the 70s in Taiwan precisely because the local people and government were neglecting the plight of the handicapped in the Taiwanese society. With the presence of St. Anne's Home, there was a clear sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God. St. Anne's Home has become a kind of teacher and a conscience for the government and the local people and continually reminds both the government and the society of the welfare and immediate needs of the handicapped in Taiwan.

## CONCLUSION

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Benedict XVI encourages us who repeat at every Mass: “Give us this day our daily bread,” “to do everything possible, in cooperation with international, state and private institutions, to end or at least reduce the scandal of hunger and malnutrition afflicting so many millions of people in our world, especially in developing countries. In a particular way, the Christian laity, formed at the school of the Eucharist, are called to assume their specific political and social responsibilities. To do so, they need to be adequately prepared through practical education in charity and justice.”<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, Pope Benedict XVI addressed the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean in Aparecida, Brazil, 13 May 2007, “The Church is the advocate of justice and of the poor, precisely because she does not identify with politicians nor with partisan interests. Only by remaining independent can she teach the great criteria and inalienable values, guide consciences and offer a life choice that goes beyond the political sphere. To form consciences, to be the advocate of justice and truth, to educate in individual and political virtues: that is the fundamental vocation of the Church in this area.”

As Vincentians, we are sure that the contempt that some people have for local no-hopers, for those unable to cope, is present also on a global scale: contempt for the vast poor in Mainland China, many people and families in recent tsunami incidents in Asia, AIDS sufferers all over the world and many millions of others. Someone has to speak for them, in the name of Christ, and this is part of our vocation. If necessary someone has to be a countersign to the modern pattern of thought which says ‘If they are not useful, if they do not produce anything, then they do not count.’ We cannot see how this can any longer be an optional extra to our proclamation of the Gospel; any gospel we proclaim which does not have this cry for justice somewhere in it, will be faulty, defective.

“Hate evil, love good, let justice reign at the city gate.”

(Amos 5:15)

“Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate.”

(Lk 6:36)

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<sup>10</sup> BENEDICT XIV, *Sacramentum caritatis*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007, no. 91.

These invitations of God always give Vincentians a big challenge and help them to imitate Jesus Christ as Saint John Gabriel Perboyre prayed:

O my Divine Saviour  
Transform me into Yourself.  
May my hands be the hands of Jesus.  
May my tongue be the tongue of Jesus.

Grant that every faculty of my body  
May serve only to glorify you.

Above all,  
Transform my soul and all its powers  
So that my memory, will and affections  
May be the memory, will and affections  
Of Jesus.

I pray to you  
To destroy in me  
All that is not of you.

Grant that I may live  
But in You, by You and for You,  
So that I may truly say with St. Paul,  
“I live now, not I,  
But Christ lives in me.”