

Vincent de Paul: the Social Commitment of a Man of Spirit

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Three ways of looking at a saint

The Soviet historian, Boris Porschnev, is witness to the first way, which is also the most common: Vincent de Paul is the great “organizer of charity.”¹ This is not to say that before Vincent de Paul there was no organized charity. There is abundant evidence of it in the history of the previous centuries of the Church and of European civil society, as well as outside them, as in the Muslim world. But Vincent de Paul would stand out in the history of charity for having known how to organize it on a large scale and with “modern” means, such as the creation of stable organizations dedicated to charity, the use of media such as printed advertizing, the systematic collection of public and private funds, the accounting and careful administration of resources, as well as other aspects.

All of this is certain; Porschnev is not mistaken in his assessment of Vincent de Paul. But there remains another question for the historian: Is being the “organizer of charity” the only relevance of Vincent de Paul for history? In this portrait have other more decisive and defining aspects of a figure such as Vincent de Paul, and his influence in social history, been omitted?

The second way is put forth by A. Ménabréa when he writes: “We owe the revolution that in the past three hundred years has transformed the social life, and the spirit of our laws, to Saint Vincent de Paul. The past had no idea of the institutions that the states... have created since then: help for the poor, health insurance, the legal obligation to aid the unfortunate, to go to the aid of the victims of war, of disasters..., the public organization of education, the learning of vocational skills.”²

¹ In *Les soulèvements populaires en France au XVII^e siècle*, Flammarion, Paris, 1972, p. 359.

² A. MÉNABRÉA, *La révolution inaperçue: Saint Vincent de Paul, le savant*, Marcel Daubin, Paris, 1948, pp. 9-10.

If Porschnev's vision is limited in expressing the importance of Vincent de Paul's influence in social history, it is possible that Ménabréa has exaggerated in his presentation. On the one hand, not all that Ménabréa attributes to Vincent de Paul can truly be ascribed to him. For example, the awareness on the part of public authorities of the obligation to help the needy is much earlier than Saint Vincent himself. Thomas Aquinas, witness to an even earlier way of thinking, writes in the 13th century that: "The one who governs should care for the poor using the funds of the public treasury."³

On the other hand, Vincent de Paul is not the only one whose influence was felt in all the areas that Ménabréa attributes to him. Let us briefly remember the ideas of many writers and leaders of the Enlightenment, or of the movements for social change that were so prevalent in the 19th century. But Ménabréa points to an irrefutable historical reality: no one before Vincent de Paul had as keen a vision of the social needs of the poor population, as well as of their solutions; none of the important figures of his time... neither in the ecclesiastical institution (Bérulle, Saint Francis de Sales...), nor in civil society as a whole (Descartes, Pascal...).

To sum up: to attribute to Vincent de Paul such a decisive influence in the evolution of social consciousness could be somewhat of an exaggeration, although Ménabréa is not totally mistaken when he does this. Without a doubt, the figure of Vincent de Paul is very important in the evolution of social consciousness. This was clearly seen by some of the minds of the French Revolution who rescued Vincent de Paul as the only figure in the canon of saints who could inspire their own plans for the reconstruction of society.

But there is a third way of defining Vincent de Paul which can be summed up in this affirmation: Vincent de Paul was a saint. If this affirmation is not seen as fundamental to the personality of Vincent de Paul, and as the source of all that he did, as well as the source of the historical influence of his ideas and his works, then we cannot understand Vincent de Paul.⁴ Neither can the figure of Jesus Christ, nor can the final reasons for his influence in the history of humanity be understood, if we try to ignore, as has been attempted unsuccessfully many times in the last three centuries, that he was the human incarnation of God.

³ "Princeps debet providere pauperibus de aerario publico," in *De regimine principum*, book 2, chapter 15.

⁴ "The one who does not see him above all as a mystic imagines a Vincent de Paul who never existed."

H. BRÉMOND, in *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, A. Colin, Paris, 1967, Vol. III, p. 219.

Vincent de Paul: a saint, a spiritual man, a man of the Spirit who manifests the richness and the fruitfulness of his spiritual experience in works with a broad social influence. Although in the history of the Church Vincent de Paul was by no means the first to manifest the strength of his spiritual life in works with social implications, it seems to us that with regard to this dimension, he is the most notable figure within this history. Not all spiritual men or women have known how to turn their spiritual experience into a source of important social action and influence.

Vincent de Paul and the histories of spirituality

Can one write a history of spirituality without mentioning Vincent de Paul at all, or giving him, at most, a tiny space in that history? Without a doubt it can be done, and in fact, has been done many times. There have been experts in the history of spirituality who certainly mention Vincent de Paul, but in order to make observations such as “his personal spirituality does not offer anything original,”⁵ or that “in strictly religious material, he is no more than a disciple of St. Francis de Sales, and even more so, of Bérulle.”⁶

What the authors of these two quotes mean is that in *their* visions of the history of spirituality, based on works written by men and women of different spiritual experiences, it is hardly worth mentioning Vincent de Paul as an important figure. And certainly Vincent de Paul did not leave any written work. But neither of the authors considers an interesting possibility: Would it be possible, on the one hand, that spiritual experience might be expressed, not in writings, but rather in actions,⁷ and that, on the other hand, here is an important spiritual experience, quite original, that has not been studied by the histories of spirituality that are based on books?

Without a doubt, this is the case with Vincent de Paul, a man of spirit who expressed the depth of his spiritual life, not in writings, more or less systematic, (as in Saint John of the Cross or Saint Teresa of Avila), but rather in works with a tremendous social projection.⁸

⁵ L. COGNET, *De la Dévotion Moderne a la spiritualité française*, Flammarion, Paris, 1972, p. 359.

⁶ H. BRÉMOND, *op. cit.*, Vol. III. p. 218.

⁷ This is how Garrigou-Lagrange, for example, sees him, and comparing him with Saint John of the Cross, considers him a mystic of action. See also G.L. COLLUCIA, *Spiritualità vincenziana, spiritualità dell'azione*, M. Spada editore, Rome, 1978.

⁸ Although Vincent de Paul did not write works of a systematic nature, he certainly expressed his spiritual vision in his abundant conferences to his

The spiritual roots of Vincent de Paul's social action

The evangelical basis of Vincent de Paul's spiritual-social vision could be founded in that teaching of Jesus Christ which transcends merely human goodness: "The second commandment is like the first: You shall love your neighbor as yourself..." (Mt 22:39), a teaching which one of his most faithful disciples would express years later in this unequivocal manner: "Whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen... whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 Jn 4:20-21). For his part, Vincent expressed the same idea with a well-known phrase that is typical of him, and which could scandalize a little the first time it is heard: "It is not enough for me to love God, if my neighbor does not love him" (XII, 262).

This phrase, by itself, dismantles in one swift blow all theology or spiritual vision which is centered exclusively in God, and which does not take into account at the same time, the human person. Every theology, if it seeks to be Christian, must be anthropological theology, or theological anthropology. That is because outside of Christianity theological-spiritual constructions and even mystical constructions of great heights are possible (Judaism, Islam...). It also dismantles at once every spiritual vision, no matter how mystical, which is centered exclusively in the union of the individual soul with God, which pretends to ignore all that is human to come to a pure union with the divinity,⁹ including laying aside the humanity of Christ, as some authors who were contemporaries of Vincent taught.

But Vincent de Paul could not lay aside the humanity of Christ, not in the beginnings of his spiritual life, nor as he progressed, nor even in his most advanced state. Through the humanity of Christ, one goes to the Father ("I am the way"), and through the humanity of Christ one also goes to all human beings, above all to the human

missionaries and to the Daughters of Charity and the Ladies of Charity, as well as in his several thousand letters. But, naturally, it is much more difficult and more labor-intensive to draw out his spiritual vision from this abundant occasional material than from systematic writings. Nevertheless, there are excellent works that have attempted to do so. We cite as the most complete and systematic: C. RICCARDI, *Perfezione evangelica, tutto il pensiero di S. Vincenzo de Paoli esposto con le sue parole*, Rome, 1965.

⁹ It would not be wise to be scandalized, nor even surprised by this affirmation, above all if one knows the authentic thinking of the true mystics. Saint Teresa of Avila writes for example: "The Lord only asks two things of us: love of His Majesty, and of our neighbor. The surest sign that we keep both commandments is to keep the one of loving our neighbor; for it cannot be known if we love God... but it can be known if we love our neighbor." *The Interior Castle*, fifth mansion, chapter 3.

being who is poor and suffering, as was Christ Himself: "Turn the medal around, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who desired to be poor, is represented to us by the poor" (XI, 32). This is the faith of Vincent de Paul; this is the basis of his spiritual life and of the social projection of his works.

The social roots of the social action of Vincent de Paul

Every human being is my neighbor, including the stranger and the Samaritan (Lk 10:36-37). And so no Christian, who wants to nourish his spiritual life with the spiritual experience of Christ, needs to go very far to practice, as he did, compassion, true love and even the giving up of one's life, on behalf of the neighbor. Unless one lives a solitary life on an island, or in the desert, there will always be someone nearby in need of help. This has always been well known and practiced by men and women of all spiritual styles and in all stages of the spiritual life.

However, neither in every age nor in every individual, is there a clear awareness about the social dimensions of human life. The modern society of today is, without a doubt, more conscious of these dimensions than the societies in past times. Its awareness includes the limits of humanity itself. Now the neighbor is not simply the individual who is near; rather, all human beings are neighbors. Human persons do not see themselves as mere members of closed institutions (small rural communities, feudal structures, guilds, parishes...), to which they owe all their loyalty. Rather they see themselves, more and more, as citizens of the world, members of one humanity.

Faced with this reality, Christian charity must clearly put into practice, without forgetting "close" relationships with those who are near, a vision and practice of "distant" relationships which take into account not only the needs of individuals in close proximity to us, but also the needs of social groupings, both near and far, and of the individuals who make up these groupings, in whatever part of the world they may be. Both Paul Ricoeur and Father Chenu opportunely warned us of this over half a century ago. This is also without a doubt the vision of what has been called the Social Doctrine of the Church since the encyclical of Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891.

But, as we have said, not every age has had a clear awareness of, nor do all Christians today understand, this new social and universal content of the word "neighbor" and consequently, the new obligations that flow from faith in Jesus Christ (although he certainly had this awareness: see, for example, Mt 28:19).

But Vincent de Paul also had this awareness: the conviction that, although it was necessary to continue feeding the hungry, it was also necessary to improve the spiritual and social conditions of the masses of peasants, war refugees, slaves, abandoned children, prisoners, and the masses of poor heathens. But in order to have this vision of charity as a social virtue, it was necessary to have a social vision of human reality which was not easy to come by in earlier times, times of small “closed” social structures, that began to disintegrate with the discovery of new worlds and the creation of political structures much broader than the feudal structures (nation states), structures that were collapsing in all of Europe under Vincent de Paul’s own eyes.

A new vision: Christian spirit and social consciousness

In the long history of Christian charity, Vincent de Paul occupies a place which, although quite original, also drinks from the same source which gave rise to this history, the charity of Christ. The historian Henry Kamen correctly framed this idea as he observed that Vincent de Paul’s action, although new in its forms, was grounded in the medieval vision of charity.¹⁰ Medieval means, in this case, Christian, based on the conviction that “God loves the poor, and He loves those who love the poor,” as Vincent de Paul himself would say. To sum up briefly: the theological suppositions of the work of Saint Vincent are grounded in the Gospel and in early Christian tradition.

What is new in Vincent de Paul is the conscious projection of these theological suppositions, now not only to alleviate individual cases, but rather to improve the social conditions for different groupings of the poor. The function of charity is not only to alleviate hunger and clothe the naked, but rather it is about trying to improve in a stable way the living conditions for all kinds of needy who are hungry and lack clothing, the uprooted (emigrants), personal difficulties (abandoned children), unemployment (elderly craftsmen, peasants expelled from their lands), the lack of freedom (slaves), lack of culture (rural schools), religious ignorance (the peasant world of his time). Traditional charity must be manifest now also in works with a social projection to try to build a more just society in all aspects, including the religious dimension, and not simply to alleviate the material or spiritual needs of some poor persons.

¹⁰ H. KAMEN, *The Iron Century: Social Change in Europe, 1550-1660*, Weindenfeld & Nicholson, London, part III, chapter 8.

We say “must” because undoubtedly in Vincent de Paul’s vision, the exercise of the virtue of mercy is not (as it was in the traditional vision, and continues to be in the general Christian mentality) an optional practice that depends on the capacity for compassion and the generosity of the individual, but rather it is something which is demanded by justice: “God will grant you the grace, Monsieur, of softening our hearts toward the wretched creatures and of realizing that in helping them we are doing an act of justice and not of mercy.”¹¹ Vincent, by implication and by contrast, attributes not seeing the situation this way as “hardness of heart,” and so he asks God for the grace of softening or moving our hearts so that we can see and understand the situation in this way. This calls for a radical change of vision, a true conversion of mind and heart.

This new vision does not in any way suppose a rejection of the virtue of mercy, but rather the opposite; it supposes the radical consolidation of mercy (that mercy which is not optional, but which is demanded by justice) and at the same time places mercy in the social sphere, for justice is the cardinal virtue which governs the social relations between individuals, groups and institutions.

For example: in the “spiritual” sphere, it was unjust that the institutions of the Church center their activities primarily in the cities and neglect the rural world. Religious instruction and the pastoral activity of the institutions of the Church are owed to the peasants (or to the pagans) by strict justice, for they have the right to them. All this cannot be left, as though by fate, to the personal zeal or mercy of the pastoral agents of the moment. In the “material” sphere, it was also unjust that in French society there were those who lived with an abundance of economic and cultural goods, while the masses of peasants and workers were barely able to exist at subsistence level, or not even that, or that they were illiterate. And so there exists the obligation of justice to try to raise the economic and cultural level of the underprivileged masses. The heart filled with mercy (as Vincent de Paul’s certainly was) must dedicate itself to trying to alleviate these evils. And it must be convinced that it is acting strictly out of justice, a justice that calls for the reform or change of social or legal structures that produce injustice.

This vision seems new to us in social history and in the history of the Church. And we do not exaggerate when we attribute its originality and innovation to Vincent de Paul. Today this vision has

¹¹ Saint Vincent writes this to one of his missionaries who worked to improve the religious and material conditions of those who were condemned to the galleys. See VII Letter 2546.

begun to spread powerfully both within and outside the Church, thanks be to God. It is the action of the Spirit that promotes ideas that directly attack the powerful egotism of individuals, of certain social classes and of all nations.

We do not mean that Vincent de Paul was, by any means, the inventor of this vision. As was said above, all that is meaningful in the life, the work and the sayings of Vincent de Paul, has its roots in the Gospel and in the charity of Christ. But Vincent de Paul knows his Gospel well, and he knows that it is said of Christ (citing Isaiah 42:1-4) that, "he will announce righteousness to the nations." However it is this righteousness which establishes the (new) justice, a justice which is above and beyond the concrete demands of Mosaic Law. Moreover this righteousness is proclaimed to all the nations, and not only to the chosen people. All the nations must govern themselves from now on by the righteousness that Jesus of Nazareth announces moved by the Spirit of God (Mt 12:18).

The Kingdom of God and his justice

After thirty or forty years of speaking about this, there is a consensus among exegetes and theologians that, although Jesus said many things about God and about himself, he did not come into the world precisely to speak about God, or about himself. Rather, he came to announce the Kingdom or the reign of God in the history of humanity and in the life to come. Discrepancies of interpretation arise when we try to define the signs that effectively manifest that God reigns in human history. But there are no discrepancies about the fundamental affirmation: Jesus teaches us that God wants us to allow him to reign in our personal life and in all our interpersonal and social relationships.

Moreover it is a question of the reign of God and of his justice (Mt 6:33). Because when justice, as God understands it and as Jesus has revealed it to us, is established, then the reign of God becomes real in both personal life and in social life. This is valid for every human being and for all his social relationships: marriage, family, the world of work, of leisure, of culture, in the economic world, and in politics. No dimension of human life should remain at the margins of the demands of God's justice. And so what is called justice in different human societies, will in fact be justice, to the degree that it reflects God's own vision of justice. We learn in the teachings of Jesus Christ exactly what the justice of God entails.

That is how Vincent de Paul sees it, and he says as much in a conference to his missionaries on seeking the Kingdom of God

(XII, 130). As he speaks about (human) justice, he employs the usual terms of the Christian moral tradition, which in turn, borrows them from Greek philosophy and from Roman law: commutative justice and distributive justice. But what is truly interesting in Vincent de Paul's vision is the clearly expressed conviction that justice is not just an invention of the human mind, or of human moral sensibility. Rather, it depends upon God himself: "Our justice maintains a certain relationship and similarity to divine justice, for ours depends upon it" (XII, 335-336).

If Vincent de Paul has understood it well, all human justice, as well as having its source in God, also finds in God's justice the criteria for judging its authenticity. Not all that passes for being just in a given society is necessarily just in the eyes of God. There are social relationships based on human law (which in a positivist vision of law is the only source of justice) which would be clearly seen as unjust if viewed in the light of God's justice. To give an example that seems evident to (almost) everyone: if slavery were permitted by the law of a given country, it would be unjust precisely because it is unjust in God's eyes. Human law could make slavery legal in that country (a judge could not condemn a person who owned slaves) but it could not make slavery just. Almost all of the human rights which today are accepted (almost) universally as "clear" demands of justice, have been violated by the legislation of practically all societies throughout history.

The differences and conflicts that are false in their theoretical aspect, but which are quite real in practice which occur, on the one hand, because of the flaws and imperfections of what is frequently called justice in the human legal world, and on the other hand, the demands of God's justice taught by Jesus Christ, have caused problems for the Christian conscience. In theory, the demands of justice and charity that proceed from God coincide. They are the same. Remember the phrase of Saint Vincent which was quoted above about mercy as a requirement of justice. In practice, and in the traditional mentality even today, the situation is quite different. And so it is said, as though it were quite evident, that charity should try to accomplish what justice alone is not able to do, that charity and justice should be complementary, etc.

But all of this is certain only because very often human justice does not take into account the demands of God's justice, and even rather often goes against the justice of God. When this happens, then charity is seen as the virtue which remedies the evils caused by human (in)justice. But in God himself, and in the evangelical vision out of which Vincent de Paul lived, this is not the way things are

presented. In that vision, charity and justice are fused.¹² In order to truly love, one must truly be just; to be truly just, one must truly love. Justice and charity, yes; but as two concepts which refer to the same reality from two different points of view, and not as two realities with different content. Because of this, the charitable soul cannot dedicate itself to doing works of charity without also considering as proper to itself the work of establishing true justice both in the society in which it lives, and in the entire world.

To sum up and return to Vincent's idea of seeking the reign of God: what the Gospel asks of us is that we work ("seeking implies concern for, it means action" XII, 131) so that by means of the justice which is in accord with God's own heart, the reign of God be made possible in this world. But in order to do this, one must be animated by a love like that which Christ had for all of humanity, above all for that part of humanity that suffers from human injustice, injustice which is all too often embedded in the legal systems of the nations.

The heritage of Saint Vincent de Paul

The institutions recognized by the Catholic Church that make up what is known as the Vincentian Family, are constituted by hundreds of thousands of men and women who recognize themselves explicitly as members of these institutions and recognize the spiritual vision (that is to say: the way of being Christian, of being a follower of Christ) of Saint Vincent de Paul as their own. This spirituality should animate all aspects of their lives. Three of these institutions were founded by Vincent de Paul: the International Association of Charity or Volunteers of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. Other institutions, some two hundred, were founded in the following three hundred years by other persons, some of whom were members of one of the three which were founded by Vincent himself. Among these institutions which were not founded by Vincent, nor by a member of the three which he founded, the Society or Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul stands out, both because of its number of members and its extension. The Society was founded in 1833 by a small group of young university students in Paris, among whom was Blessed Frederic Ozanam, who was only

¹² Blessed Frederic Ozanam, at the tender age of twenty, also saw this. He was one of the best, if not the best, of those who have been inspired by the spirituality of Saint Vincent de Paul. He wrote to his friend Auguste Materne on April 19, 1831: the law of love "should be the only law which governs all human actions."

twenty years old when it was founded and who would be remarkable in later history.

This imposing group of institutions and of Christians belonging to the Vincentian Family has not had a single or homogeneous history; although there have always been more or less close relationships among some of them. Moreover, in the majority of them, there is no written history of the institution. Keep in mind these two realities in order to appreciate the value, or the lack of value, of the considerations about the history of the spiritual heritage of Saint Vincent de Paul that we will offer below.

On December 3, 1852, at the age of 39, eight months before his death, Frederic Ozanam wrote to a friend while he was on a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Vincent de Paul: "I owed a visit to this much loved patron who preserved me from many evils in my youth, and who showered so many unexpected blessings on our humble conferences. There we have seen the old oak tree under which Vincent, who was a shepherd as a boy, took cover while he watched over the flock. This tree is still standing, supported by the bark of its trunk, which has been devoured over the years. But its branches are magnificent, and they still have green foliage, even at this advanced age. I see in it what seems to me an image of Saint Vincent de Paul's foundations."

This image of the tree, worm-eaten but still full of life (and it is this way even today, more than 150 years after Ozanam's letter), serves as a metaphor for the state of the spiritual heritage of Saint Vincent de Paul, throughout the three long centuries since his death in 1660.

Like all human institutions which have not been swept away by the march of history, the institutions of Vincentian inspiration have lived, during the more than three long centuries since the death of the founder, moments of splendor here and there, years of little more than mere survival, and in some cases they have simply disappeared. But without a doubt many of the branches of that old trunk continue to be full of life, even today, some one hundred fifty years after the death of Ozanam.

A catalogue of the charitable works maintained today, at the beginning of the Twenty-first Century, by the branches of the Vincentian Family, of the financial bases that maintain them, and of the number of volunteers who work in them (the young and the not so young, the married, single or widowed, priests and lay brothers, Daughters of Charity) would doubtless impress a reader of whatever faith, or of none at all, including even those who are dedicated to and recognized for works which are similar to those maintained by Vincentian institutions. We will not insist on this point, for it is well

known in the wide circles of public opinion. Truly the old tree trunk has given in the past, and continues to give today, signs of vitality in practically all the nations of the world.

This investigation has not attempted to describe in detail the various social ideas of Saint Vincent de Paul; and in fact it has not done so. It is focused on only one idea that seems fundamental to us: the necessity of integrating work for social justice into the traditional demands of charity, and moreover as a central aspect of charity, and not merely as an application or consequence of charity.

Today, after the unequivocal teachings of the Social Doctrine of the Church, and those of Vatican Council II, after much study, and much rhetoric, after so much social movement centered on the defense of human rights, the awareness of the need to integrate justice into the demands of charity is spreading rapidly within the Catholic Church, and also of course, outside it, and independent of it.

Looking at this phenomenon, an inevitable question arises: Do all of those who belong to one or another of the institutions of Vincentian inspiration have the clear awareness of the necessity and the priority of integrating into their vision the work of justice on behalf of the poor, and not simply to alleviate the needs of the poor who suffer injustice? If we examine the official documents of the Vincentian institutions over the last thirty years, the question has a clear answer: yes, they do have this awareness and it is clearly expressed in those documents.

But historical inertia also weighs heavily. Many members of the Vincentian institutions continue to practice charity as if nothing had changed in the awareness of the Church or the world. We must admit frankly that for many members of the Vincentian institutions the theme of justice demanded by charity would seem perhaps to be something new taught by the Church today, but which is not found in the spiritual vision of Saint Vincent de Paul as it has been transmitted to them. Over and against this vision, it must be affirmed that the theme of the relationship between charity and justice, lost in the process of transmission, is in fact solidly present in the charitable practice and the spiritual vision of Saint Vincent de Paul himself.