

The Relationship of Justice with Charity in Vincentian Thought¹

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Vincentian thought makes charity and justice the basis for the treatment of others. In fact, when St. Vincent introduces people into the world of the poor, he does not do it to ease their conscience, but rather to disturb it more; to provoke a serene and adult examination of conscience about whether one was evangelically just. He cannot understand a religion that is not interested in the other or exploits him/her. Thus he says sorrowfully "... there is a big difference between being Catholic and being just."²

The seventeenth century was a time of great iniquities and waste. Numerous injustices of all kinds were perpetrated in the government, in education, among Christians whether Catholic or Protestant, etc. The inequalities occurred for many reasons, most of them as old as humanity itself: 1) Not considering the other as an equal 2) Exaggerating what one thinks is owed to oneself and lessening what one considers owed to the other 3) Thinking that what is fair is what is good for the strong (cf. *Rep.* 332d). It is like the old Spanish refrain: "The laws go where the kings want them to" 4) Using judicial structures for one's own good and the detriment of the other (cf. *Rep.* 332d)

Although it was not very just, the seventeenth century was very juridical. Legal demands were so frequent that a small diocesan seminary, like that of Montauban, retained a lawyer six months of the year to untangle and defend its interests, its rights and its honor before civil and ecclesiastical tribunals. Furthermore, in moral

¹ Cf. BAYLACH, JOSE, "Justicia," in AA.VV., *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Vincenciana*, Salamanca, CEME, 1995, 312-329. AA.VV., "San Vicente de Paul y la Justicia," *Cuadernos Vicencianos. En Tiempos de San Vicente de Paul... y hoy*, Tomo II, Salamanca, CEME, 1999, 163-175. CARBALLO, FRANCISCO, "Dimension Política del evangelio en la acción vicenciana," en AA.VV., *Justicia y Solidaridad con los pobres en la vocación Vincenciana*, Salamanca, CEME, 1988, 97-114. GALINDO, ANGEL, *Moral Socioeconomica*, Madrid, BAC, 1996, 187-206.

² SV II, 494.

theological reflection, the tracts *De iustitia et iure* gave greater weight to commutative justice, with a tendency to fall into a certain formalism.³

St. Vincent was attracted to the field of law and had a licentiate in Canon Law. He saw it as a man with a strict sense of the duties of justice. Furthermore, because of the huge network of foundations he set up and because of the multitude of charitable works he managed, he had to execute many contracts and agreements. He operated with the traditional definition of justice: "The virtue by which one has a firm and constant will to give to each one what belongs to him."⁴ He follows St. Thomas who sees in the concrete the preeminence of justice over the other moral virtues.⁵ Likewise he assumes the classical three part division of justice: legal, distributive and commutative. In fact, we find that St. Vincent theologized much about this virtue, making it a continuation of prophetic and evangelical preaching. And he joined the practice of justice to the service of the poor.

In the face of a context which placed justice on a secondary level, the Vincentian ethic places a high value on this virtue. So much so that the first thing St. Vincent asked of the people associated with him was that they be just; since the Kingdom of God demands the establishment of justice. For him, justice makes present the kingdom brought by Jesus Christ. Faith demands the acceptance of the entire legacy of Jesus Christ including the social aspects. And thus the following of Jesus brings with it specific social alternatives and concrete positions in the face of power as the gospel teaches. While trying to make the gospel effective, Vincent places special emphasis on charity and justice. He insists that the imitation of Christ means paying attention to his words and works. These lead to the option for the poor. This is a prophetic option which implies being present in every area in which the humble are mistreated. The evangelization of the poor brings with it the promotion, as well as the defense, of the poor on the personal and social levels.

³ Cf. VIDAL, MARCIANO, *Moral de Actitudes*, Tomo III, Madrid, Ed. PS, 1981, 22-23.

⁴ SAINT THOMAS, *S.th.* II-II, q. 58, a. 1. Since Plato, justice has been considered one of the four cardinal virtues. Aristotle understood it as "giving to each one his own" for the purpose of establishing harmony and order. Later Ulpiano understood it as "the virtue by which each one, with a constant and perpetual will, attributes to each one his right" (*Constans et perpetua voluntas ius sum unicuique tribuendi*) in *Dig.* I, leg. 10. St. Thomas takes this and systematizes this rich heritage by establishing a valuable treatise on justice located in *S.th.* II-II, qq. 57-122.

⁵ Cf. *S.th.* I-II, q. 66, a. 4.

THE THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF JUSTICE

In the seventeenth century it was common to refer to God as the "Sun of Justice." St. Vincent also used this expression. For him, the expression "Sun of Justice" refers to the God who stirs us up to share his life. For this reason, writing to a priest who was tempted to discouragement because of the lack of progress in his pastoral work, he makes this beautiful comparison:

*"... you have to convince yourself that God only asks of you that you cast your nets into the sea, not that you catch fishes, since it is his job to make them come into the net. And do not doubt he will do so if, after fishing all night despite the difficulties of the work and the hardening of hearts, almost all of them unconscious of the things of God, you wait patiently for the day to come when the Sun of Justice awakens them and his light illumines and warms them. To this work and this patience one must also add humility, prayer and good example."*⁶

Vincent de Paul affirms that the justice of God is sovereign.⁷ He exercises it by giving to each one according to his works, keeping exact and strict justice.⁸ God exercises his justice commutatively and distributively.⁹ Explaining the two kinds of justice of God he has recourse to mathematical examples which were in fashion at that time. In his commutative justice God grants his merits with an arithmetic measure; in his distributive justice he grants them in geometric measure. The justice of God shows itself fully the day of one's death. God exercises commutative justice awarding our good will by giving us the virtues; he carries out distributive justice giving heaven to the good and hell to the bad:

"Commutative, since God transforms the works of men into virtues, and his merits into reward; and when bodies corrupt, the souls will take possession of the glory which they have deserved. This commutation of merits into reward is done by measure and by number, or as the theologians say, in arithmetic proportion. Yes, God gives the virtues according to the effort one makes to acquire them, and he gives glory according to the number and value of good works.... God will reward us according to justice and the number of our works.... It is also distributive inasmuch

⁶ SV VII, 358. Other texts that refer to God as the Sun of Justice are: E.S. XI/2, 536; XI/2, 780.

⁷ Cf. E.S. XI/1, 432.

⁸ Cf. E.S. XI/1, 434.

⁹ Cf. E.S. XI/1, 432-436.

as it guards a certain proportion called geometric, when God distributes heaven to the good and hell to the bad.... Why? Because heaven is the pay and the salary with which he rewards his servants, and hell is the suffering with which he punishes the wicked. It is characteristic of God to give to each one according to his works.”¹⁰

St. Vincent refers to the justice of God by pointing out that it is characteristic of God to punish evil.¹¹ He shares the sacral and vindictive mentality of his time, which sees in God a severe being unwilling to let man’s sin pass. In this way, he interprets illnesses, wars and other public calamities as punishments from God.¹²

However this implacable image of God is only one aspect of how he views the Almighty. He completes the description by showing how God is always open to mercy. Therefore, on every occasion he will urge people to trust in the love of God: “May God have mercy on her and grant to all who provoke his justice the grace of repentance and conversion of life!”¹³ God is simple, but we humans cannot take him in with just one look. Therefore when St. Vincent speaks of the divine justice he notes the strict aspect of God; and referring to his merciful charity, he emphasizes the oceans of tenderness and compassion of God. Both aspects should be kept in mind in order to capture the true image of God expressed in Vincentian theology. Moreover, as a reflection of divine action, humans should practice this same charitable justice. In this way he points out to St. Louise that if on one hand she should punish a person, at the same time she should help her so that “justice be accompanied by mercy.”¹⁴

He formulates these considerations on the justice of God, not to remain in mere abstract contemplation, but rather so that each one may be responsible for his own life: trying hard to achieve virtue, living an interior life, extending the Kingdom of God within and without oneself, combating vices, fearing for one’s salvation, etc.

¹⁰ E.S. XI/1, 433-434.

¹¹ E.S. XI/1, 434.

¹² Referring to an epidemic which struck Rome and Genoa he points out: “The truth, Father, is that we are deeply worried, especially seeing that neither the change of seasons nor the prayers the whole church has offered during the jubilee have been able to stop the course of this sickness nor cause it to lessen. Christians’ sins must be very great to cause God to exercise his justice in this way. May his mercy wish to come quickly to those poor cities and console so many afflicted towns that suffer throughout the world, some in one way and others in another,” SV VI, 169.

¹³ SV VI, 90.

¹⁴ SV I, 449.

Such reflections in no way remain in mere interiority, rather they should foster the missionary vocation inherent in the Christian: "It is not enough to work so that God may reign in us, thus seeking his reign and his justice; rather it is also necessary that we desire and try to extend God's reign everywhere, that God reign in every soul."¹⁵

The Vincentian organization of charity springs from the question that God and the poor asked of Vincent de Paul in the face of the spiritual and material misery, the exploitation and injustice in which the people lived. How to remedy it? If the question comes from God and the poor, St. Vincent knows that only from that same God and those same poor can the answer come. For him the center of Jesus' message is the coming of the kingdom (cf. Matthew 1:14-15). The most surprising characteristic of this kingdom is that it is destined preferentially to the poor (cf. Luke 6:20). For Vincent de Paul, telling the poor that the "kingdom of God is for them" means that Jesus Christ takes on the defense of the poor today just as he did in his time. On this earth, the Lord Jesus defended the poor by doing justice for them and giving them salvation. In our day, Jesus Christ continues doing justice for the poor to the degree he finds available instruments who desire to carry on his mission. The relationship of Christ with the poor and of the poor with Christ takes on fundamental importance in the discovery of the dignity that the dispossessed assume within the church. It is for this reason that for the Vincentian ethic, serving the poor is the path towards serving God: committed service which seeks to reestablish justice since Jesus Christ is the justice of God for the poor. The poor person is the bearer, many times without knowing it, of the demands of the justice of God. The Kingdom of God and the justice proclaimed by Jesus Christ are made effective when the integral defense of the poor is taken on.

It was not for nothing that St. Vincent took as the motto of the Congregation the verse "My mission is to proclaim the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:18). Present day exegesis tells us that the coming of the Kingdom proclaimed by Christ means that God has decided to manifest his power by showing compassion for the poor, by showing forth his justice by rescuing and saving the oppressed and down trodden just as Second and Third Isaiah had announced. This text makes Christ a prophet whose mission is the prelude to the establishment of God's Kingdom in favor of the poor. Jesus will make explicit and real its content throughout his whole life through the defense in favor of the poor and the liberation of the oppressed (cf. Luke 7:18-23). All this means that under the kingship of God,

¹⁵ E.S. XI/1, 435.

those who lacked every right acquire rights. Jesus Christ is the one charged with doing justice for the poor inasmuch as he is the one who fulfills the Father's will with regard to the marginalized.¹⁶ In this way Vincent de Paul joins charitable justice with Christology, the will of God and the service of the poor. In the integral service of the poor Vincent de Paul makes clear that God is their protector and defender. And so he wants to organize a company in the church which would have the poor as its heritage and would give itself entirely to them. Therefore the evangelizing service to the poor is nothing less than the continuation of the mission of Christ who came to preach the gospel to the poor.

Along with the option for the poor, St. Vincent observes that Jesus Christ shows his love for justice by fulfilling the civil laws of his time, among them paying the coin of tribute. Paraphrasing Matthew 22:15-22 he says: "When they were suspicious of him, to show his accusers they were wrong he asked them to show him the coin of tribute; and seeing there the image of Cesar, he told them one must give to Cesar what was Cesar's. He chose to perform a miracle rather than not pay the tribute they asked of him although he had every right to be exempt from it."¹⁷

Vincent de Paul liked to reflect on the fact that Jesus Christ did not inject himself as judge in civil disputes or merely temporal matters. He invited all to live as children of God, and from that fundamental experience he healed people's attitude with regard to possession and power.¹⁸ Moreover, in a century when judges and disputes were abused, St. Vincent held firm to the evangelical maxim: "And if someone takes you to court to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well" (Matthew 5:40). He interpreted this as meaning that Jesus chose to act only when there was a grave violation of justice. But if it is merely a minor affair, let it pass. It is more evangelical to yield than to get worked up and obstinate in the defense of one's own rights. However, if, as we mentioned, the matter is serious, one ought to have recourse to judicial action; but before that one should exhaust all possible options of dialogue, prayer and condescension. One should never have recourse to the courts without having honestly sought a settlement.¹⁹

¹⁶ Cf. GANOCZY, ALEXANDER, *De su plenitud todos hemos recibido*, Barcelona, Herder, 1991, 51-67. GONZALEZ-CARVAJAL, LUIS, *Los signos de los tiempos: El Reino de Dios esta entre nosotros*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 1987, 136 and following.

¹⁷ SV VI, 30. Cf. SV VI, 2.

¹⁸ Cf. SV II, 493-495.

¹⁹ Cf. E.S. XI/2, 423-424.

Living as a Christian is carrying out what Jesus proposed to the crowds: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice" (Matthew 6:33). Vincent de Paul interprets this passage by pointing out that one should seek with all one's strength that God reign, striving so that in one's own interior God be sovereign. He reigns in his creation, in the government of the church and especially in those who are just, by means of the virtues they practice and have received from Him. Moreover, God extends his justice through two kinds of justice: commutative and distributive.²⁰

THE PRACTICE OF JUSTICE

Vincentian ethics have a great appreciation for justice. This shows itself through a non-negotiable respect for the law. Therefore, the various laws existing in the various kingdoms should be respected and obeyed; in the same way, one should not fail to ask permission of the competent civil authorities in the situations where this is necessary.²¹ Ordinances coming from magistrates should be obeyed,²² since Vincent understands these are, or should be, drawn up on principles of justice. Furthermore, he accepts that the government of princes is of divine right.²³ The respect owed to judges and other public authorities, apart from how they might be in the concrete, is due to them because of their investiture, since God exercises his justice indirectly through those men robed with legitimate authority. Basing himself on this conviction he tells the President of the Parliament of Rennes: "You are the principal minister of God's justice in this province."²⁴ What we have said does not detract from the fact that Vincent knew that the drama of his age was that scandalous legal injustices were perpetrated. He could affirm sadly that, in many cases, the justice of God did not coincide with the justice of men.

As we have already pointed out, Vincent de Paul lived in a hyper-judicial age. Everything had to be done before a notary; and disputes and legal actions were raised for any reason at all. St. Vincent himself in his lifetime had to face numerous judgments.²⁵ As a

²⁰ Cf. E.S. XI/1, 428-432.

²¹ Cf. SV I, 22.

²² Cf. SV I, 231.

²³ Cf. SV VI, 30.

²⁴ Cf. SV III, 55.

²⁵ Recall the judgments with regard to the matters of Annecy, Crecy, Orsigny, San Lazare, Saint Meem and Toul. Cf. SV III, 43; VII, 422.

general rule, he proposed not getting involved in judgments.²⁶ His motives for proposing this were many:

1) the example of Christ:

“There is a maxim which forbids going to court. ‘If they take your cloak, give them your shirt as well’ (Matthew 5:40). When justice calls us we are obliged to respond; but beforehand it is advisable that the Company, to honor the counsel of Our Lord and to show devotion to this maxim, be disposed to prefer losing to litigating; and should endeavor to extinguish every kind of disagreement, cost what it may, rather than being obstinate in sustaining its rights, in such a way that it never turn to the courts without first seeking a settlement.”²⁷

2) Judgments are slow and costly.²⁸

3) Often enough the judges are not concerned with the truth and they themselves are examples of corruption.²⁹

4) Because of the passions enflamed by the judgments themselves, the neighbor is frequently disedified.³⁰

In the course of human life men frequently reproach one another for different reasons. Generally they go to court for matters of money and other goods, as well as for affairs of honor or power.³¹ Taking up again what was mentioned in the previous point, St. Vincent, realist that he was, thinks about the most effective way to resolve conflicts. He proposes what we would call today “mediations,” outside of the judicial sphere since this instance lives off fomenting suits or rousing the anger of some against the others. Vincent de Paul proposes respectful dialogue and the capacity to see one’s own rights without forgetting the other’s. When conflicts arise, one should be reasonable, knowing how to be accommodating and prudent, showing good will and even contributing more than what is owed. In fact, it is advisable to seek the mediation of a common friend.³²

²⁶ Cf. SV II, 480; V, 384, 408, 412, 599; VI, 990; E.S. XI/2, 537.

²⁷ E.S. XI/1, 423-424. He would also counsel, with a certain disguised humor, a bishop friend of his to initiate judgments and legal actions to follow the example of Jesus Christ “who condemned legal processes, but nevertheless underwent one and lost it,” SV II, 480.

²⁸ Cf. SV VI, 36.

²⁹ Cf. E.S. X, 221.

³⁰ Cf. SV III, 69.

³¹ Cf. SV II, 494.

³² Cf. SV V, 903; VII, 95-97.

For this reason one of the purposes of the popular missions was the settling of processes and the reconciliation of adversaries. Vincent was convinced that if with preaching one achieved that people lived according to the gospel and conformed themselves to the way of acting of Jesus Christ, then judicial conflicts would practically disappear or at least would diminish greatly. Despite the general rule of not becoming involved in judgments, there are times one must participate. If friendly dialogue were not sufficient, Vincent would see the judicial way as the last resort. The motivation for involving himself in a judgment was based upon the gravity of the matter, and on the principle “when justice calls us we are obliged to answer.”³³ Concretely he initiated judgments to defend legitimate property (e.g. when someone did not pay debts after having waited sufficient time; when someone wanted to retain property that had been honestly donated, etc.); or to defend the right of the poor (e.g. when someone wanted to retain goods placed at the service of the poor).³⁴

Once a judgment is begun one should act with diligence to defend the truth. From a certain point of view, St. Vincent was a model litigant since he showed us how to act in a judgment. Justice moves one to bravely defend one’s rights and those that have been entrusted to us. But this does not justify disloyal means, like wanting to win over the judge to one’s cause; or winning by unethical means. One should respond with objectivity and transparency. In these moments also one should remember the basic principles of morality taught by Jesus Christ: “Do to others what you want them to do to you” (Matthew 7:12). This maxim is the basis for all morals, and upon this principle all the actions of secular justice can be regulated. Upon this principle Justinian established his laws and jurists have regulated civil and canon law.³⁵ Once justice has rendered its ruling Vincent teaches us to submit to it with meekness. In fact even when the verdict was contrary and had been patently erroneous, Vincent preferred to accept it except in certain cases. And so he writes, not without a touch of irony, to Fr. Pesnelle who has suffered a contrary and arbitrary verdict from the court: “Long live justice! We must believe the loss of your case is just. God himself who, before, granted you that good, now takes it away — blessed be his holy name! That good is bad when it is where God does not want it to be — do not think of those sterile years of which you speak. If they are so, it will

³³ E.S. XI/1, 423.

³⁴ Cf. SV VII, 97.

³⁵ E.S. XI/1, 419.

not be through your fault, but rather the disposition of Providence whose will is always adorable.”³⁶

Another way of living according to justice is to abandon a partisan spirit, not abuse one's power nor use it against the people who are under our mandate, nor to promote unduly those who share our faith. With respect to this, what he points out to Fr. Gallais, the superior of the Sedan mission where there was a Calvinist majority in the magistracy, is remarkable:

“And if it is a case of a Catholic against a Huguenot, how do you know if the Catholic has just motives in his suit? There is a great difference between being Catholic and being just.... What, you will tell me, can I see a Catholic oppressed by one of (their) religion and do nothing for him? I will answer you that the oppression will be for some motive and will be because the Catholic owes something to the Huguenot, or for some injury or damage he has done him. And so, in that case, is it not just that the Huguenot have recourse to justice to arrange a solution? Is the Catholic less worthy of censure because he is a Catholic? Or will you have more reason to meddle in these affairs than Our Lord had for not touching the matter of the man who complained about his brother? Yes, but the judges are Huguenots. It is true, but they are also jurists and they judge according to laws, customs and ordinances; and besides their conscience, they profess their honor.”³⁷

The practice of justice cannot be reduced to fulfilling legal justice. St. Vincent proposes a more interior justice which leads to a more delicate conscience in all that has to do with giving to each one what belongs to him. It is for this reason that he asks for great honesty in handling money.³⁸ Money is an efficacious means for the interchange of goods and services. The danger comes when it becomes an end in itself, bringing the person to the idolatry of money. It is the “Mammon of Iniquity” about which Jesus warns us in the gospel (cf. Matthew 6:24). St. Vincent knew the havoc money brought about in the whole world since the excessive desire for it causes great injustices. “A powerful gentleman Sir Money” was a phrase sadly current at that time. Having and unchecked power went hand in hand. From that arose the pride of the rich, bad administration of

³⁶ SV VIII, 175.

³⁷ SV II, 493-495.

³⁸ AA.VV., “San Vicente de Paul y el dinero,” *Cuadernos Vicencianos. En tiempos de San Vicente de Paul... y hoy*, Tomo I, Salamanca, CEME, 1977, 281-290.

public affairs where many functionaries confused public money with their own, the pillaging of the army, robbery in the streets and roads, etc. In the face of the damage brought about by avarice, Vincent said: "See, my dear brothers, the danger there is in handling money. I say it for every kind of person, without exception, men and women."³⁹ From the moment St. Vincent de Paul discovered the poor in their material and spiritual misery, money would become for him a means to live simply and to serve the poor. He knew from experience with what difficulty the poor earned it, and how easily the rich wasted it. For this reason, without fomenting hatreds, he would act as a link between the two groups; he would be the administrator of the generosity of one group and the provider of the necessities of the other. In this way, in charity, he reestablishes justice.

He will remind the rich that they are responsible before God for the money they have. The use they make of it for the service of the poor will be one of its most noble uses. He will obtain from them enormous sums to distribute in immediate help or to set up the patrimony of the wounded. He will show himself to be a brilliant and rigorous administrator of the capital of the poor. He will be guided by the strictest rules for the administration of property, investing in lands, in buildings, in a stage coach line. By means of the money both the nobles and middle class and the government gave him, as well as what his Congregations produced, he established a network of permanent assistance and promotion of the poor.

The poor handling of money also occurred in ecclesiastical and religious administration. Avarice, greed and robbery were realities which sullied the church. Therefore he would look for ways to "fence in" the money and other goods, so they would not be diverted from their specific mission. He did this because justice demands transparency in the handling of money. Let us look at some of the ways he proposed: one of them was to respect the intention of the giver.⁴⁰ This takes precedence over every other consideration and need. To act in any other way is to go against justice. Another way of being just with money is to keep an orderly administration which clearly shows the amounts of income and expenditures. This accounting should be accompanied by the greatest possible number of receipts. Thus one should ask for a receipt for alms given, as well as for other kinds of expenditures. Vincent tells a priest:

"I beseech you also that in every monastery, ask for a receipt for what you are given; and with regard to the distributions which

³⁹ E.S. IX/2, 896.

⁴⁰ Cf. SV II, 228; VI, 8.

must be made in the other cities where there are persons of the company, tell them to follow to the letter the orders Mr. Villarceaux has given them, and to ask for a receipt for everything they hand out. For it is necessary to avoid that, for any pretext, even one centime be diverted or applied to other needs. Also please do me the favor of sending me with Br. Matthew a copy of the accounts, signed by Mr. Villarceaux, and on his orders, if there is one; and you will let me know each month the amounts that have been distributed or ordered distributed in other places.”⁴¹

In these matters he emphasized that one should always avoid “rounding off” when it was time to close accounts. This way of acting, little by little, causes one to lose exactness in the economic area. In fact, more than once, he did not accept a foundation if it meant having to accept any rounding off of accounts. Furthermore, due taxes and assessments should always be paid, avoiding any kind of evasion.⁴² Neither should one accept a loan at interest for there is always a danger of usury. Vincent follows the opinion of the theologians of the Sorbonne even though the monarchical courts permitted it. Vincent de Paul sees as ethical that money produce profit by investing it, not by loaning it at interest.⁴³

To love one’s own community is something licit, but he points out that one should not want it to grow at others’ expense. For example, he rejects a donation that an ecclesiastic wanted to make to the Congregation of the Mission in Geneva because it would have brought harm to a religious community.⁴⁴

A key concept in commutative justice is *restitution*. It “does not seem to be anything but returning one’s property to one’s possession and dominion.”⁴⁵

To establish the equality of justice, restitution is the solution when someone appropriates and keeps a good against the will of its legitimate owner, as in the case of robbery or theft. What the person loaned or what was taken from him should be restored. Restitution implies, therefore, returning to its legitimate owner those external

⁴¹ SV II, 74.

⁴² Cf. SV VI, 2.

⁴³ Cf. SV VI, 283. St. Vincent wanted his missionaries to be properly formed in these complex matters. Whether it was in the free moments during the missions, or more specifically, in the conferences given between missions, questions of the administration of the sacraments or moral matters, among them usury, were specifically treated.

⁴⁴ Cf. SV VI, 26.

⁴⁵ Cf. SAINT THOMAS, *S.th.* 1, q. 62, a. 1.

goods which have been taken from him unjustly. In this way the equilibrium and equality of commutative justice is reestablished. Clearly restitution concerns mainly the objective sphere. St. Vincent maintains the classic teaching which is ordinarily applied in pastoral practice through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In it, when someone has taken, robbed or used badly some good he should make restitution. This can be done in different ways, but it should always be done so that the sacrament be properly administered.⁴⁶ Justice also implies not abusing anyone's goods even with the pretext that they are rich people.⁴⁷ And he would not permit anyone to eat at another's expense.⁴⁸

Still another way of being just is loving work. This is so decisive for St. Vincent that to him, the person who could work and did not was unjust. It is unworthy to want to live at another's expense: "The just one lives this way, my dear sisters; he lives, according to God's commandment, by the work of his hands and is not a burden to anyone. But the unjust person does not act that way; for not wanting to be bothered with working, he will be a burden for others, he will begin to beg and rob."⁴⁹ Love of work leads one to treat kindly and respectfully the employees of the house. In fact, he says they should be given even more than the labor laws of his time allowed. For example, he asks that an employee be paid even for the months he was sick, and even that his medicines be bought for him. An interesting step ahead of its time that the working classes would achieve later with much effort.

St. Vincent dedicated his whole life to evangelical peace. But when a kingdom is unjustly attacked, he infers it is legitimate to defend itself. He holds, with the majority of the theologians of his time, the theory of just war. And so, when Casimir, the king of Poland, suffered a series of invasions (Cossacks, Russians; later Charles Gustav, the king of Sweden, in alliance with George III, the prince of Transylvania) he writes to him: "I hope against all hope that the justice of your arms prevails over the force and iniquity of your adversaries."⁵⁰ He understands that it is fair to pray and act in favor of one who upholds a just cause.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Cf. SV VI, 606.

⁴⁷ Cf. SV I, 379.

⁴⁸ Cf. SV I, 421.

⁴⁹ Cf. E.S. IX/1, 443.

⁵⁰ Cf. SV V, 454.

⁵¹ Cf. SV VII, 83.

JUSTICE AND CHARITY IN THE PROMOTION OF THE POOR⁵²

Let us give special attention to treating the point St. Vincent emphasizes, one should be just to the poor.⁵³ St. Vincent was effective in the promotion of the poor during his age because he was one of the best informed and formed men of his time in the matters of poverty and marginalization. But it was not a cold and theoretical knowledge; rather it was a questioning knowledge that called him to action. He knows the world of poverty and experiences it as a call and accusation, as a challenge and commitment, as a cry which goes to the throne of God and asks him to act. This also implies living the heart of the gospel message and the authentic criterion of the faith. He understands that the Kingdom that Christ brought is made real by giving a preferential place to the needy.

The Vincentian motive for working in favor of the poor is discovering that the defense of the rights of the poor and the service of the disenfranchised is being involved in the affairs of God. Another motive is that the full encounter with God takes place in the service of the poor. Without ruling out the mystical path nor the life of silence and study, St. Vincent vindicates as a “theological place” work in favor of justice and charity towards the poor. In this way, the new crises that augmented poverty and at times appeared unexpectedly were for him a new judgment of the poor who demanded action. Through the situation of the defenseless Vincent feels that God’s justice is expressed and obliges every baptized person to work in favor of the poor. We see that this ethical combat to prevent the poor

⁵² Cf. IBÁÑEZ, J.M., “El compromiso con la justicia, dimensión esencial del servicio vicenciano,” in AA.VV., *Justicia y solidaridad con los pobres en la vocacion vicenciana*, Salamanca, CEME, 1988, 115-157. ETIENNE, IVONNE, *Sur laroute avec Monsieur Vincent*, Paris, Ed. Saint-Paul, 1960, 114-117.

⁵³ As we mentioned, between 1617 and 1635 St. Vincent was discovering more and more the pain of the people. The experiences which put him in most direct contact with the poor are the numerous missions he gives in the countryside. While he gives the missions, he sets out to create institutions which help to ease the material and spiritual misery of the marginalized. We can point out a third period. Between 1635 and 1660 he becomes a many faceted and creative promoter of works in favor of the poor. He does this in a time when the French government had become an enormous superstructure which grew by the force of the people’s misery. Furthermore, a considerable sector of the nobility and the bourgeoisie were highly indifferent and insensible to them. In the face of this, St. Vincent feels the judgment of the poor weighing upon himself. This poverty he takes as a personal challenge, because he understands that a Christian cannot be indifferent to the pain of others. The experience of this terrible misery embedded itself in his heart causing him to oppose the causes which produced poverty and seeking ever more people who would help him to reduce it.

from becoming miserable and disenfranchised is founded upon a solid practice of the virtues of charity and justice. What is striking is that in the midst of a society disconnected from the poor (even by many mystics), St. Vincent calls for indignation at the injustices committed against them, an indignation that is not a violent response, but rather charitable justice which reestablishes an excessively asymmetrical relationship. Ibañez Burgos summarizes the Vincentian option in the following phrase: "The worshippers of God have to live in the creative charity of justice in favor of the needy."⁵⁴

The eminence of the poor is so great that Vincent de Paul asks his congregations to use their goods with such moderation that they can always use significant amounts in favor of the poor. He sees the improper use of goods as a sin against justice since he understands that the poor person is its rightful owner.⁵⁵ For St. Vincent, doing justice is one of the ways of helping the weak and the small by returning to them their rights. In this way he inculcated in his contemporaries the habit of seeing present day misery, of understanding its causes and of seeking solutions. What was in his time the object of non-binding charity he caused to be seen as proper to demanding charity, and in many cases, as an obligation of justice. He came to see that the basic goods should be available to all. He put this in practice, although humankind would take a long time in giving support and juridical formulation to these values. St. Vincent contributed to the recognition of these rights and to assuring the application of them.⁵⁶ He had the insight that if a society did not attend to its weakest members it was not really Christian. He realized that European society grew by withholding from the most defenseless part of what was due to them. And so he said: "May God grant us the grace of being tender-hearted towards the miserable and of believing that, while succoring them, we are doing justice and not mercy."⁵⁷

The following reflections serve as a basis for the Vincentian ethic of service to the poor. Putting this into practice means, first of all,

⁵⁴ IBAÑEZ, J.M., *op. cit.*, 125.

⁵⁵ Cf. E.S. IX/2, 906.

⁵⁶ With great effort humanity came to define every person's right to life, safety, sufficient food, health, housing, a healthy infancy, a dignified old age, work, education, religious freedom, etc. St. Vincent worked for abandoned children, the distribution of food, the promotion of hospitals, home care for the sick, welcome for refugees, attention to the mentally ill, the galley slaves, aid for aged, and provision of tools and seeds to devastated areas, job training, the creation of schools for basic education, systematic instruction in the faith during missions, etc.

⁵⁷ SV VII, 115.

treating the poor with the same respect we would have for all. For example, in the Mother House of St. Lazare there was a group of mentally ill people who had remained when the house was donated to the Congregation. St. Vincent would ask that they, like all the pensioners, be treated well. He would say in a Repetition of Prayer:

“With regard to the pensioners, brothers, I have learned that sometimes they are given badly prepared food, and even the meat and wine left over from the day before. This is not right, brothers; they are people whose relatives pay a good pension. Is it not just that they be given good and well prepared things to eat? In the name of God, let this not be repeated; treat them as you would us, as you would the priests. Because, look brothers, you are committing an injustice against these poor people, some of whom are totally innocent, who are locked up and cannot complain of the injustice you commit against them. Yes, I call it an injustice.”⁵⁸

The option for justice led Vincent to become involved in political action.⁵⁹ Obviously he does not do it within present day parameters, so enriched by the Social Doctrine of the Church, but he sees very clearly that easing the situation of the poor is not just an economic question. For St. Vincent one cannot serve the poor if at the same time he is not struggling against poverty and the deep causes which produce it.

This forgetfulness on the part of his contemporaries is so grave that it is the same as not being Christian. Jesus Christ was sent by the Father to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is near and it is for the poor. If that is so, how is it possible that in Christian kingdoms the poor live in such inhuman conditions? St. Vincent lists a series of vices that have damaged correct coexistence as we will see later on. But basically he understands that the only valid answer is to take on and have others take on a commitment in favor of the poor.

⁵⁸ SV XI/1, 299.

⁵⁹ We see Vincent acting in the political arena when he considers it necessary to defend the poor. Thus he meets with cardinals and Prime Ministers, first with Richelieu and later with Mazarin to seek to ease the cause of the people's misery. For example, he speaks with Richelieu to ask him plainly to stop the war; he publicly opposes Mazarin in 1649. In 1652 he appeals to Pope Innocent X to ask him to intervene for the sake of peace in the Fronde of the Princes. And he writes to Mazarin in 1652, asking him to leave the kingdom, simply because he judges him to be the principal cause of the people's suffering. He intervenes in politics, even though he usually loses, because he understands that without sound policies of governments and the powerful, permanent change is impossible.

Vincent de Paul understood that a great part of the inhuman situation of the poor stemmed from the ills of the “Ancien Regime”: a policy centered on the strengthening of the monarchy at the cost of promoting war, high taxes for the lower classes, the waste of the upper classes and the indifference in the face of the pain of the poorest sectors of society. This system, even though it created a strong state on one level, provoked terrible crises in the weakest groups. It filled the country people with sorrow, concentrated riches in the hands of a few, multiplied popular rebellions and increased the number of poor, beggars, vagabonds and bandits. The experience of this terrible misery which embedded itself in the world of the poor led Vincent to plunge more deeply into the misery, oppose its causes and to look for people who would work to reduce it.

JUSTICE IN RELATION TO CHARITY

We come at last to the main theme of this article — seeing how St. Vincent resolves the conflictive connection between justice and charity. The way out of this labyrinth consists in referring to God, and especially to the Incarnate Word, the most perfect response on how to link these two virtues. Finally, from the viewpoint of Vincentian realism, we have treated a few vices which go against a good life, and especially against justice.

For St. Vincent justice is an essential virtue; but, as every moral virtue it has to tend towards the theological ones, especially charity. And so with Vincent de Paul one can speak of charitable justice, because he always understands justice in the Christian context of charity. The Vincentian ethic tries to resolve the difficult “theological cross” of harmonizing the principles of charity with those of justice. It holds that the ideal of Christian coexistence lies in knowing how to harmonize justice and charity. This harmonizing is achieved by making clear the rights of justice, but rethinking them in a broader framework like that of charity which can always seek more creative responses aimed at healing the bonds.

Vincent affirms that the practice of justice shares with charity the attitude in the one who exercises it of going out of oneself (although charity effects an even greater self-forgetfulness). One may transgress the law in the face of the absolute of love because charity can construct a way of greater perfection in favor of the neighbor. He understands that charity takes precedence, not insofar as it annuls the duties of justice, but rather it broadens and deepens the good relationship between people (the aspiration of justice) by inviting them to total gratuity, to pardon and reconciliation. Charity even attains what justice desires but cannot achieve by itself.

We have already pointed out that the saint understands that charity should be affective and effective. Both of these aspects are important and complementary. But Vincent de Paul gives priority to effective charity. And from this primacy of effective charity he closely joins charity with justice.

The Father of the Poor wished for a reform in the church and in society; and his way of bringing it about was through charity. We know that the society of the 17th century was highly stratified.⁶⁰ What is special about Vincent is, by respecting this “order,” he made it flexible, bringing the different social groups together by the virtue of charity. He brings about that goods are distributed and that respect and dignity are shown. With regard to help for the poor Vincent understands that it is fostered by charity which makes us see the great truth that we are all brothers. This help is changed into an act of justice for two reasons: 1) Because of our greed we are responsible for our neighbor’s poverty. 2) Even if we did not cause it, we have the obligation of succoring a “brother” who is also the owner of what I possess:

“I give thanks to God for the charity that the city of Marseilles is showing for the poor in the need in which they find themselves and for the help it has opportunely given to the forced laborers in this time of cold and shortages. May God grant us the grace to soften our hearts in favor of the miserable; and to believe that, while aiding them, we are doing justice and not mercy. These people that God orders us to help are our brothers.”⁶¹

The primacy of charity can never bring us to justify unjust situations. In fact, there will be situations where, in order to be truly charitable, the first thing that must be done is struggle in favor of justice. Only a badly understood charity can be negligent with regard to the duties of justice. It would be unjust “to do works of charity” with some at the cost of not giving others what I owe them. Giving importance to natural right, he says that “the duties of justice are preferable to those of charity.”⁶² Asking a priest to respect the intention of the donor in the use of alms even though there are many needs to attend, he says: “There can be no charity if it is not accompanied by justice; and nothing can oblige us to do more than

⁶⁰ Cf. GOUBERT, PIERRE, *Louis XIV et vingt millions de Français*, Fayard, Collection Pluriel, 1966, 22-50. GUITTON, JEAN PIERRE, *La société et les pauvres en Europa (XVI-XVII^e siècles)*, Paris, Ed. P.U.F., 1974, 57-68.

⁶¹ SV VII, 115.

⁶² SV VII, 633.

we can reasonably do.”⁶³ In the same way he asks a priest who was rescuing captives to recover the money sent to free a captive, but which had been used for other things. The striking thing about the following text is that it concludes that respecting an obligation of justice in the context of charity (money sent for redeeming captives) makes the person more charitable:

*“Blessed be God for all the inquiries you have made and because you can probably get back through the consul the money that captain did not hand over to the slaves of Havre-de-Grace in Algiers. You can be sure there is no difficulty with the priests of the Mission seeking justice for the poor slaves so that what is held back from them can be returned to them. It is rather very meritorious and very edifying for all the good souls who know what true charity makes charitable people do.”*⁶⁴

As we have already pointed out, Vincent de Paul held that whenever possible judgments and legal problems were to be avoided. But if there is no other option but to become involved in them, they should be conducted in such a way that charity is not sacrificed.⁶⁵ Also, he pointed out when one must legitimately punish, it should be done to satisfy justice; but on the other hand, charity tends to soften the punishment, to not make it so hard or lasting, giving another chance. Clearly, the punishment should not be washing one’s hands of the other. This is another way of reconciling justice with mercy.⁶⁶

If the sense of organization is evident from the beginning of Vincent de Paul’s charitable works, during the periods of greater social turbulence and public calamities, this organization becomes socially ingenious and creative. Such a socialization of charity is, without doubt, the expression of social responsibility of the evangelical person in the face of the misery which invades society and the lives of people. St. Vincent applied this harmonious alliance between justice and charity to the solutions he tried to give to the different kinds of problems he attended to through his vast “social network.” And so when he asks a priest to take care of and help the prisoners, he explains to him that is not for the sake of fostering vice, but rather to make them more just through merciful love as Jesus did with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). And so, mysteriously, what justice seeks for, charity achieves. Furthermore, St. Vincent knew how unjust penal justice could become and what prison life was like in his

⁶³ SV II, 68. Cf. SV II, 74.

⁶⁴ SV V, 398.

⁶⁵ Cf. SV VII, 97.

⁶⁶ Cf. SV I, 449.

time. And so he says that those who work with the prisoners “exercise mercy, seeking it for the guilty and demanding it for the innocent.”⁶⁷

Let us update this rich Vincentian heritage by pointing out that the Social Doctrine of the Church frequently shows the insufficiency of justice alone in resolving the conflicts between people. Therefore it seeks to unite justice and charity. It does so by including justice in love: “Love, so to speak, is the condition of justice and, without doubt, justice is at the service of charity” (QA 12). Charity is never constructed against justice, but it can transcend it. In this way it frees justice from its great danger: seeking justice it falls into vengeance. Although they are two different virtues, the frontiers between justice and charity are far from unchanging. Quite the contrary, the ideal is that by respecting justice, one goes a step beyond, establishing charity which surpasses justice without cancelling it out.

Finally let us say a word about solidarity which for John Paul II is a bridge between justice and charity. Solidarity is defined by John Paul II as “the firm and persevering determination to strive for the common good; that is, for the good of each and every one so that all may be truly responsible for all” (SRS, 38). In this way, solidarity is presented as a virtue linked to *justice* when it collaborates in building up the common good. It is presented as a principle which can transform the structures of sin and produce more human structures. In the face of burning social problems it is necessary: to directly help the poorest nations (many of them former colonies plundered by their former powers); to reform the international economic and financial institutions; to support the efforts of the poor countries to develop themselves with dignity (cf. CA 26; SRS 16; CIC 2440). The subjects of this supportive justice are all the social groups which produce and distribute goods. This distribution should be carried out according to the necessity and the productive capacity of the different actors. The relationship between justice and solidarity favors equality among peoples.⁶⁸

Solidarity is not just a human virtue, but also a Christian one. As such it is linked to charity. Therefore it has the notes of total gratuity, pardon and reconciliation. It aims for the conversion of the sin which adheres to the human heart, and it orients personal change with the help of grace. For Christians solidarity is inspired by the

⁶⁷ SV VII, 443.

⁶⁸ VIDAL, MARCIANO, “Justicia y solidaridad en la ética social actual,” in AA.VV., *La justicia social*, Madrid, Ed. PS, 1993, 269-286.

loving unity of the Trinity. In this way, solidarity creates communion. Moreover from this Trinitarian origin of solidarity, in accordance with his work for holiness, John Paul II points to the saints as an admirable example of solidarity. He explicitly mentions two figures: one who worked in Latin America centuries ago and the other born in his native land in our times: “Many saints canonized by the church give admirable witness of this solidarity and they serve as examples in the difficult circumstances of our times. Among them I wish to recall St. Peter Claver, with his service to the slaves in Cartagena of the Indies, and St. Maximilian Kolbe who gave his life for an unknown prisoner in the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Oswiecim” (SRS 40). Thus we see that solidarity is the connecting thread of the three basic categories of the social moral: charity, justice and the common good.

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