

St. Vincent at the School of St. Paul

by Yves Danjou, C.M.

“This was the first sermon of the mission and God gave success to it on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul; God does not do such things without design on such a day.” This was how St. Vincent explained the beginning of the Congregation of the Mission founded under the aegis of St. Paul.

The Event at Folleville

The event, which was reported at length by Abelly,¹ is very well known. At the end of the year 1616, St. Vincent accompanied Madame de Gondi into one of her territories, at Folleville, south of Amiens. He had already had occasion to be called to the bedside of a dying man who desired to make a general confession. The latter later spoke to Madame de Gondi: “Ah Madame, said he, I would have been damned if I had not been able to make a general confession, because of several grave sins which I had not dared to confess.” Madame de Gondi was bowled over by this and she turned to St. Vincent: “Ah Monsieur, what is this? What have we just heard? It is thus doubtless with the greater number of these poor people. Ah, if this man who passed for a good man had been in such a state of damnation, what would be the situation of the others who live worse lives? Ah! Monsieur Vincent, what souls would be lost! What remedy is there for this?”

St. Vincent is thus invited to preach in the church of Folleville in order to exhort the inhabitants to make a general confession. This was on 25th January, 1617, the feast of the conversion of St. Paul, which is stated twice by St. Vincent. The result surpassed anything which he might have foreseen. The response was such that St. Vincent, although he had been helped by another priest, would not have been able to respond to the demand to such a degree that Madame de Gondi called on the Jesuits of Amiens. Faced with the

¹ LOUIS ABELLY, *La Vie du Venerable Serviteur de Dieu*, Paris, 1664, t. I, ch. 8, pp. 33-34.

success of such an initiative, the same undertaking was planned in the other villages which belonged to the territories of Madame de Gondy.

At first glance one can note in this event a simple fact from the life of St. Vincent. Confession was at that time the privileged means of encouraging the faithful to the practice of religion and to devotion. Attendance at mass was a social act but confession required a personal commitment. This sacrament was one of the best means of opposing Protestant ideas. That explains the importance given in the 17th Century to devotion to Mary Magdalene, the penitent woman par excellence, to whom St. Vincent refers to several times and whom he calls "The Beloved Lover" (X, 547).² The problem was that, in the countryside, certain priests being poorly instructed themselves were incapable of hearing confessions validly and of usefully aiding penitents.

The Origin of the Congregation of the Mission

Initially, the event at Folleville did not overturn the life of Vincent. He was at a period of his existence where he was still searching out his future. Having come to Paris to make his fortune there, he was more and more aware of the demands of the priesthood which he had received in 1600. Chaplain to Queen Margot, he had occasion to be in contact with the spiritual renewal which was taking place in the capital. He had links of friendship with Pierre de Bérulle which opened him to the spiritual dimension of the priest, but he did not wish to become part of the oratory which de Bérulle was in the process of founding. Thanks to de Bérulle's influence, he became, in 1612, the parish priest at Clichy in the Paris suburbs. He maintained that he found great joy there, yet some months afterwards, in September 1613, he had been named tutor in the family of the de Gondy. He gave evidence of pastoral dynamism as is shown in 1617 by the event at Folleville but he was not easy with this. He took refuge therefore not far from Lyon, at Chatillon-les-Dombes, to which he had been named curate. He was full of apostolic zeal since he had founded the Ladies of Charity, but some months later he found himself back in Paris with the de Gondy.

All these events which followed one another in an unforeseen and rapid fashion which might even be called incomprehensible, makes one think of St. Paul. This latter after his conversion went into

² The numbers in parentheses refer to PIERRE COSTE, *Saint Vincent de Paul; Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Paris, 1920-1925, 14 Volumes.

Arabia, came back to Damascus, then went to Jerusalem in order to come back finally to the town of his birth at Tarsus (Gal 1:17-21). It was there that Barnabas came to look for him in order to join him into the church at Antioch and to help him to discover his missionary vocation (Acts 11:25-26). For St. Vincent, this call came from Madame de Gondi. St. Vincent recognised it: he had not thought of it himself. Abelly affirms that at the moment of preaching at Folleville "From that moment (and during eight years afterwards), he did not think in any way that this little grain which had been sown would grow and multiply and still less that it would serve as the basis for the establishment of a new company in the church which was to happen later."

St. Vincent did not hide himself when he speaks of the origin of the Congregation of the Mission: "Gentlemen and my brothers, no one had ever thought of that, no one knew what missions were, we did not think of this and we did not know what it was and it is in this that one recognises that it is a work of God" (XI, 169). He said the same thing again on the day when he distributed the common rules on the 17th May, 1658.

The Importance of the 25th January

However, St. Vincent did not soon forget this 25th January of 1617. The memory of the feast of the conversion of St. Paul came back to him later as a sign from God to help him to understand at one and the same time his own personal journey and the development of the congregation. His letters written on one 25th January mention the day of the conversion of St. Paul even though this was not one of the most important feasts of the church (VII, 58 and 59).

We could therefore think that Abelly while he explains it as the desire of Madame de Gondi, to make regular journeys preaching in the villages which belonged to her does not find any echo among the religious communities contacted in spite of the 16,000 livres which she had offered to put at their disposition. The Jesuits excused themselves and the Oratorians refused to take it on. It was thus St. Vincent who was going to be charged with responding to the desires of Madame de Gondi. It was by this decision which was going to take form as time unfolded, that he was going to discover his true vocation, that of giving himself to missionary preaching following the example of St. Paul.

Abelly explains to us in his own style by reporting this episode at Folleville: "The missionaries of his congregation celebrate, with particular devotion, the feast of the conversion of this holy apostle,

in memory of what this new Paul, their father and founder, happily began on this day; his first mission which has been followed by so many others which have caused the conversion of such a great number of souls and contributed so much to the expansion of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.”

Abelly speaks of Vincent as a “new Paul.” He himself would never have accepted such a comparison. It would seem that he paid particular attention to avoiding such a facile play on words between his family name and the name of St. Paul. On the day of the first distribution of the common rules, 17th May, 1658, in explaining what had happened at Folleville, he makes no allusion whatsoever to the conversion of St. Paul although three years previously he had demanded that this feast would be honoured as the day of the foundation of the congregation (XI, 169). It is remarkable that in the Common Rules which were set down by St. Vincent himself, the word “apostle” is utilized in preference to that of St. Paul whenever a citation is made on the subject (8 times in 11).

To Put on Jesus Christ

The Common Rules however mark well the attention that St. Vincent gave to the writings of St. Paul. We do not forget the particular respect which he had for the New Testament which he considered as “the rule of Christian perfection” and of which a chapter was to be read each day “on one’s knees and bareheaded” (Ch. X, 8). It is thus normal that St. Vincent cites St. Paul on numerous occasions, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly.³ Right at the very start of the rules he gives what is the first reference to his spirituality: “In order that this congregation might, by means of the grace of God, achieve the end which it has proposed, it must do its utmost to put on the spirit of Jesus Christ.” It is clear that St. Vincent is referring to Romans 13-14: “Clothe yourself in the Lord Jesus Christ” declares St. Paul.

This theme so dear to St. Vincent has often been studied and lifted up for examination.⁴ He comes back to it often citing abundantly

³ M. Vansteenkiste has dealt with this in *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France*, October 1996, pp. 202-221. See also B. KOCH, “Monsieur Vincent’s References to Holy Scripture in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission,” in *Cahiers Saint Vincent*, Paris, December 2008, pp. 9-31.

⁴ For the sake of brevity, we cite only the last article to deal with this subject in a fully developed way; ERMINIO ANTONELLO, “Clothing Oneself in the Spirit of Jesus Christ in the Thought of St. Vincent,” in *Vincentiana*, May-June 2008, pp. 172-188.

from St. Paul. We have an example in his conference on 2nd May 1659 which explains the common rules with regard to the 8th Article of the evangelical maxim regarding mortification. His insistence is such that he is obliged to give references in Latin. He recalls firstly the prayers that the priest is required to say at the moment of putting on the liturgical vestments before celebration of the mass: “Another means of renouncing ourselves is *spoliare veterem hominem et induere novum*, that is to say to take off the old man and to dress oneself in the new” (cf. Eph 4:22-24, Col 3:9-10). A little later he continues: “St. Paul says that by baptism we thus put on Jesus Christ: you who are baptised in Jesus Christ, you have put on Jesus Christ.” “*Qui cumque in Christo baptiziti estis, Christum induistis*” (Gal 3:27). What do we do when we establish within us mortification, patience, humility etc.? We establish Jesus Christ there; and those who work at all the Christian virtues can say as St. Paul does “*Vivo ego, non jam ego, vivit vero, in me Christus*” (Gal 2:20): it is no longer I who live, it is Jesus Christ who lives in me. I lived, *vivo ego*; it is no longer I who live *vivit vero in me Christus* (XII, 224-225).

This assimilation to Christ is not a simple spiritual attitude. It is a call to a missionary life in the image of that which Christ lived during his public life. St. Vincent explains it thus to his missionaries: “The rule says that, in order to achieve this (the end which the congregation proposes for itself) as well as to attain perfection, it must put on the spirit of Jesus Christ. Oh my Saviour! Oh Gentleman! This is a huge undertaking, to put on the spirit of Jesus Christ! This means that for us to work at our perfection and to assist the people usefully... we must work at imitating the perfection of Jesus Christ and attempt to follow it” (XII, 107). The end of this conference where the references to St. Paul are not lacking is even more explicit: “All the baptised have put on the spirit of Jesus Christ but all do not do the works. Each must therefore attempt to conform himself to our Lord, to distance himself from the ways of the world, to link himself in affection and in practice to the example of the Son of God, who became human as we are, in order that we might not only be saved, but saviours, as he is; this means by co-operating with him in the salvation of souls” (XII, 113).

Missionary Following Christ

By the imitation of Christ which is at the same time personal sanctification and living preaching, St. Vincent wished to be missionary. “To announce the Gospel in preaching Jesus Christ,” declares St. Paul in his letter to the Romans (16:25). We understand from this that he regarded the apostolic action of St. Paul as an

example to follow and a model to imitate. He saw in the pastoral experience which he had undergone at Folleville a direct relationship with the spiritual transformation of St. Paul. He says this in the account which he gives of the event: "This was the first sermon of the mission and the success which God gave to it on that day of the conversion of St. Paul; which God did not do without design on such a day."⁵

This is why St. Vincent often takes as a model St. Paul. He had moreover a temperament that was at one and the same time passionate and sensitive, generous and demanding, sure of itself and prudent. One could ask oneself if he did not find in himself what he saw in the person of St. Paul: "Was he not the most quick and the most angry person that one could have met? He was entirely fire" (IX, 272). Abelly affirms that Monsieur Vincent "was a bilious character with a lively spirit, and was as a consequence of this strongly prone to anger" and that he had to make an effort "to suppress the tendencies of his nature."⁶ St. Vincent was aware of this since he describes himself thus to a confrere who desired to stay longer in bed: "But someone calls to awake me. Monsieur Vincent who always cries out, comes to get me, he will cry after me (what an angry person!) 'Monsieur what are you doing there? Everybody is at prayer; there is only you who are still in bed. What are you doing there monsieur? You must get up'" (XI, 238).

St. Vincent very quickly developed a sense of the demands of evangelization. For him following the example of St. Paul, to imitate Christ is to follow him in his missionary involvement. He comes back to this often. When he explains in his conference of the 6th December 1658, the ends of the congregation, he does not cease to repeat this. "Yes our Lord asks us that we evangelize the poor: this is what he did and what he wishes to continue to do through us" (XII, 79). An objection is presented to him because the parish priests often made it. "That is true but there is not to be found in the Church of God any company which has as its share the poor and which gives itself completely to the poor without ever preaching in the large towns... the great motive that we have for this, is the grandeur of the thing; to make God known to the poor, to announce Jesus Christ to them, to tell them that the Kingdom of Heaven is nearby and that it is for the poor" (XII, 80).

By these words, St. Vincent expresses his missionary ideal; to announce Jesus Christ throughout the world. Certainly, he speaks in

⁵ L. ABELLY, *op. cit.*, t. I, ch. 8, p. 34.

⁶ *Ibid*, t. III, ch. 12, pp. 177-178.

the first place of the poor people of the countryside. However he understands the word “poor” on two levels. The poor is firstly the one who is in material difficulty but it is also the one who is deprived of spiritual assistance. Corporal and spiritual, the two go together. From his first foundation, which we know to be the Conference of the Ladies of Charity, he said it clearly in the rule which he gave to them at Chatillion: “In order that the end of this institute might not only be to assist the poor corporally, but also spiritually, the said servants of the poor... will do all with great zeal to co-operate for the salvation of souls and to lead them as if by the hand to God” (XII, 429).

A Broadened View

This is the reason for which St. Vincent orientated very quickly his thoughts and activity towards the missions outside of France. In the same way that St. Paul asked Christians to be “as sources of light in the world” (Phil 2:15), he asserts strongly: “Our vocation is to go, not only into a parish, not only into a bishopric, but throughout the world; and to do what? To embrace the hearts of men, to do that which the Son of God did, he who came to set fire to the world in order to enflame it with his love. What have we to desire, if not that that fire burns and consumes all?” (XII, 262). According to him, apostolic action is the same everywhere. “It is true, he wrote to the superior at Genoa, that those who do good in foreign countries with regard to the poor and the captives, that they are pleased to do the same things here among the poor and the afflicted” (III, 337).

For St. Vincent there could be no limit to the announcing of the Gospel. He declares in 1643: “To work for the salvation of the poor people of the fields, that is the principal aim of our vocation, and all the rest is only an accessory to that...” but gradually his vision broadened: “Are we not happy, my brothers, to express the vocation of Jesus Christ in its simplest form? For what could express that better than the manner of life that Jesus Christ lived on earth, if not missionaries? I do not say simply us, but the Missioners of the Oratory, of Christian Doctrine, the Capuchins Missioners, and the Jesuits Missioners. Oh my brothers, these are great missioners, of whom we are simply the shadows. See how they travel even to the Indies, to Japan, to Canada, to achieve the work that Jesus Christ began on earth and which he has never ceased since the moment of his call... let us imagine that he says to us: ‘Go out missioners, go out; what, are you still here and there are poor souls who still wait for you!’” (XI, 133-134).

We find in these words all the missionary force of St. Paul. "To announce the Gospel is not a title of glory for me; it is a necessity which is laid upon me. Yes what an evil for me if I do not announce the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). St. Vincent, when he gave the Letter of Mission to Charles Nacquard, called to found the mission in Madagascar, said to him: "The charity of St. Paul has great need of you" (III, 279). On the other hand, St. Louise de Marillac, under the influence of St. Vincent, had the desire to live in the same manner, the generosity called upon by the love of God. From the beginning of the year 1643, she often finished her letters with a phrase of St. Paul's: "The Charity of Christ urges us on" (2 Cor 5:14) which she completed with the word "crucified" in reference to 1 Cor 1:23. St. Louise is thinking firstly of the degree of misery to be responded to but she is also attracted by the work of doing this beyond the frontiers of France. Several sisters were proposed for the mission in Madagascar (VI, 251).

A Reflected Evangelisation

This announcing of the Gospel is not done without reflection. It is well known that St. Paul, in order to announce the good news, undertook to go to the great administrative and commercial centres of the Roman Empire, like Ephesus, Thessalonica or Corinth. St. Vincent, without speaking of any true geo-political view, was very sensitive himself to the expansion which the great towns could offer to him. Rome was his first foundation after Paris, although canonical recognition was not granted until 1641 (XII, 282-283). He underlined in these terms the importance of the town of Marseille: "It is on the way and mid-way to Rome; it is a seaport where one may embark for Italy and the Levant and therefore it is very useful for the company" (XII, 149).

It is remarkable however that most often he installed his missionaries at the hearts of towns even though they were deputed to give missions amongst the poor people of the country, and he ceased to forbid them to preach or to confess in the towns where they lived. It was thus from the beginning as he explained in one of his letters dated 12th September 1631: "We live a life almost as solitary in Paris as the Carthusians when we are not preaching or catechising or confessing in the towns for almost no one has anything to do with us nor us with anyone else" (1,122). We must recognise that a town presented economic advantages and facilitated more contact than other places would.

At the same time St. Vincent refuses to put himself in agreement with other congregations called to a place for an apostolic work.

He had thought to send one of his missionaries to Sale, a Moroccan port not far from Rabat but he withdrew his proposition when he learned that other religious had the intention of going there. He explains this to Nicolas Bagni, the Nuncio in France: "The gentlemen of propaganda know that when it finds other workers who wish to go to places where we have been called, we withdraw in order not to break with charity or to give in to the sentiment which we must have that others will do better there than us" (IV, 331).

On this point he concurs with St. Paul who affirms to the Christians in Rome that he had "the honour of limiting his apostolate to the regions where no one had yet invoked the name of Christ in order not to build on foundations laid by another" (Rom 15:20). One could think that that is the reason why "the spirit of Jesus does not permit them" to enter into rich Bithynia (Acts 16:8). This is what urged St. Paul to go to Macedonia and then to Greece. It comes from a true adventure, for the Jewish communities were very few there. They were moreover unknown to him when he found himself at ease in Asia Minor on account of all the contacts which he had had in Tarsus his hometown and when events obliged him to go to Syria.

The Audacity of St. Vincent

St. Vincent had the same audacity. One is quite surprised by his desire to go ahead in beginning his little company, even though it only included some dozen people, in undertaking apostolic actions which were risky or adventurous. From 1634 he spoke of sending missionaries to Constantinople, the centre of the Ottoman Empire (I, 253). That did not happen. He quickly proposed, in 1643, to take charge of the mission in Arabia (III, 336). As that did not come to fruition, he turned to North Africa where the first missionaries arrived in 1645. In 1647 he sent two teams of missionaries to Ireland even as the English troops began their actions of persecuting Catholics. The situation was such that St. Vincent believed that two of his confrères had lost their lives there (IV, 290).

In 1642, it was the adventure in Madagascar which began with various attempts but which did not deter the determination of St. Vincent. When he spoke of it, his words are exalting: "Well! Gentlemen and my brothers, would it be possible that we might be so weak of heart and so effeminate as to abandon this vine of the Lord where his Divine Majesty has called us simply on account of the fact that four or five or six have died there!... It would be some company of the mission because there have been five or six deaths that it abandoned the work of God; a weak company attached

to flesh and blood! Oh no!... I do not doubt that nature would not shake a little at first; but the spirit which holds ground beneath it says: I desire this; God has given me this desire; this alone would render me incapable of abandoning this resolution” (XI, 422). This discourse, like many others, has Pauline accents. “This is what I affirm brothers, writes St. Paul: flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.... Be firm, unshakeable, make constant progress in the works of God, knowing that your suffering is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor 15:50 & 58).

The insistence of St. Vincent in urging his confrères to keep confidence and to continue with energy in missionary works undertaken allows us to see that reticence was not lacking in the company. Certain confreres were shaken by the audacity of the founder. There was no lack of exits from the company. St. Vincent however did not accept those who hesitated, who doubted or even refused to commit themselves fully, following the example of St. Paul who reproached Mark for his defection at the moment when they were close to Asia Minor (Acts 13:13) which later causes a certain tension with Barnabas (Acts 15:38-39).

Faithfulness to the mission

This explains why St. Vincent, especially at the end of his life, emphasizes the strength to remain faithful to the end in the apostolic commitment. He knows that loyalty is difficult to maintain. The defection of Judas, despite the grace he had received in accompanying Jesus in his public life, often returns to his mind. He spoke of this more than twenty times. He knows that only the end crowns the work. “Remember always,” he wrote to Etienne Blatiron, “that in the spiritual life there are many beginnings; what is important is the progress and the end” (II, 129). This recommendation makes us think of St. Paul who says: “Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God’s upward calling, in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:12-14).

St. Vincent fears that after him the zeal of his missionaries will weaken. “What! one of the cowardly missionaries will say, why so many missions.... All this is to undertake too many things. It is necessary to abandon this. Really, when Mr. Vincent is dead there will be many changes. We will have to close all of these works because we will not be able to look after them. And who is the cause of all this evil? A coward, missionaries lax and full of love of their

own convenience and rest” (XI, 193-194). He said this in 1655. Three years later he returns with reference to the farewell speech of St. Paul to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:29). *Post discessinam mean*, said St. Paul, *lupi venient raptors*. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock (XII, 91).

Generosity in all situations

To stigmatize the tepidity of some missionaries, St. Vincent uses very strong words taken from the country people. He treats them as carcasses of missionaries (XII, 91), unscrupulous people (XII, 92), vermin (XI, 164) and even sissies (XI, 375). He says the word carcass several times, especially for those who want to “take their pleasures, living capriciously”: which St. Vincent explains by referring to the statement of St. Paul, “There is no evil in the world that does not come from this evil passion of possessing wealth.” Greed, avarice, love of wealth is the source of all sorts of evil. Greed, *radix omnium malorum* (1 Tim 6:10). Who is subject to this lust has in itself the principle, the origin and source of all evil, *radix omnium malorum*. There is nothing which a man is not capable of when driven by this desire. It has in itself that which is capable of doing evil things. There is no crime so great, so strange, so horrible that a man whose commitment is to these interests cannot easily be found guilty. *Radix, radix omnium malorum*. This is the seed and the root of everything; *radix*, no point in looking for another cause; this is it” (XI, 241-242).

On another occasion, having referred to the text in which St. Paul says; “I treat my body harshly and subject it to...” (1 Cor 9:27) he criticizes those who seek their own ease and seek for a place convenient to them; “What is this, my brothers? What can we say to these people, if not that these are people overly self-concerned, girlish spirits and people who do not want to suffer in any way?” (XII, 30).

St. Vincent was not without reason when he made zeal for souls one of the five foundational virtues of the missionaries: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal for souls. They are “like the faculties of the spirit of the Congregation of the Mission” according to the Common Rules (ch. II, 14) which state “We must consider them as the five beautiful little stones of David with which we can, so well, even at the first hit, strike the infernal Goliath, that we might vanquish him entirely, in the name of the Lord of Hosts, and bring the Philistines, that is to say, sinners, into the service of God; always providing that we can set aside the arms of Saul and that we use the approach of the same David, that is to say, if,

following the example of St. Paul, we are going to announce the Gospel, not with persuasive words and relying on human wisdom, but with the teaching which the Spirit reveals and with the virtue of God" (ch. XII, 12).

This text shows that St. Vincent is very close to the spirit of St. Paul but differs from him in his expression. Marked by his country education, he compares the virtues of the missionary to the five small stones used by David to attack Goliath. Paul, on the other hand, who was raised in an urban environment and formed at the games of the stadium, prefers a comparison with the equipment of the soldier which is comprised of five elements; the girdle of virtue, the sword of justice, the buckler of faith, the helmet of salvation and the breast plate of the Spirit (Eph 6:14-17).

Missionary Zeal

"Zeal is that which is purest in the love of God" (XII, 308), declares St. Vincent who could not forget the apostolic urgings of St. Paul for whom love is the fulfilment of the law (Rom 13:8). It is from this that he defines the spirit of his little company with regard to other congregations; "All seek to love God but they love him in differing ways; Carthusians by solitude, Capuchins by poverty, others by singing his praises, and we others, my brothers, if we love him, we must show it by bringing people to love God and the neighbour; to love the neighbour for God's sake and God for the neighbour's." He concludes from this that apostolic zeal is the determining factor in the holiness of the missionary; "It is true, therefore, that I am sent not only to love God but to make him loved. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbour does not love him" (XII, 262).

Zeal demands, therefore, that one give oneself to the task and to the means of achieving it. St. Vincent loves to recall the importance of hard work, following the example of St. Paul who declared; "Each will receive payment according to the work he has done" (1 Cor 3:8). He says this to one of his missionaries, "I swear that laziness is often a stumbling block and that missionaries must avoid it more even than people in the world since they (the missionaries) are made for work" (VII, 488-489).

Several times he admires St. Paul for the work he undertook; "St. Paul, this great apostle, this most holy man, this vessel of election, earned his living by the work of his hands; in the midst of his great works, his great responsibilities, his continuous preaching, he took the time, either by day or night, to earn his way and ask nothing of anyone" (IX, 492-493). Drawing on this example, he

commends the Daughters of Charity for being a burden on no one (IX, 494). He himself had always desired that missions would be given without charge, which did not deter him from seeking from all quarters the money necessary for this. He explained himself in these words; "St. Paul did so and never took anything from the place in which he worked; but he took from other churches in order to work in the new ones, when the work of his hands did not earn enough or when preaching or conversions deterred him from earning his way by the work of his hands. *Spolians Ecclesias Macedoniae ut non essent vobis oneri*, he said to the Corinthians, when he said that his glory in preaching the Gospel was to take nothing for doing so" (I, 137).

A shared Zeal

Missionary zeal is the lot of all Christians. St. Paul has often been reproached for his restrictive commendations with regard to women; they must keep silence in the assemblies (1 Cor 14:34), remain submissive to men (Eph 5:22). That is explained by the historical context of his epoch. In fact, Paul rejoices in the support he received from women. At the end of the letter to the Romans, he greets, without any distinction between them, the men and women who have been, he says, "his" collaborators in Jesus Christ (Rom 16:3). He especially commends Phoebe "our sister, deaconess of the Church of Cenchrea" (Rom 16:1)

St. Vincent did not forget this. Among women he found the perfect collaborators at a time when it was thought that they had better occupy themselves in piety than in apostolic commitment. It was no mere chance that his first foundation is that of the Conference of the Ladies of Charity. He makes reference to this in the way he addresses them; "It is eight hundred years or so since women had any public work in the Church; though once they were called deaconesses... but, by the time of Charlemagne, by the secret designs of Providence, this usage ceased and your sex was deprived of all work, such that, since then, it has had none; and now we see that this same Providence entrusts it today to some among you" (XIII, 809-810).

St. Vincent takes the liberty of saying (XIII, 764) to the Ladies of Charity that their "devotion" frees them from the strictures of St. Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians. The reason that he gives, a little later, is, in its way, a summary of his life; "Nobody can be lost in the exercise of Charity" (XIII, 815).

It is from this perspective that St. Vincent states again to us his deep conviction, which is that of St. Paul; "Let us hold as certain that

we will not be true Christians except to the degree that we are ready to love all and even to give our life for the love and the glory of Jesus Christ, resolving for ourselves, with the Holy Apostle, to choose torments and even death rather than be separated from the charity of this Divine Saviour.”⁷

Amiens-Folleville, 25 January 2009

Translation: EUGENE CURRAN, C.M.

⁷ This study is limited to the missionary activity of St. Vincent in relation to that of St. Paul. There still remains much to be undertaken with regard to the influence of the latter on the specifically spiritual thought of St. Vincent.