

St. Paul the Apostle in the Life of St. Vincent de Paul

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Introduction

The celebration of the Pauline Year gives us the opportunity of discovering this great Apostle of Christ in the person, life and teachings of the Founder of the Congregation of the Mission and Daughters of Charity. This article will allow us to study his doctrinal and apostolic influences in the life of St. Vincent. Such a study of this particular nature is contained, in one way or another, within the general theme of “St. Vincent de Paul and Sacred Scripture,” but not as well developed as we desired.¹ The commentaries written by various authors to tackle the topic are valuable for our study, but they are not sufficient when a focused vision and a more specialized treatment are needed.

Overall, St. Paul has played a determining role in the preaching and life of St. Vincent, whose testimonial richness can only be examined with the help of the Sacred Scriptures and Pauline theology, and to a lesser extent, help of other authors who drank from the same fountains, though according to their own appropriate capacity and talents. St. Vincent was not a Scripture scholar, but the

¹ Among others, these have studied the relationship between St. Vincent and Sacred Scripture: F. GARNIER, *Textes Bibliques cités d'après Saint Vincent de Paul*, Vincentiana 23 (1979), p. 214-219; J. GONTHEIR, *Saint Vincent de Paul et l'Écriture Sainte*, Cahiers Saint Vincent, Bulletin des Lazaristes de France 70 (1979), p. 1-22; A. DODIN, *Monsieur Vincent et la Bible*, Initiation à Saint Vincent de Paul, CERF, Paris 1993, p. 83-113; M. VANSTEENKISTE, *M. Vincent et la Bible*, Bulletin Société de Borda 388 (1982), p. 1-7; W. DICHARRY, *Saint Vincent and Sacred Scripture*, Vincentiana 1 (1990), p. 143-154; B. KOCH, *Le rapport de M. Vincent à l'Écriture Sainte dans les Règles Communes C.M.*, 3 session de l'École française, Annecy 1993, p. 1-17; J.P. RENOARD, *La parola di Dio in san Vincenzo*, Annali 99 (1992), p. 141-154; *Au temps de St. Vincent de Paul... et aujourd'hui*, Cahiers 20, 34; D. GARCIA - M. ABAITUA, *Referencias Biblicas*, Vicente de Paul, Obras completas, Edicion CEME, Salamanca 1974, SVP XI/4, p. 877-884; J.L. FERNANDEZ HERMOSO DE MENDOZA, *Escritura (Sagrada)*, Diccionario de Espiritualidad Vicenciana, CEME, Salamanca 1995, p. 201-204.

Scriptures, especially St. Paul, enabled him to expound his convictions and confirm his faith and missionary experience. From St. Paul, St. Vincent learned that the Scriptures can be well used for teaching, for refuting error, for correction and for educating along the path of justice (2 Tm 3:16).

The sudden encounter of Saul of Tarsus with Jesus on the road to Damascus, when he was persecuting Christians, reveals a ray of light in order to explain the mystery of the conversion of Vincent de Paul when he was thinking primarily of amassing wealth and assuring himself of a secure retirement (1609-1617). The comparison between the conversion of St. Paul and that of St. Vincent has no more than a distant similarity which allows us to state one more time that God calls whom he wants, when he wants, how he wants, in order for a specific mission to be accomplished. The great difference between the two conversions is that the conversion of the youthful Vincent was not extraordinary in comparison to that of Saul's, inundated by abundant light when he was persecuting Christians (cf. Acts 9:3-5).

St. Vincent encounters in St. Paul a great follower of Christ, the witness par excellence of the Gospel, and a messenger jealous of the word of God. Paul's missionary witness and his teaching serve not only as a doctrinal fountain for Vincent, but also as a stimulus, a stirring up for his preaching and for his zeal, a guide for reaching Jesus Christ and clothing oneself in the Holy Spirit.

Vincent knew the Pauline writings well, even though he did not read Paul in the original Greek. He read the Bible in the Latin Vulgate edition of St. Jerome. Furthermore, on occasion, he made a mistake in his citations, as when he would attribute to one author what really was written by another sacred author.² He offered commentaries on the Scriptures in his familiar and homespun style, without the pedantry of human wisdom and professorial explanations. His commentaries were not directed to Biblical or Pauline scholars, but to Christians of good will who wanted guidance about their vocation or mission, without concern for academic methods or exegetical precision.

In his 250 explicit citations, some repeated and many more implicitly referring to St. Paul, distributed throughout his many conferences and other writings, Vincent de Paul shows his love and devotion for those who are chosen and sent by God to preach the

² This is the case in the conference on February 21, 1659 about searching for the reign of God which is attributed to St. Paul writing to the Corinthians, but actually the citation is found in St. John, author of the Book of Revelation 14:13: *Opera illorum sequuntur illos* (cf. SVP XI, 433).

Good News to the nations. In the *Common Rules* 115 citations are taken from the New Testament, explicitly or implicitly, and 35 are taken from St. Paul.³ The number itself is not great, but it is significant because of the impact that the writings of St. Paul and meditation on his doctrine and life had on Vincent de Paul.

It is true that he interprets and adapts the doctrine, not only within a religious context, but also changing it into dynamic principles about the spiritual and apostolic life. The Letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians are the main ones that he quotes and in particular the Letter to the Romans and First Letter to the Corinthians. When offering a conference to the missionaries, he quotes from St. Paul in his explanation about availability, sometimes called holy indifference:

Oh great St. Paul! Since your conversion you have had the infused grace of indifference. What abundant grace was bestowed upon you so quickly in this vessel of being chosen! So marvelous a moment that changed you from a persecutor to an apostle! How great was the light that produced in him, detached from the law, his fortune, his feelings, an ability to say suddenly: "Lord, what do you want me to do?" It is hard to imagine everything he suffered in his person, for his honor and in his ministry. That heart of St. Paul so generous and so resigned that saw persecution in many places, was whipped, stoned, imprisoned at times, scorned, exiled and finally martyred. It is amazing how much he suffered, simply amazing.⁴

Likewise, he offers other praises when he has the occasion to think about the wisdom and the commitment of this "apostle by vocation" (Rm 1:1). Before the comments on May 16, 1659, many times he had proposed to the Congregation that St. Paul was the model apostle or missionary, that is to say, one who is sent, because "what is a missionary? One wants to say sent, sent by God."⁵ One knows a missionary by his availability to come and go where he is needed in order to preach the Good News to the people.

Concerning the issue of doctrinal questions, nothing stands out because these concerns had little impact in the teaching of St. Vincent. In this article we are focused on the spiritual and pastoral explanations of St. Vincent, offered to his followers. This article is

³ Outside of the Bible, the *Common Rules* do not have citations except for one from St. Zeno: "Curiosity makes a person guilty, not learned" (cf. RC XII, 8).

⁴ SVP XI, 533-534.

⁵ SVP XI, 342.

divided into two main sections with other subdivisions as needed: 1) St. Paul and the Origin of the Congregation of the Mission; and 2) St. Paul and the Christocentric spirituality of St. Vincent.

1) St. Paul and the Origin of the Congregation of the Mission

The predilection of St. Vincent for St. Paul is explained because in St. Paul he finds the major teachings that bring Vincent to Christ and illuminates his own proper missionary vocation and that of his religious communities. In an extract of an undated conference, St. Vincent commented on the good results from a mission preached in Folleville on January 25, 1617, the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul:

That was the first sermon of the mission and the success that God gave to it, the day of the Conversion of St. Paul. God made this happen within his design on such a day.⁶

Since that date, the Apostle of Christ is always on the mind and in the heart of St. Vincent, even though he does not always mention his name. After Jesus of Nazareth, sent by the Father to preach the Good News of salvation, the next most important reminder for Vincent was the Conversion of St. Paul. Each year this feast day brought to his mind the design of God for him and the Congregation of the Mission. This missionary community emerged to preach to the poor, in the style of Paul, who was committed to the total mission that was confided to him to come to know God and Jesus Christ his Son. Only a man of faith, such as St. Vincent, would be able to relate that mission in Folleville with the origin of the Congregation of the Mission and speak directly about the design of God in all of this.

Although Paul of Tarsus was the last of the apostles to be called by Jesus, he stood out among everyone because of his self-denial, his work and doctrine. St. Vincent learns all about Paul day after day. He matures in his explanations to the faithful with the purpose that they arrive at a knowledge of the truth, and they adjust their life to the model sent from heaven, Jesus Christ, subject to the fragility of human nature except in sin, to reach the total salvation of humanity — that is the proper plan of God for St. Vincent and the members of the Congregation. With effort and apostolic zeal, they have sacrificed everything to try to achieve it, and they are called by the Gospel of Christ, from which Paul has received the revelation. From this comes the idea that the missionaries ought to be committed to

⁶ SVP XI, 700.

evangelization and reach out so that all people attain salvation, made possible by Jesus Christ. It is acknowledged that the terms evangelization and salvation have their own proper meaning, but practically speaking for the Vincentian Community, these terms are inseparable: the first goes along with the second.

Evangelization and salvation

Of all the titles that St. Vincent dedicates to the Son of God, made flesh in human nature, the one he emphasizes is “Evangelizer of the poor,” along with “Savior.” Where did he get this idea? Without a doubt, from the evangelist, St. Luke, companion of St. Paul, on their apostolic visits and who did not cease to teach the Gentiles for whom our Lord had achieved the salvation of the world and reconciliation with the Father. This title, “Savior,” filled St. Vincent with so much enthusiasm that he could never be quiet about it in his conferences. It flows spontaneously and naturally from him as a form of exclamation or as a brief prayer. In the middle or at the end of his conferences, he used it like an arrow on fire that leads to the beloved person of Jesus:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the only true Redeemer, who completed perfectly that which is signified by that beautiful name of Jesus, the name of Savior. He came from heaven to earth to exercise that office and made it the object of his life and death, exercising continually that characteristic of Savior. While he lived on earth, he directed all his thoughts to the salvation of humanity and he continues with those same sentiments where he now encounters the will of the Father.⁷

Certainly, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity belong to everyone and also exclusively to God because of their very work. Because of this reality, they have continued the saving mission of the Son, sent into the world with the same zeal undertaken by the apostles and in particular by St. Paul. Returning to the significance of a missionary, St. Vincent logically concludes the following: “Whoever says missionary, says apostle, says savior; we have been called to save souls.”⁸ Once again, the one sent, the missionary, the apostle and the savior all have the same goal: to free humanity from all slavery that impedes total salvation. St. Vincent explains the reason of the divine plan for the Congregation in this

⁷ SVP XI, 762.

⁸ SVP XI, 217.

way: “The Son of God was made man like us, so that not only would we be saved, but also be a savior like him, that means cooperating with him in the salvation of all.”⁹ We are then instruments of salvation, chosen by God, in the person of Jesus Christ, just like St. Paul was chosen, to bring to the people eternal salvation and liberation from all worldly distress.

There is also another historical reason that explains the vocation and mission of Vincent de Paul and his congregations as saviors, that is, the selection of the seal that was used at the very beginning of the Congregation, *IHS*, Jesus Savior of all. This one was used before adopting definitively the one we now use, *Jesus Christ Evangelizer of the Poor*, so as not to confuse ours with the one the Jesuits use and above all to signify the mission proper to his Congregation in the Church.

According to St. Vincent, within the same design of God, the Congregation is to dedicate itself to the evangelization and salvation of all people by the practice of charity. Just as the love of God and love of one’s neighbor are part of the same commandment, the missionaries are to remember that their obligation is to evangelize without ceasing in words and deeds for the love of Christ and humanity, following the example of St. Paul because “love cannot remain idle, for it moves us to salvation and compassion for others.”¹⁰ However, it grows even more deeply into the love-charity of Christ when it evokes the effusion of the Holy Spirit in our hearts (Rm 5:5). Referring more to the actual living out of fraternal charity, he says: “The Congregation of the Mission will endure as long as charity reigns in it.”¹¹

Most certainly St. Vincent could be using the words of St. Paul: “The charity of Christ urges us” (2 Cor 5:14), but in reality the recorder of the conferences does not mention the details of how it appears in the Pauline writings. Nevertheless, if there is something that characterizes the word and heart of St. Vincent, it is the teaching contained in the original text, understood as: the charity of Christ concentrates us on him and drives us to give testimony about him who died for us; he died and rose because of the love he has for us and continues to have. Such is the ordinary meaning of urgent from the Vulgate that was translated from the original Greek text. By means of charity, St. Vincent lived this out by his expressions in

⁹ SVP XI, 415.

¹⁰ SVP XI, 555.

¹¹ SVP XI, 768. The same affirmation is made when talking about prayer as an “imprignable fortification” (cf. SVP XI, 778).

prayer and evangelization, not without the same urgency that corresponds to the love by which Christ has shown us in his death and resurrection.

Once again, he admires the Apostle for his compassionate charity and mercy. "Oh, St. Paul, how perceptive you are on this point! Oh Savior, who filled this apostle with your spirit and your love. Help us to say like him: Do I not feel sick when someone among us is sick?"¹² The dual discovery that he made about the religious ignorance that seized the people and the illnesses that many people suffered without relief and support lead him in 1617 to the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission and to the Confraternity of Charity, in Folleville and in Châtillon-les-Dombes, respectively.

It was in 1617 that the young priest, enlightened by faith, began to discover Jesus Christ in the Gospels and in the person of the poor, without the possibility of separating them, because Christ himself identified with them (cf. Mt 10:31-40).¹³ With the light of the Pauline doctrine and more particularly, a review of the formation of the Mystical Body, whose Head and Savior is Christ, he organizes his compassion and mercy into works of charity and in generous help for urgent situations, as St. Paul did (cf. 2 Cor 8-9), especially in support of the poor in Jerusalem. The example of Jesus Christ who being rich became poor so as to make us rich is sufficient for us to be in solidarity with those who suffer or lack the necessities of life.¹⁴ In the justice and holiness of God within the unity of the Body of Christ, there is a basis for the exhortation for Christian solidarity and for not remaining unresponsive to the suffering of others:

*All of humanity makes up the Mystical Body; we are all members, one to another (1 Cor 12:27). Never is it heard that one member, not even in animals, is immune to the suffering of the other members; that one part of the human becomes bruised, wounded, or violated and the others do not feel it. That's impossible! All the members are so united and joined together that the evil of one is the evil of others. With this reasoning, Christians who are members of the same body have to suffer together. How can one be Christian and see the afflictions of a brother and not cry with him and not feel with him! That one has no charity; he is only a Christian in name; he is lacking in humanity; he is worse than an animal.*¹⁵

¹² SVP XI, 560.

¹³ SVP IX, 302, 916, 1194; XI, 404.

¹⁴ SVP XI, 139, 792.

¹⁵ SVP XI, 560-561.

Evangelization and Work

Along with compassionate charity and mercy, there is our daily work, which is a convincing proof of our love of God and one's neighbor and source of our personal sanctification. God never ceases to work, inside and outside of ourselves. Sent into the world, his Son worked with his hands in the shop and preached, using the word and acts of charity, reaching out to sinners and the sick in spirit and body. What about St. Paul? The example of St. Paul, an untiring worker, does not fail us on this point of vital importance. Work flows in obedience from the first command of God to human beings. Furthermore, St. Paul responds to this by not being a burden but a help to society:

This man filled with God, a chosen vessel, earned his livelihood with the work of his hands; in the middle of all his great tasks, his serious occupation, his continual preaching, he worked day and night, so as to be able to support himself, without asking anyone. In one of his letters he says: "Do you know that I did not demand anything and that the bread that I eat was earned by these hands so as to sustain my body" (cf. 2 Th 3:8). Who could not be filled with awe by this example?¹⁶

2. St. Paul and Christocentric Vincentian Spirituality

In talking about his faith and experience about God and humanity, St. Vincent did not intend another concept about assuring us in the pursuit of Jesus and in the need to clothe ourselves in the Holy Spirit. He learned from St. Paul, his best teacher in this area and from whom he literally took his teachings. Is there a better person to whom Jesus Christ can hand over his mission than St. Paul who follows the Lord and continues his saving mission? Who is better than St. Paul to embrace the height and depth and width of the love of Christ? (cf. Ep 3:18-19). Who is better than St. Paul to show us the transformation by the Spirit of Christ, overcoming his weaknesses of the flesh that fight with the Spirit? (cf. Rm 7:14-25).

There have been various Christian and spiritual approaches that St. Vincent derived from his use of the doctrine and epistles of St. Paul in order to respond to his own proper vocation and that of his communities, sustained by the Spirit of God. We are dishonest if we think that only St. Paul helped him clarify his vocation, without taking into account the rest of the Scriptures that he used frequently.

¹⁶ SVP IX, 447.

However, it is certain that St. Paul stands out as his best teacher. Jesus Christ is the center of those questions of faith and experience that St. Paul passed on to us; such as: "For me, life is Christ and death would bring me profit" (Ph 1:21), or also: "I live, but not I; it is Christ who lives in me" (Ga 2:20). Furthermore, there are other references that make it even more transparent that the life of Paul and Vincent are overwhelmed by the same spirit of Jesus Christ: a preferred theme of our Founder.

St. Vincent makes other Pauline confirmations in similar terms: "Nothing pleases me except in Jesus Christ."¹⁷ "Jesus Christ is the rule of the mission."¹⁸ Hence, Jesus Christ and his saving mission make up that which is called Vincentian spirituality, the affective with the effective. In reality, those who explore the faith and charity of St. Vincent in the light of the teachings of St. Paul find twin souls, both overwhelmed by the same love of Jesus Christ.

Fundamental Spirituality in the Mysticism of Baptism

The reality here consists in the dying with Christ so as to rise with him to new life (Rm 6:4). Something so fundamental elevates the spirituality that St. Vincent presents and that by which he exhorts us to live with a radicalness and priority to whatever task we are called. Following St. Paul, he explains that we ought to die to ourselves in the old person, that is, sin, so as to live in the new creation, the new person, recreated in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5:17; Ep 2:15; and Col 3:5-12), with all that goes along with abandoning the works of the flesh and the producing of the fruits of the Spirit (Ga 5:19-24).

Briefly, someone might be supposing that this occurs from an instantaneous act because of an immersion in water. The answer is no, for it is understood that many denials and difficulties persist all our lives. However, they become lighter when the Christian makes his life the life of Christ in order to serve others in a spirit of faith and charity. The act of baptism imprints an indelible character, and, although following Christ in our life is difficult, it is important to note that "the grace we have received in baptism gives us an appetite for virtue. The spirit of our Lord places in us the same inclination toward virtue that nature places in us toward vice."¹⁹

¹⁷ L. ABELLY, *La vida del venerable siervo de Dios Vicente de Paúl*, CEME, Salamanca 1004, p. 95-96.

¹⁸ SVP XI, 429.

¹⁹ SVP XI, 484.

St. Vincent condensed the spiritual themes about the mysticism of baptism, developed by St. Paul, in the advice he gave to his first collaborator, the faithful Antoine Portail, relatively early on May 1, 1635, when he was involved in many apostolic works:

*Remember, Father, we live in Jesus Christ, by dying to Jesus Christ, and that we have died in Jesus Christ for the life of Jesus Christ, and that our life must be hidden in Jesus and full of Jesus Christ, and in order to die for Jesus Christ, we must live with Jesus Christ.*²⁰

It was inevitable that when St. Vincent presented Jesus Christ as the center of our Christian and missionary life, he was not only referring to the Spirit of Jesus Christ but also following the Pauline doctrine: in baptism we put on the spirit of Jesus Christ: "All baptized in Christ, you have clothed yourselves in Christ" (Ga 3:27).²¹ It is also certain, he advises, that if "all the baptized are clothed in the spirit of Jesus Christ, not all realize the works that are owed. For that reason, everyone has to resemble our Lord, moving away from the maxims of the world, to follow with one's affection and with one's practice the examples of the Son of God" incarnated.²²

Vincent de Paul refined and reinforced his argument about the basic spirituality in baptism when he speaks openly and with assurance about the vocation of the Daughters of Charity: "If you are faithful in the practice of living like Daughters of Charity, you will be good Christians. Do not say so often that you would want to become a good religious. How can you become good religious without becoming first good Christians?"²³ From where comes the journey to return to the baptismal fountain? Where are the Christian roots planted that are required for the complete development of one's religious and missionary vocation?

In connection with what has been said, Vincent exhorts us to live the holiness that God calls us to and which he has chosen for us before the beginning of the world (cf. Ef 1:4). Although he could not avoid the influence of the work of Benedict of Canfield²⁴ who maintained that sanctity is the fulfillment of the will of God, Vincent concluded above all that in the divine plan we are called to holiness by the irreproachable practice of love, having been chosen before-

²⁰ SVP I, 320.

²¹ SVP XI, 522.

²² SVP XI, 414-415.

²³ SVP IX, 132.

²⁴ Cf. BENEDET OF CANFIELD, *La Règle de Perfection*, the edition of Jean Orcibal, Paris 1982.

hand to be his adopted children, through Jesus Christ (cf. Ep 1:4-5). From this there is the development of perfection by means of charity with the commitment to the salvation of humanity: "If our perfection is found in charity, which is logical, there is no greater charity than devoting ourselves to saving souls and to consume ourselves in the same manner as Jesus Christ."²⁵

This idea is even more obvious when he explains the name, Daughter of Charity, to the Daughters: "To be Daughters of Charity is to be daughters of God, daughters who belong completely to God, because he who is in charity is in God, and God in him."²⁶ Consequently, although Vincent does not say it explicitly, holiness consists in living out one's adoption as son/daughter by means of the love of God, whose effusion in our hearts is owed to the Spirit, present since baptism (cf. Rm 5:5).

Clothed in the Spirit of Jesus Christ

This is another topic in which we hear St. Paul at every step in the words of St. Vincent de Paul. This Pauline formula expresses and means the configuration of Christ as evangelizer and savior of the world (cf. Rm 13:14; Ep 4:24; Ga 3:27; Col 3:10-12; 1 Th 5:8). At play here is the presence and docility of the Holy Spirit that accompanies Jesus Christ when he is praying and preaching the Good News of Salvation. This means that to center one's life in Jesus Christ is to center one's life in the Holy Spirit, because "he who does not have the spirit of Jesus does not belong" (Rm 8:9). To St. Vincent is owed the enthusiasm for the image and expression: "Clothed in the spirit of Jesus," because he made it his own in his synopsis on the theology of the Holy Spirit:

When one says: The spirit of our Lord is in such a person or in such works, how does one understand this? Is it because the same Holy Spirit has flowed over them? Yes, the Holy Spirit, regarding each person, spills over the just ones and lives personally in them. When one says the Holy Spirit acts in a person, that means that this Spirit, living in the person, gives him the same inclination and dispositions that Jesus Christ had on earth, and he does good works; however, I am not saying with the same perfection, but according to the measure of the gifts of this divine Spirit."²⁷

²⁵ SVP VII, 292-293.

²⁶ SVP IX, 33.

²⁷ SVP XI, 411.

At the beginning of the *Common Rules* St. Vincent wanted to use that expression: "If the Congregation, with the help of God's grace, is to achieve what it sees as its purpose, a genuine effort to put on the spirit of Christ will be needed. How to do this is learned mainly from what is taught in the Gospels..." (CR I: 3). In the introduction to the *Common Rules* St. Vincent offers us this reflection: "Think of them, not as the product of human ingenuity, but as a gift from the Holy Spirit. Everything good comes from him, and we are not qualified of ourselves to claim anything as our own achievement.... My idea was that men who are called to continue Christ's mission, which is mainly preaching the good news to the poor, should see things from his point of view and want what he wanted. They should have the same spirit that he had, and follow in his footsteps" (*Introduction to the Common Rules*).

*What is the spirit of our Lord? It is a spirit of perfect charity, full of marvelous esteem for the divine and an infinite desire to honor this spirit with dignity, an understanding of the great wonders of the Father, to admire them and to praise them constantly.... And the love of Jesus Christ. What is it? Oh, what love! My Savior, so great was the love that you had for your Father! Might it be possible perhaps to have an even greater love when he was emptied by the Father? Because St. Paul, speaking about the birth of the Son of God on earth, mentions him being emptied (Ph 2:7-8). Might it be possible to show an even greater love when dying for the love of the form which he had made? I have here a description of the spirit of our Lord, with which we have clothed ourselves. The same thing that the eternal Son scorned about the earth, the goods, the pleasures, and the honors, in order to do the will of the Father; we also will enter into his spirit, scorning all as he did."*²⁸

The reader is now able to see the big picture of the doctrine of St. Paul from the previous descriptions. On another occasion St. Vincent emphasized the following comments to the youthful Antoine Durand, named superior of the Seminary at Agde, that "you empty yourself of yourself, so as to clothe yourself in Jesus Christ.... Our Lord imprints on us a character and gives us, so to speak, the vitality of his Spirit and his grace, being united with him like the shoots of a vine with the vine; we do the same that Jesus did on earth, that is, we accomplish divine works and we engender the same as did St. Paul, so filled with the spirit, as new children of our Lord (1 Cor 4:15)."²⁹

²⁸ SVP XI, 411-412.

²⁹ SVP XI, 237.

Here the secret is contained for all his prodigious activity in favor of the poor and needy.

Although he prefers to use the expression, “to clothe oneself in the spirit of Jesus Christ,” it is combined with and complements other equivalent statements. Induere from the Latin Vulgate of St. Jerome, when it is translated from the original Greek text, means for St. Vincent to be clothed in the sentiments and affections of Christ. Even more abundantly, one fills oneself with the sentiments of Christ, so that one is required to empty oneself beforehand of what is contrary to the Gospel: desire for riches, pleasures, honors, vainglory, jealousy, laziness, etc. Also, other expressions of similar meaning can be added: “To enter into the spirit of Jesus Christ so as to enter into his actions;” “to participate in the spirit of Jesus Christ,” and to “allow oneself to penetrate the spirit.” Each one of these expressions implies a different modality, enriched by the other similar expressions. Such words and expressions are employed in order to explain the spirit by which we are opened to the actions of the Spirit of Jesus Christ which can be accomplished, in his name, before the community.

From what has been said, we can conclude that the word spirit, used by St. Vincent, contains a variety of meanings... the same that occurs in the letters of St. Paul. At times, he refers to the sureness of the Holy Spirit and at other times to distinct forms of being and acting, to a life force, a manner, a disposition, etc. One thing is certain that being clothed in the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Rm 13:14) is a question of life or death for the missionary and constitutes his distinction. This is the great “task” to which one must dedicate himself; in other words, “the company would be a body without a soul.”³⁰

The proof of this particular manner of advising the missionaries how to live out or clothe themselves with the five virtues constitutes the spirit of the Congregation of the Mission: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, apostolic zeal and the need for prayer. A simple reference to this concrete theme of the five virtues confirms, one more time, a dependence on the Apostle of the people, for he had no doubts about stripping himself of everything that would impede him in his progress of following Christ (Ph 3:12).

If we get involved in the details, the spirit of simplicity of St. Paul stands out when he says he is only trying to please God and not human beings (Ga 1:10), but St. Vincent does not have the same luck. He was not certain, for example, when he is interpreting his teaching to the Romans: it is well to know but with soberness (Rm 12:3).

³⁰ SVP XI, 400.

However, he understood the verb sapere, like many of his time, to mean science. “One needs to study, he says, but with soberness.”³¹ In reality, “to know with soberness” from the Latin Vulgate edition is not referring to human science nor studying, but rather a non-exaggerated respect of oneself, something which certainly St. Vincent did not rule out but certainly did not highlight.

Where one finds most dependence upon Paul is in the conference concerning Vincentian simplicity, “Method in Preaching,” in which the authority of St. Paul is invoked, because “his word and his preaching have nothing persuasive of human wisdom but only a demonstration of the Spirit” (I Cor 2:4). Furthermore, the Apostle writes to the Corinthians that he does not pretend to know or understand anything when he was among them, only about Jesus Christ crucified (I Cor 2:2). He gave advice to his disciple, Timothy: “Take great care about what you do and what you teach” (ITm 4:16).³² This advice ought to serve as an orientation to missionaries called to be “light of the world and salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13-14).

He was exactly on the mark when he explained the humility of the Son of God, noting the meaning of the words: he emptied himself from the Latin word exinanivit and he humbled himself from the Latin word humiliavit, terms which refer to the Greek used by St. Paul with so much transcendence in theology and spirituality (Ph 2:7) in the Greek and Latin Churches. For St. Vincent, in this plan for the Son of God, enfleshed in human form, to become one like us, Jesus was obedient because of the love he has for his Father and for humanity, whom he saw as deprived by reason of sin, from eternal glory.³³ Emptied out, humility, obedience and love coexist in Christ and it should also be that way in the lives of the missionaries.

Concerning the virtue of meekness, it does not appear directly in the Pauline writings but rather in the Gospel (Mt 11:29) and the works of Francis de Sales, a contemporary and friend of Vincent. Nevertheless, the advice that St. Paul gave to the faithful in general and to Timothy, in particular, is an indication of what is the theme of Vincentian meekness.

Regarding the spirit of mortification, we have already made some comments in the section on the mysticism of baptism. Nevertheless, it is convenient to elucidate one more time the goal that St. Vincent had in interpreting St. Paul on the virtue of mortification, which

³¹ SVP XI, 462.

³² SVP XI, 172, 179.

³³ SVP XI, 411-412.

today is ignored by many Christians and denigrated by others and which is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Rm 6). It is also important to take note of corporal mortification when the Apostle punished his own body; since he has been an announcer himself, he does not want to be disqualified (cf. I Cor 9:27).³⁴

Finally, zeal in St. Paul highlights that he was a prisoner for the sake of our Lord and as Vincent defines, under the inspiration of Francis de Sales,³⁵ as a “pure desire to do all that is pleasing to God and useful to one’s neighbor... zeal is the most pure virtue in the love of God,”³⁶ and confirms the previous teachings. In the commentary about this virtue, we have St. Vincent presenting this reflection when he wrote to Father Peter Escart: “It is certainly true that zeal is the soul of the virtues, but it is also true that one ought to be zealous according to wisdom, as St. Paul says (Rm 10:2); that is to say, according to practical wisdom; in the young people who lack this ordinary wisdom, their zeal becomes excessive, especially in those who have a certain natural roughness.”³⁷

St. Vincent is talking about what wisdom? If it is that which gives us an experience of God and of humanity, that is good. But the wisdom to which he is referring here, St. Paul does not need to see in apostolic zeal but with a knowledge of the justice of God and of justification by faith in Jesus Christ, for the Jews, brothers who have not arrived. In any case, St. Vincent does not wander far from the meaning that St. Paul gives to his words.

If we move from apostolic virtues to prayer, the experience of St. Paul shines forth with special splendor. Inspired by Paul, Vincent says with assurance: “Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything;” it is possible to say with the holy Apostle: “I can do everything in Him who sustains and comforts me” (Ph 4:13).³⁸ This citation is a wake up call to the missionaries so that in the midst of difficulties and rough situations we never abandon him, so long as we confide in his efficacious power and in the action of the spirit, and it gives us joy that we are children of God (Rm 8:16).

³⁴ SVP XI, 237, 345.

³⁵ St. Francis de Sales has written about devotion: “Between charity and devotion there is no major difference between the call and the fire; charity being a spiritual flame, when it is on fire, it is called devotion” (cf. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, P. 1, c. 1).

³⁶ SVP XI, 590.

³⁷ SVP II, 62.

³⁸ SVP XI, 778.

In light of the teachings of St. Vincent, the Daughters of Charity would be able to exchange in a public setting their prayer experiences, for they would not last long in their vocation nor be true Daughters of Charity without prayer, “it is from prayer that they draw their strength to support themselves in their service of God and neighbor.”³⁹

Basically consistent with St. Paul, St. Vincent mentions that “the Spirit comes to help in our weakness. Because we do not know how to ask for what is good” (Rm 8:16) and “from Him all good comes, without whom we are not capable of having even our own proper thought” (2 Cor 3:5).⁴⁰ Every day he was checking on his communities of missionaries and Daughters of Charity to see how God was being revealed above all to the simple ones lacking in human wisdom.⁴¹

I have given here a short summary about the doctrine of St. Paul, commented on and lived out by St. Vincent. If the reader would try another outline and method in order to measure the Pauline influence on the Founder of the Congregation of the Mission and Daughters of Charity, he would always encounter Vincent in his faith and experience, inexplicable to a great extent without the words and guidance of St. Paul, an exceptional witness to the life of Christ who died and rose for us.

Translation: JAMES G. WARD, C.M.

³⁹ SVP IX, 375.

⁴⁰ Cf. SVP XI, 328.

⁴¹ Cf. SVP IX, 386-387.