

St. Paul and St. Vincent

Pillars and Foundations

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This article is not intended to present a detailed analysis much less a scientific one of the theme chosen, because only one argument will be enough to fill in the available space. It can give only a little reflection in this Pauline anniversary of two thousand years of his birth side by side with the reflections on St. Vincent. These teaching even though familiar to each member of the Congregation, can as well be useful to all the Vincentian family. I thought to begin with the theme "Gospel" because we see that it is basic in St. Paul and St. Vincent who specifically wanted to dedicate the Congregation of the Mission to the announcement and the preaching of the gospel, not as a communication of theological, cultural, biblical or historical doctrine, but as an experience, a witnessing of faith and charity, and so together as the fruit of the Holy Spirit. We can then talk of charity in a theological and supernatural sense as an expression of the paschal mystery, but avoiding reducing such a mystery to just an altruistic generosity. The consequence is that the poor are being considered according to the light of the Word of God and of St. Vincent who saw Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ.

THE GOSPEL

There is no doubt that for the specialists the central theme in the preaching of Paul is the gospel. The famous phrase of Rudolf Bultman, according to whom the historic importance of Paul is the fact that he was a theologian, goes hand in hand with that of Voltaire who defined St. Vincent as "*un gran bienfaiteur de l'humanité.*" St. Paul for some might be just a preacher theologian and St. Vincent a simple benefactor of humanity. This happens when we eliminate the gospel in the Pauline sense.

Since St. Paul has never presented a systematic vision of his gospel, this does not mean that what he has written would be easy to organize. The many times he used the term "gospel" are not sufficient

to express the whole embrace of salvation. In spite of this, his affirmations on the gospel taken singularly are an unending fountain of doctrine.

Many authors have tried to present a possible nucleus of all that Paul intended by the gospel. In reality each scheme is useful to articulate the variations of an immeasurable mystery. A possible outline of the gospel of St. Paul presented by different writers is as follows: *Ab aeterno* God has chosen man to participate in the divine life, death and resurrection of His incarnate son. After His willing acceptance of death for sinners, He was exalted by the resurrection and was made the head and the saviour of all of humanity. Paul became a minister of this "gospel" through divine revelation and boasts of preaching this gospel on every occasion, after he has verified it with the leaders of the church. This announcement demands that the person accepts and enters into this mystery through baptism and an orientation of life according to the Holy Spirit, struggling against the flesh to live as a new creature. Such a situation is imperfect; it will be perfect and complete only at the moment He comes and especially with the final resurrection of the body. For each of these statements there are abundant texts. We give just a few references.

"Therefore we should always give thanks to God for you, beloved brothers in the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning of time for salvation, through the sanctifying works of the Holy Spirit and the belief in the truth. To this end he has called you to this through our gospel to possess the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thes. 2:13-14). There are the celebrated hymns of Col. 1:15-20; Eph. 1:1-14 and Rom. 5-8. This design of the Father reveals all His wisdom and love for humanity. All these designs or mysteries were accomplished by his son Jesus Christ. On the one hand it is the father that sends His Son to save mankind from sin. (Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:18; Rom. 3:25). On the other Paul affirms the central role of Christ in "offering himself" (Gal. 1:4; 1 Tim. 2:6; Tit. 2:14) even offering himself out of love for us (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:25). Paul develops this essential line through a vocabulary he borrowed in part from the Old Testament; for he talks about redemption, liberation, salvation expiation of sins, satisfaction, price paid. He also talks about reconciliation, peace, love, Christ's sacrifice (*thysia* Eph. 5:2) and holocaust. All these are included in the apostolic formula "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3). To sum it up, "we await the blessed hope and the glory of our almighty God and saviour Jesus Christ who has given himself for us as a ransom for our iniquities and forming us as a holy people that belong to Him, zealous in good works" (Tit. 2:13-14).

The gospel as a theme becomes therefore the nucleus of the preaching of St. Paul expressed in all its riches. He realizes perfectly his being a servant and an apostle as a vocation dedicated totally to Christ, "chosen by him to preach the gospel of God" (Rom. 1:11). "According to the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, that was entrusted to me" (1 Tim. 1:11). It is extraordinary to read that, "preaching the gospel of his Son" (Rom. 1:9) puts into action the worship of God, therefore preaching, announcement, liturgical worship, all these make part of the mystery of His Son. "So faith comes from what is preached, and what is preached comes from the Word of Jesus Christ" (Rm. 10:16).

As much as this gospel of a Crucified God could seem a "foolishness" according to the thinking of man who is not yet converted (1 Corth. 1:2), he is not ashamed, because in reality it is taken as salvation. If one wants actually to believe this, it becomes a divine force that reveals and communicates the goodness and the salvation of God received naturally through a faith that is always growing, because as the scripture says, "the upright man will live by faith" (Rm. 1:17).

In this St. Paul is perfectly conscious of practicing a sacred and a divine office in the preaching of the gospel and he boasts of this and his duty of "being a minister of Jesus Christ among the pagans to make them acceptable as an offering made holy by the Holy Spirit" (Rm. 15:16). "Not that I do boast of the preaching of the gospel; since it is a duty which has been laid on me, I should be punished if I did not preach it" (1 Cor. 9:16). In fact, "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel and not to preach it in the terms of wisdom of human eloquence in which the crucifixion of Christ is emptied of its meaning" (1 Corth. 1:17). Here the discourse should be well analyzed but it is obvious that St. Paul intends that his appointed duty referred to the preaching of the gospel. This explains how Paul is totally oriented in this divine activity: "To do all for the sake of the gospel" (1 Corth. 9:23), so that "the gospel I preach is not a human message" (Gal. 1:11) and I do this freely without any interest: "I preached the gospel of God to you without any fee for it" (2 Cor. 11:7).

For this reason the gospel should not be modified or remodelled: "There are some that put in division among you and they want to distort the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:7). Also in talking to Peter about issues of food, circumcision, and the Law of Moses, Paul struggles for a different idea but based on the "truth": "To him however he did not submit, even for an instant, so that the truth of the gospel remains the same among you" (Gal. 2:5). "Or when I saw that they

were not respecting the true meaning of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of everyone..." (Gal. 2:14). It sounds strange that some, including Cephas, were not living according to the truth of the gospel. Some little human errors for us should not be allowed to destroy the brightness of the gospel, for Paul in spite of everything recognizes the diversity of tones in the same gospel: "To me was entrusted the gospel to the non-Jews just as to Peter was entrusted that to the Jews" (Gal. 2:7). The divine passive voice referring to God deals with a diversity that come from above.

The gospel is above all an instrument of salvation. It is "the power of God for the salvation of all" (Rom. 1:16). Here the term *power* signifies the energy of the divine grace that emanates from God through the gospel that is being expressed often as the Holy Spirit. It becomes the word of the truth: "In him you too, after you heard the message of the truth, the gospel, of your salvation and have believed it; and you too have been stamped with the seal the Holy Spirit promised to you" (Eph. 1:13). The consequence is a gospel that looks for persons with a zeal to diffuse it because it diffuses peace into the heart of each person in the church and in the whole world: "Wearing for shoes on your feet eagerness to spread the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15). It could be said that each step should bring the announcement of the gospel of peace.

With all this the gospel always remains a mystery. "... pray for me to be given an opportunity to open my mouth and speak without fear to make known the mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:19-20). The liberty of the word implies a liberty of means of expression, liberty from hindrances, from conditioning, from contrary impositions, but above all the liberty that comes from within: meaning freedom in truth, in charity, in obedience and above all else a freedom of faith that dissolves servility and old and new cultural mentalities, things that risk emptying the divine power of the foolishness of the gospel. That is why Paul says that it takes courage to preach and bear witness to the gospel, using a famous noun (*parrhesia*) and a derivative verb that does not just indicate a courage that is presumptuous, arrogant or mealy-mouthed, but a courage of the weak and humble that becomes strong by the power of God: "For it is when I am weak that I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). For this he could say to Timothy: "Never be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord, or ashamed of me for being his prisoner, but with me bear hardship for the sake of the gospel, relying on the power of God" (2 Tim. 1:18).

Unfortunately, there are ways to make the melody of the gospel off-key, falsifying it. "It was God who decided that we were fit to be entrusted with the gospel, and when we are speaking, we are not

trying to please men but God, who can read our inmost thoughts” (1 Thes. 2:4), “It is true that some of them are doing it just out of rivalry and competition, but the rest preach Christ with the right intention, out of nothing but love, as they know that this is my invariable way of defending the gospel. The others who proclaim Christ for jealous or selfish motives, do not mind if they make my chains heavier to bear” (Phil. 1:15-17). By now the Christian community recognizes these scandals, having seen inappropriate intentions in the transmission of the splendor of truth, and it is possible to speak of Christ with literary appropriate terms but with a harmony of incorrect tonality, and is harmful to preach it for glory, for a humble spirit of selfishness, for a noble and common interest, in short for a wrong intention. It is contrary to “*simplicity*,” the style that St. Vincent wants from his preachers. St. Paul however, remained fixed “knowing that there were places for the defense of the gospel” “For we brought the gospel to you not only as words, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with utter conviction” (1 Thes. 1:5).

It is not difficult to see in the texts above a good part of the concepts of St. Vincent de Paul, expressed with other terms. As a matter of fact, he uses the gospel, referring to it above all as a global doctrine of the four Evangelists and their writings. For this reason he has always before him the image of our Lord whose examples he has tried to follow in visiting prisoners and sick, “... I was a prisoner, I was hungry...” (I, 94; Matt. 25:3-46).

What Paul expresses on his semitic language, St. Vincent says with an ecclesiastical language of his time. But it always has to do with the same dynamism that springs forth from the gospel: “We are entirely under the obedience of the Bishops for going in every part of their diocese, where they think it best to preach, to teach the catechism, to hear the general confessions of the poor people, to teach all mental prayer, practical and necessary theology, the ceremonies for which they have taken orders...” (I, 309). At the end Paul gives us a splendid definition of missionaries as “servants of the gospel” (I, 563).

All his spiritual doctrine comes from the gospel (III, 176; 182-183). He himself says he lives according to the “prescriptions of the gospel” (I, 151). From this we can understand how for him the gospel, Jesus Christ and the Word of God are equivalent terms. For him living according to the prescriptions of the gospel means living according to the example of Jesus Christ and vice versa. All his letters, conferences and rules are just an explication of this equivalence according to a famous phrase: “Christ is our rule. He is the rule of

the mission, it is He that speaks. Our duty is to listen to his words, consecrate ourselves to Him and put them in practice" (XII, 130). Following his example is following "the holy will of God." This is necessary above all when it comes to renouncing oneself and carrying the cross "everyday." "Think about these words my dear sisters: every day" (III, 176).

Following Paul, St. Vincent feels a pressing duty "to go to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth," preventing the risk of extinguishing the faith in Europe which is already evangelized: "What must we do to save the bride of Christ from self-destruction?" (cf. III, 182-183). He was strongly struck by the way in which the missionaries work for the preaching of the gospel: "Father, I was consoled in seeing that you have worked continuously in acquiring virtues, the love that you have for them is clear from the fact that you feel pain for those who do not apply themselves. Seeing that you apply these frequently in the ministry of the Gospel to draw persons to Christ, I cannot but admire your person" (III, 610). Most of the time the gospel becomes an occasion to carry out to the letter the words of Christ: "Today we have carried out to the letter what Christ has said in the gospel, to love and bless our enemies" (IV, 143).

It is already something great to give yourselves totally to God becoming his sons in a best manner possible and we should be content with this title of "servants of the Gospel" (V, 594); likewise even when, due to our abjection, we could be despised "it is at that moment we begin to be true disciples of Our Lord, according to what the gospel says: "How happy are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3). Talking about the Common Rules the first thing noted by St. Vincent was that they are in conformity with the gospel and derive from it (IX, 314). They are nothing other than a reflection of it. His conferences for the most part begin with the gospel texts talking about the virtues of Jesus Christ, and Vincent draws applications to the spirit of vocation. Even the method of preaching should be according to the gospel and the example of Jesus Christ (X 284-285). In executing the commands of the gospel we should not be preoccupied for tomorrow; but that does not mean that we should neglect our means of assistance "otherwise we should not even sow the seed" (XI, 351).

However, it deals above all else with being available to "go everywhere to spread the Holy Gospel" (XI, 412). It is not enough to preach naturally, it is necessary to ask God to shower his grace on each and every member of the company to act always with humility and simplicity, "and to preach with trembling the truth of the gospel as Our Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught it" (XII, 25). On the

other hand, the purpose of the Congregation is that of preaching the gospel to the poor, especially those of the countryside (XII, 74), given that Our Lord came to earth to announce the Good News especially to the humble and to the abandoned poor (cf. Lk. 4:18), because “this is our objective” (XII, 3-4). Vincent is famous for asking, “if you could ask the Son of God, why did you come?” He would have answered: “To evangelize the poor... to do the thing foretold and foreshowed by the prophets, [that is,] making the Gospel effective” (XII, 84). Often in St. Vincent the gospel and Christ are identified. He talks about the Holy Spirit and the maxims of the gospel as those of Christ and the other way round. On the contrary, the maxims of the world are those that oppose Christ and the gospel (XII, 107-108; 120). The evangelical counsels are the counsels of Jesus Christ Himself. Behold the rules of the Congregation are nothing other than a summary of the gospel: “The little company has made her rules as the summary of the gospel adapted to the uses that are more appropriate to us to unite ourselves with Jesus Christ and to respond to His designs” (XII, 154). In particular the evangelical maxims are called “*ambrosia*” honey-dew of heaven, which feeds us to live as Christ has lived, reflect the doctrine and the person of Christ Himself (XII, 182). Naturally, it is not enough to copy materially the gospel “it is not all doing good, it needs to be done well, according to the examples of Our Lord... that renders everything good,” and also, “It is not all fasting, observing the rules, being preoccupied of God. It needs to be done in His spirit, that is with the same perfection with which He did things” (XII, 178-179). Among many other things to be said, let us conclude by saying that it is necessary to “repair and to form the proper reasoning in a way conformed as much as possible to the gospel” (XII, 214). This theme was expounded in great detail because of its great importance. We can understand why St. Vincent very frequently uses the verb “to evangelize.” One time, with a marvellous intuition, he defined Christ as “the evangelist of the poor” (XI, 32), seeing Him almost as an inspired author and the poor as a sacred text over which the divine word gently blows. Even if he had never used the term “evangelist of the poor,” Vincent, with a true Pauline spirit, more than a hundred times invoked Christ as a “Saviour.”

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Even though other topics would also be very important (will of God, evangelical maxims, the five virtues), let us deal with this theme because without the Holy Spirit the gospel becomes an ideology, charity becomes a social life style, and above all without the

Holy Spirit it cannot meet either Jesus Christ, or the Church much less the poor.

First of all, Paul sees the Holy Spirit as a gift lavished on us by the risen Christ (cf. Eph. 4:7), but also He who performs¹ it in his mission of the obedient Son, as the Saviour and Redeemer. To be in possession of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost indicates a bridging between the Old Testament and the New Testament. He becomes also the illuminator of the mystery itself: "When the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking as from himself but will say only what he has learned and he will tell you of the things to come. He will glorify me, since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine" (Jn. 16:14-15; Act. 2:33).

Before becoming the gift of Christ, the Spirit defines him to the whole church in his new identity of the Risen from the dead. This was already said in the ancient Judeo-Christian profession of faith reported by Paul in Rom. 1:3-4: "Born from the line of David according to the flesh, became Son of God in power according to the Spirit of sanctification through the resurrection from the dead."

The Holy Spirit expresses the new salvific dimension of the Son who as the final Adam becomes the "life-giving Spirit" (cf. Jn. 7:38-39) that indicates the capability of the Son to express his salvific function, showering abundantly on the children of Adam the Spirit he has acquired and is distributing. The texts where Paul expresses this (2 Tit. 2:8 and above all Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:9; Phil. 1:19) are echoed (as in Act 16:7; 1 Pet. 1:11), and make use of absolutely original terms talking about the "Spirit of the Son" or "the Spirit of Jesus Christ," which indicates that the same Spirit has a revealing bond with the ministry of the dead and risen Son.

The Holy Spirit, described in His relationship with God and Jesus Christ forms also their contact with redeemed man. He is essentially "sent" (Gal. 1:6; 1 Pet. 1:12), "shed for us" (cf. At. 2:17,33; Rom. 5:5; 1 Corth. 12:13; Tit. 3:6), "given to" (cf. Jn. 19:30; 2 Corth. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:17; 1 Th. 4:8, 1 Jn. 3:24; 4:13), "lavished upon" (cf. Gal. 3:5; Phil. 1:19), and he then comes to be "received" (cf. Jn. 7:39; Rom. 8:15; 1 Cor. 2:12; 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 3:2-14), and from which we can "be filled in" (Eph. 5:18). The result is that the divine now "lives in us" (Rom. 8:9-11; 1 Cor. 3:16) or "indwells" (Rom. 8:11; 2 Tim. 1:14) in a Christian as something that one has (cf. Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 7:40; 2 Cor. 4:13), according to the language that is typically

¹ The verb "perform" is not a mistake, it is a recent very significant term used also by Benedict XVI and indicates to transform, to make suitable, to give the internal capability, to conclude according to the purpose or intent.

Pauline. Paul in fact is the author who above all others has developed the theme of the Holy Spirit. Besides, for Paul the Holy Spirit is a gift of God that redefines the baptized: "Fount of regeneration, re-birth and renewal in the Holy Spirit." Naturally the text that is more explicit is Gal. 4:6 (that has a parallel in Rom. 8:15): "The proof that you are sons is that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit that cries, Abba, Father!" Note that he who cries is not the Son but the Spirit.

From these affirmations derive the consequences for the Christian life that are well known. The whole Christian existence therefore is a life according to the Spirit. "In fact everyone moved by the spirit is a son of God" (Rom. 8:14); "therefore if we live by the spirit, let us also walk according to the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25).

With all these affirmations Paul affirmed that the Spirit is by nature dynamic. His language on "walking by" and "letting be lead by" expresses exactly the proper dynamism of the Spirit in a disciple. This new way of relating with the Spirit (Rom. 7:6) stands out in the battle against the contrary principalities, called the "flesh." It is known that this concept identifies in a very semitic way the entire man (body and spirit), but as such alienated from God and opposed to him (cf. Rom. 9:8; 1 Cor. 1:26; 2 Cor. 1:12; 10:4; 11:17 ff.). The text of Gal. 5:16-25 and Rom. 8:5-7 emphasizes these two contrary principles in extremely appropriate terms highlighting above all the negative aspects, even the smallest ones.

Paul says that "... the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2). Paul calls "law" the new dynamism of the Spirit, drawing the terminology from the "law" of the ancient tradition. This is the *new law*. We are no longer dealing with the principalities and forces imposed from external factors, but a kind of dynamism that works interiorly, to which one aspires or is attracted, in other words, to charity (2 Cor. 5:14-15). In fact St. Thomas added: "*Spiritus Sanctus, dum facit in nobis caritatem, quae est plenitudo legis, est Testamentum Novum*" (2 Cor. 3:6).

The doctrine of St. Vincent on the Holy Spirit is likewise as fundamental as it is for Paul. He took some starting points from the Pauline vision on the contrast between the spirit and the flesh even if expressed in different languages. St. Vincent concentrates his attention not so much on the doctrinal, theological or catechetical aspect that could be taken for granted, but on the teaching of the Scriptures, which calls continually for living according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh, which he expanded on in the discourse of the human spirit against the Spirit of Christ.

What St. Vincent wrote to Mr. Portail reflects the thoughts of Paul: "You remember that we live in Jesus Christ for the death of Jesus Christ, and that we should die in Jesus Christ by the life of Jesus Christ, and that our life should be hidden in Christ and full of Christ and that to die as Christ, we should live as Christ. Once we recognize this, let us give ourselves to scorn, shame, disgrace, and let us disapprove of the honors that others give to us, good reputation and applause. Nothing that we do should be directed towards this end" (I, 295). Today we find much exaggeration and strangeness that after such a rigorous and profound theological and biblical premise, St. Vincent lost himself in the thought that seems a poor and old-fashioned asceticism. On the contrary, he was talking about the human spirit as opposed to Christ, doctrine that form a background of his spirituality in many themes: charity, humility, simplicity, detachment, will and providence of God, imitation of Christ, clothing himself with his Spirit. Here we find an echo of the resounding gong of which Paul writes in 1 Cor. 13:1.

In a letter to G. Cornaire Vincent shows how very important it is to be willing to confront ourselves continuously with the painful situations of Our Lord in order to catch His Spirit and virtues, just as the contrary inclination comes from the spirit of man centered in himself (IV, 32). And he concludes with a fundamental affirmation: "We talk about triumphing over our enemies: over the flesh that is opposed to the spirit," with a clear reference to the Pauline texts. From this comes the frequent call to clothe ourselves with the Spirit of Christ (VII, 419; XI, 343-344; XII, 107-108 ff.).

Some thoughts were of a rare beauty: "I beg you therefore to enliven yourself with His Spirit, which signifies humility, mildness, tolerance, patience, vigilance, prudence and charity. You will find in Him all the virtues, and if you allow this, He will exercise them in you and through you. Live with this trust and you will stay in peace" (VIII, 231). And again: "I think of you for the difficulties that you find and for the solution that you yourself suggested, but I still beg you to have patience and remember that disgust and discouragement are products of our poor human nature that we carry with us wherever we go. We need to abandon ourselves to the Spirit of Our Lord to bear with ourselves and to win over our timidity, laziness and other weaknesses. I pray this Holy Spirit, the sanctifier, to animate you with His strength and fill you with His blessings" (VIII, 293).

To St. Louise, in a masterly fashion, he teaches that "at times we desire many good things with a desire that seems to be according to God, but instead it is not.... God above all else wants you to be His, and after He shall grant that you serve on even greater number of

persons. And also if you were only all His, would this not be enough for your heart? Honor therefore, the tranquillity and the peace of Jesus Christ. In this way you shall put yourselves in the state of service. The kingdom of God is peace in the Holy Spirit. He shall reign in you if your heart will be in peace" (I, 113-114). When St. Vincent writes that, "the kingdom of God is peace in the Holy Spirit" he refers to the text of Gal. 5:21-22 and that of Rom. 14:17: "... the kingdom of God does not mean eating or drinking this or that, it means righteousness and peace and joy brought by the Holy Spirit." The contents of only these two texts (even though there are many others cited) demonstrate how St. Vincent accepted in the depth of his heart the gospel and the teachings of Paul. Much more than the veil of celestial humility allows us to see.

To the enterprising missionary, Achilles Levezeux, tempted to seek human defensive strategies, he wrote: "This could be a very poor motive and very far from the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to which in all our actions we should have the aim only to please God" (IV, 487). He says that the company "without this spirit is a body without a soul" (XII, 95). To this he adds: "The rule teaches that it is important that we be clothed with the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (XII, 107) and this to be able to carry out all our missionary tasks, be it in looking for sanctity, be it for assisting in a useful way the people or the church. He concluded: "Behold the great task: being clothed with the Spirit of Christ!" (ibid.).

The Spirit of Christ in the company is found above all else in the five virtues that are like "the power of the soul of all the Company" (XII, 312). The Common Rules give a list of vices and defects that are greatly opposed to the evangelical maxims (RC. II, 15). The first of these vices is "prudence of the flesh" of Pauline memory.

CHARITY

It is evident that Paul speaks abundantly and of many aspects of charity. He usually, however, speaks of the works and acts of charity, without giving them a complete definition and details because catechesis comes with preaching, where the mystery of love of Christ is being presented in an exhaustive way. Paul therefore in his own letters does not have many of these passages even if he abounds in reference to the love of Christ and to the practice of charity. His teaching however, is particularly illuminating for the thoughts of St. Vincent.

A passage that presents the true nature of love according to the example and the teaching of Christ is given in this well-known

passage of Rom. 5:5: "... the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" with the following verses 6-11. These verses taken in their immediate and also broader context and of which Augustine has left an excellent comment, reveal that the love, "agape," of Christ is essentially a mystery of faith, a gift of the Spirit and not a rational or social persuasive expression of the interior or exterior needs of man. When we talk about charity, first of all we mean that we were loved by Christ in the moment in which we were still enemies of God, against God, wilful sinners. It is very rare, said Paul, that one could arrive at the point of giving his life or rather dying for a good person (like M. Kolbe) but certainly, (added St. Augustine) it is totally absurd and incomprehensible that one dies for his enemy. Instead, (continues Paul) Christ demonstrates His love for us because He died for us exactly when we were still enemies against him and sinners. These lines contain almost all the Pauline christology and doctrine of salvation.

To talk of charity in Paul we usually make reference to 1 Cor. 13 and not as much to Rom. 5:6-11. St. Vincent however, never cites the first three verses of 1 Cor. 13, where Paul says: "If I give away all that I possess, (implies giving to the poor)... but am without love, it will do me no good whatever." He cited only three times 1 Cor. 13:4: "Love is always patient and kind" (XII, 268 where Coste noted that indicating 1 Cor. 13:14 is an obvious typographical error; V, 2; XV, 28 in a letter to Chantal). Vice versa, we expect that he should have quoted Matthew 25:31-46 (the final judgement). Instead he has only two brief references for conference outlines: XIII, 788; Mt. 25:41; XIII, 788; Mt. 25:34. The famous pericope nevertheless is inserted in the Common Rule of the Congregation of the Mission where it is written that when a Vincentian visits a sick person, he needs to look at him not simply as a sick person but "as Jesus Christ Himself, of which he is assured that it is to Him that he renders this service" (CR VI, 2; Mt. 25:40).

We will find a more precise reference in the Common Rules II, 2 where we read that we need to prefer spiritual things to temporal things, the salvation of the soul to the health of the body, the honor of God to that of the world and that thus we resolve to choose, with Blessed Paul, "privation, infamy, even death itself rather than being separated from the love of Christ." The text clearly references Rom. 8:35: "What can therefore separate us from the Love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried or being persecuted, or lack food or clothes or being threatened or even being attacked?" Here St Vincent has entered into the depths of the Pauline doctrine on

charity, not seen simply as external works or services but as inserting oneself into the essence of the Paschal mystery. He confirms it in this passage of the Rules: "Therefore we should not torment ourselves for material goods (cf. you should not disturb yourself, but in everything make your requests to God in prayers and supplications Phil. 4:6; Mat. 6:21, 25-30; Lk. 12:22-34), but cast your worries and cares before the Lord because he cares for you (1 Pet. 5:7; Is. 55:23), convinced that when one is rooted in this charity based on this hope (Eph. 3:17) he shall remain always under the protection of God (Ps. 90:1). So he will not suffer any bad thing (Ps. 90:10) and will not be deprived of any good (who seeks the Lord lacks nothing, Ps. 34:11), even if it seems that all is going bad" (cf. Lk. 12:4-7). Saying, *rooted in this charity and founded on this hope*, Saint Vincent reached a level of Pauline doctrine based on an extraordinarily profound charity, "agape" which consists in insertion of the love of Christ in a living and life-giving way.

A passage closely connected with Eph. 3:17 and Rom. 8:35 remains a classical text that became the motto and seal of the Daughter of Charity, even if cited only partially: "... and this is because the love of Christ overwhelms us once we have the conviction that one man has died for all, then all have died" (2 Cor. 5:14). The text moreover unites with the following verses. "And the reason he died for all was so that men should live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised to life for them" (2 Cor. 5:15). The two verses in fact, according to scripture scholars, remain closely joined and express the genuine love of Christ (in a subjective and objective sense), and are the true and authentic basis of love of neighbor as also for the poor. It seems undoubtedly that the writing around the seal reflects well the thoughts of St. Vincent. The fact that from the beginning it contains the word "crucified," absent in the Pauline texts, shows that Paul was interpreted more than correctly. In fact the word, the motto and verse contain a difficult verb "*urget nos*" of which the translation in the modern language, especially without the verse that follows, at times loses its expressive force. The Greek word *synécho* (active and median — passive in the conjugation) in the New testament is used above all by Luke (six times in Luke and 3 times in the Acts of the Apostles). Paul used it only two times and Matthew only once. This verb needs to be examined a bit.

Analyzing only the close significance and parallels with 2 Cor. 5:14 (it has in fact many different meanings), we can deduce that the verb means to be in anguish in a real or metaphoric sense. Jesus talks about the baptism that He must receive (Lk. 12:50), where He

indicates both His radical donation to His mission and the strong desire that pervades Him. Then the term also describes the crowd that was pressing on Christ (Lk. 8:45), the soldiers who were keeping Him in custody (Lk. 22:63); the enemies that will flock together in Jerusalem from every part (Lk. 19:43); those that were stoning Stephen to death “cried out however in a loud voice covering the ears” (Act 7:57) (so as not to hear the blasphemy of Stephen). It also indicates being taken over by a sickness: the mother-in-law of Peter was with fever (Lk. 4:38; cf. Act. 28:8; Mt. 4:24); or from fear: the inhabitants in the territory of Gerasene “were taken by a great fear” because of the swine (Lk. 8:37).

Paul appeared as one “dominated,” “governed” and “lorded over” by his duty as a herald of the Word (cf. Act. 18:5), or one who feels obliged to live for love of Christ and not for himself (2 Cor. 5:14), or finally as one who is strongly consumed by the desire to be with the Lord or with the church (Phil. 1:23). Therefore, the sense of this passage is not that of an urgency or a push that comes from an external necessity but from an internal “pressure” originated in *agape*, that is from the fact that Paul feels totally taken, caught up, dominated, possessed, illuminated, filled and brought to self-awareness by the love of Jesus Christ (cf. the doctrine of St. Thomas), fully aware and caught up by the influence of the Holy Spirit, so that he cannot hold it inside and cannot refrain from pouring it out and communicating it. Very correctly the new Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity recite: “The Charity of Jesus crucified urges us.” The charity of Jesus Christ crucified which animates and inflames the heart of the Daughters of Charity, that urges them to run to the service of all the poor. The heart cannot function if not “inflamed and filled,” as we cannot go to all the poor if we do perceive fully in our hearts that “He died for all, because those who live cannot live for themselves, but for Him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor. 5:15).

THE POOR

We understand very well that talking about the poor in St Vincent in a few paragraphs is very risky. For now let us focus briefly mostly on Paul, in which the theme of the poor regards predominantly those of the community of Jerusalem and environs for whom he organized the famous collection. He however, has no theological vision different from the other inspired authors as regards the humble, the meek and the poor in the material or spiritual sense.

Paul tells us that after his first visit to Jerusalem “recognizing the grace that was given to me, James, Cephas and John the reputed

pillars, gave me and Barnabas their hands as a sign of communion; we were to go to the pagans and they to the circumcised. The only thing they insisted on was that we should remember to help the poor, as indeed I was anxious to do" (Gal. 2:9-10). He speaks four times about the famous collection "for the poor that are among the holy ones of Jerusalem" (Rom. 15:26,28; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8:20), that becomes an occasion for developing an extraordinary theology of the service in two chapters in his second letter to the Corinthians, 2 Cor. 8 and 9. Here Paul teaches many things on abundance, on generosity, on love and care towards others, on the duties of the rich, on giving spontaneously for the poor. They are two chapters of fundamental importance together with the famous "note" to Philemon.

The famous phrase of 1 Cor. 13:3: remains always a classical monument: "If I give away all that I possess... but am without charity, it will do me no good whatever." Naturally here the term charity does not have the sense of helping or attending to those with a need (otherwise it would be a contradiction). In fact this phrase in a literal context can be useful for a transition towards the right thoughts of St. Vincent though in these paragraphs it does not seem necessary to open this very vast theme. Making a global comparison between St. Vincent and St. Paul we can see that both start from the foundation of faith in the paschal mystery: Christ our rule, and Christ made for us "wisdom, justice, sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). From this starting point and through all the "*tradito*" flowing from the preaching of Christ, we reach all the teachings on help and relief of those in need, with well known biblical texts from Matt. 25:31-46 and many other parables (Good Samaritan, Lazarus), as well as the "*loghia*" of giving a cup of fresh water. But as it is well known that St. Vincent teaches that we can as well celebrate the Holy Mass, teach catechism, hear confessions, yet not do a work that pleases God — and more in accomplishing other good works (cf. XII, 150-165 with exact biblical references), we could do grand works for the poor and yet not act with supernatural charity that is absolutely essential for completing an act of charity (cf. Mt. 10:41).

We can conclude with the recommendations of St. Paul to the Christian slaves to be obedient to their master, especially if they are believers, and to do so out of the love of Christ, as he also commended the masters to treat their slaves with love (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22; 4:1; 1 Tim. 6:12; Tit. 2:9; also in 1 Pt. 2:18). This teaching reminds us of the famous confession of St. Vincent, referring to when he was chaplain of the galleys: "When I praised them for their resignation and felt sorry for them in their sufferings

and I called them blessed because they were doing purgatory on earth, and I would kiss their chains, having pity for their pains and would show myself as one who participates in their tribulations. They would listen to me and give glory to God and be placed in a state of salvation” (IV, 52-53).

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