

St. Paul and St. Vincent de Paul

Two Converging Roads

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INTRODUCTION

To be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus. According to the words of the Apostle St. Paul, every baptized person is “called to holiness” (Rom 1:7), challenged to be an imitator of Jesus independently of the variables of the space and time in which he lives. Throughout history the response to this universal vocation has taken on various forms. In truth the “modus vivendi” of the follower is always determined by two poles: on the one hand, by the action of the Holy Spirit which endows the believer with a charism, a particular grace which moves him to act in a particular way; and on the other hand, by the historical circumstances, the indefinite factors, which offer the ingredients which determine one’s action, and which, simultaneously, will be determined by his action. These two elements — charism and context — make the history of each call unique and unrepeatable. Despite the fact that we are all followers of Jesus, no two histories are the same, except perhaps for some common, perhaps coincidental lines; because in his essence man is always the same, and the action of the Holy Spirit in us has as its purpose making us like the Son, Jesus Christ.

The objective of this work is to ascertain and propose some lines of reflection between two lives separated by almost 16 centuries: St. Paul and St. Vincent de Paul. In the first place we will highlight some aspects of the life story of the two men: the road they traveled until they discovered the true God. Secondly we will present some aspects of their doctrine which unite but also distinguish the two missionaries. Finally, we will examine their pastoral practice, the way each one has found to announce the Good News and how it is related to the problems of their times.

1. THE ROADS OF CONVERSION AND VOCATION

1.1. Paul

To speak of the conversion of St. Paul is to refer to the event which transformed the life of a man, a man who was the cause of the transformation of the lives of many others, and who, directly or indirectly, contributed decisively to the transformation of the course of the history of humanity. The different accounts of the principal episode, the apparition of the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, are presented in the Acts of the Apostles and also by the Apostle himself. The different nuances which appear in the three accounts in Acts (9:1-8, 22:4-16, 26:9-18), and the way in which Paul himself describes the experience (Gal 1:12-16, 1 Cor 9:1, 15:8-11, 2 Cor 4:6, Phil 3:12) make us think that what really happened in his life was not just one episode, but rather a whole series of factors which determined his conversion. According to some authors the account presented in Acts is a “kind of legend”¹ whose purpose was to explain to the community the radical change in the man who once persecuted the church, but who now, with equal zeal, spoke of Jesus Christ. The communities which heard it said: “The one who persecuted us now announces the faith that before he wished to destroy” (Gal 1:23-24). As a response to the communities’ questions, Luke draws up an account with a catechetical and apologetic tone in which he endeavors to offer an explanation for such a transformation. But how did this change come about? What factors determined it?

The animosity of the Jews toward the nascent community is well known, especially towards the group of Greek origin (the Hellenists), stemming from their rejection of the Mosaic law and the temple. The followers of Jesus openly criticized Jewish traditions. They defended the position that “the cult practiced in the Temple and regulated by the Law now made no sense after the redemptive death of Jesus.”²

¹ Cf., for example, J. BECKER (1992-2007), *Pablo, el apóstol de los paganos*, Salamanca: Ed. Sígueme; H. ALVES (2008), «Paúl, de fariseu a apóstolo,» in AA.VV., *S. Paúl, Apóstolo da Palavra*, Rev. Bíblica: XXXI Semana Bíblica Nacional, (17), pp. 19-78; G. OPORTO (2008), «Fui conquistado por J. Cristo. A experiência pascal como chave da vida, da teologia e da missão de Paúl» (I Was Conquered by Jesus Christ: The Paschal Experience as the Key to the Life, Theology and Mission of St. Paul), in AA.VV., *S. Paúl*, Fátima: Difusora Bíblica, pp. 55-64.

² A. OLIVEIRA (2008), *Um ano a caminhar com S. Paúl. Proposta da Conferência Episcopal Portuguesa para a vivência do Ano Paulino*, Coimbra: Gráfica de Coimbra 2, p. 20.

Paul, the young Pharisee who had made his own the traditions and doctrines of his ancestors, acted in accord with the three basic principles of Judaism: 1) the duty of obeying the Law of Moses; 2) scrupulous respect for the Sabbath rest; 3) the Jerusalem Temple as the sign of the presence of God among men. The confrontation between the zealous Pharisee and the followers of the crucified was inevitable.

Nevertheless, despite its victims, from this confrontation a new life sprang up. The persecution of the Nazarenes organized by Paul caused him to come into contact with the person of Jesus Christ, alive in the attitudes of the Christians. The disciples of the crucified faced with surprising courage and inner freedom the tribulation, the offenses and the punishments of which they were the victims. The testimony given by his contemporary converts awakened many questions in the heart of the future apostle. Who was, after all, this Jesus? What power did he have to give life to these people? The death of St. Stephen at which Paul was present would have made a deep impression on him: someone who dies pardoning his enemies, someone who relates to God in a new way so personal and intimate. Paul tried to get to know the God who inspired this group. But in his first phase he found the idea of a crucified Messiah repugnant, because crucifixion was considered a curse (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13).

As time passed Paul gradually sensed that the Mosaic law of itself was no guarantee of man's salvation. He became more convinced that fulfilling the Law did not make one more just before God. Thanks to his own life as a fervent Pharisee with the natural successive alternatives of hope and then of failure in the face of the Law, the idea grew in him that justification is not acquired by the practice of good works, but rather is a gratuitous gift of God. He also came to understand that the duty of adoring God in a determined geographic space with its associated rituals was a scheme that excluded many other men and women who were searching for God with sincere hearts, despite not being able to visit the holy city or not knowing the traditions in which he was educated. Henceforth, in the light of his encounter with the Risen Christ, for Paul, every person, in the intimacy of his own being, is a Temple of God (cf. 1 Cor 3:17). Finally he realized that the precept concerning the Sabbath had been surpassed, when the One who had risen on the First Day of the Week won out.

These ideas were bubbling beneath the surface for days and months, perhaps years, in Paul's mind and in his passionate heart. They would become clear when, according to St. Luke, on a certain day on the road to Damascus, Paul hears his name pronounced by the God he was persecuting: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting

me?” (Acts 9:1-18). We do not know for sure the details of this vision. We only know its consequences. Paul acquired the interior conviction that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord.³ He “saw,” surely not with his bodily eyes, but with those of faith. That “interior light” was the turning point in his life. From that time on he became the greatest of the Apostles.

Going beyond that, on the road to Damascus Paul was not only converted, but he also discovered his mission,⁴ the role God had determined for him from all eternity: to announce the Good News about God. “I had been conquered by Christ” (Phil 3:12-14).

1.2. St. Vincent de Paul

The description of Paul’s conversion is the great entry way into the long history of men and women who were converted to Jesus of Nazareth. In Paul’s case, as in Vincent’s and so many others, we cannot state that before that key moment of interior illumination they lived apart from God’s ways. But they were traveling, surely, according to their own rhythm, moved by their own projects and convinced they were on the right road. St. Vincent de Paul, already a priest, also passed through different stages of inner purification until he recognized what his place in the church was and what God he should be serving. The same thing happened to Paul. What were the factors that determined this change of heart?

The accusation of robbery of which Vincent was the victim in Paris (1608) was, for example, an important reference point in this conversion process. Because of being publically humiliated, St. Vincent de Paul had the experience of a “fall.” Like Paul, St. Vincent de Paul realized that his own projects, carefully planned and motivated by his own ambition, were leading him down a dead end street. But they were not without lessons for one who was open to learn. This episode made him come down from his clerical “status” and make his own the place of those who had nothing — neither honor nor riches.

Another key episode in the conversion process occurred during the time when St. Vincent de Paul was almoner to Queen Margaret. The luxurious atmosphere was conducive to a frivolous life without challenges or goals. This submerged him in a “dark night,” a time

³ J. MURPHY-O’CONNOR (2004-2008), *Paúlo, um homem inquieto, um apóstolo insuperável*, Lisboa: Ed. Paúlinas, 2ª Ed.

⁴ L. CERFAUX (1962-1976), *O cristão na teologia de S. Paúlo*, S. Paúlo: Ed. Paúlinas.

when God seemed absent. His silence, dense and often inexplicable, almost made Vincent renounce his own faith. According to his first biographer, this period lasted for three years and Vincent only managed to overcome it when he made the firm resolution, under the inspiration of divine grace, to consecrate himself totally to the poor.

When we read the histories of these people — and remember our own — we realize that there is a divine pedagogy at work in the process of conversion. It is the moving force of transformation through the language of events but also of silence. God speaks and is silent. He reveals himself and he hides his face. And in this dialectic, he instructs people to discover the truth, that truth that is the road to liberation and personal fulfillment.

In January 1617, on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul (what a coincidence!), another apparently unremarkable event was to change St. Vincent de Paul's life radically. In the light of faith, the sick man of Folleville was the spokesperson of the poor who, in the name of God, clamored for more and better human and religious attention. The original intuition, the "interior light," would take on more defined contours a short time afterwards in the institutions Vincent founded: the Ladies of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. All of these, in different ways, would take on the commitment to carry out the liberating mission of Jesus.

From 1617 onward, like St. Paul, St. Vincent de Paul understands that his vocation was not just to do the mission in one town, but rather to do in every place "what the Son of God did who came to set the world ablaze with the fire of his love" (SVP XI, 553). Later on, like St. Paul, Vincent recognizes that his work was the fruit, not just of a personal whim, but rather of the will of God. Both men considered their action as a duty, as an obligation that, from all eternity, had been providentially imposed upon them.

Shortly before his death, the peasant of the Landes, imparting his blessing to various members of the institutions he founded, calmed them with the words of the Apostle Paul: "The God who began this good work in you will bring it to completion" (Phil 1:6, SVP X, 231). God was the author of everything. God would also be its principal guarantor.

Today, with the divine assistance, it is the turn of the Vincentian Family to carry this project forward.

2. DOCTRINE

2.1. St. Paul in the texts of St. Vincent

Explicit references to the Apostle Paul are not frequent in St. Vincent's writings. The saint of charity has recourse to the Apostle of the Gentiles to establish his positions with the aim of changing the attitude of his listeners. In general, Vincent does not speculate about Paul's theology. On the basis of the sacred texts he gives direction, draws practical applications, makes recommendations for the concrete situations of daily life such as community conflict or the need of practicing charity. He makes use of Paul's "divine authority" to "bring water to the mill." To do this he makes interpolations and adaptations of the text which are sometimes surprising.

He invokes St. Paul's authority when he insists that the members of the Congregation work free of charge, just as the Apostle did, in the popular missions (SVP X, 520); when he emphasized the importance of practicing the virtues like mortification (SVP X, 472; XI, 522), indifference and detachment (SVP XI, 533); when he asks the missionaries to center their preaching on the person of Jesus Christ crucified (SVP XI, 529-530); when he counsels a missionary to resolve community tensions in a peaceful way. He reminds them that even St. Paul had words with St. Peter and St. Barnabas (SVP IV, 233), but that union prevailed among them.

In his conferences to the Daughters of Charity as well, he cites St. Paul when he refers to the need of worthy preparation for communion (SVP IX, 220-229); when he speaks of temptations (SVP IX, 656-668) and perseverance in vocation (he presents Paul as the substitute for Judas) (SVP IX, 328); when he develops the theme of virtues like uniformity, chastity and modesty (SVP IX, 943-944). In the same way he refers to the Apostle to say that despite his choleric temperament, he was a great saint (SVP IX, 256-257). Therefore, even those with an impulsive and aggressive temperament (as he himself was) also had the possibility of a saintly life.

Vincent also calls on the figure of the Apostle in his allocutions to the Ladies of Charity. When these women hesitated to take on the work of the foundlings, with all its consequences, Vincent has recourse to St. Paul's authority to say that the priest Melchisedech, like other important figures, had neither father nor mother because he had been an abandoned child (SVP X, 919; 939).

He cites Paul in a passing way in a talk to the Daughters of Charity in July of 1657 (SVP X, 956); in the study about grace (SVP X, 192); in the text used when presenting a priest to a parish

(SVP X, 471; 529); while giving advice (SVP X, 846), as for example about marriage (SVP II, 136).

But the presence of St. Paul in St. Vincent's writings goes much further than explicit references as we shall now see. Surely both men had an obstinate and obsessive temperament, quite helpful when there was need for persistent effort, even when conditions were not in their favor. Both had regular contact with the communities they founded by way of correspondence. In their letters we see some aspects they had in common: the topics they presented, the practical recommendations, the calls to fidelity to the "proclamation" (kerygma); the concern for organization and community stability; the challenge of being authentic "imitators of Jesus." The terminology they use is sometimes full of tenderness (sons, daughters, friends...), but in other cases he makes use of severe language to put down the positions of his adversaries.⁵

2.2. The Centrality of Christ

2.2.1. *In St. Paul*

In the beginning of I Corinthians, Paul declares categorically what the essential content of his preaching is: "Among you I did not want to know anything except Jesus Christ crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). As the center of his proclamation we find Christ who accepted the humiliation of Calvary to save us. Time and again he refers to the redemptive death of the "Son of God who loved me and handed himself over for me" (Gal 2:20); that crucified Christ who is a "scandal for the Jews and foolishness for the pagans" (1 Cor 1:23). One statistic is very revealing all by itself: the name of Jesus (and associated terms) appears 380 times in the Apostle's letters. Contrary to the "enlightened ones" who presented in the community the facet of the glorious Christ, relegating the cross to a secondary plane, Paul centers his theology on Jesus Christ crucified. As the writer Santiago Oporto points out: "Looking upon the crucified, Paul captured all the force and scope of Jesus' handing over of himself: for love of us he became poor; even beyond that, God made him a curse for us and even guilty of sin (literally sin). On the cross Jesus showed himself to be the mystery of God's love for men and his project of salvation for all humanity."⁶

⁵ Cf. Phil 3:2; SVP XI, 397.

⁶ G. OPORTO, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

The Christ that Paul knew was not, however, the Son of Mary, the man of flesh and blood. Despite all of Paul's personalizing of his relationship with Christ ("He loved me and handed Himself over for me"), for the last-minute Apostle, as for his contemporaries and for future generations, it was impossible to "follow" or walk side by side with the historical Jesus. After Jesus' death and resurrection, it was no longer possible "to be with" him; but it was possible "to be in" him.⁷ As H.U. von Balthasar emphasizes, this expression reveals the new reality of being Christian, until by death, it is again possible, but in another sense, "to be with Christ."⁸ Therefore, contrary to what we find in the Synoptics, we do not find in Paul's writings the terms "to follow" (akolouthēin) nor "disciple." In the light of the Resurrection, Paul avails himself of new language to express the relationship of the follower with the master.

Now the believer is called to **imitate** those who, like Paul, are true imitators of Jesus — "be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1; 2 Thes 3:6-9). In the new context of life "in Christ," the one who proposes to imitate Jesus is also invited to live in intimate communion with the Risen Lord and to prepare himself to walk, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, keeping in sight the goal of **identification** with Christ: "Have among you the same sentiments which Jesus Christ had" (Phil 2:5).⁹ For Paul, this is the common goal for all the baptized, not just for some.

To the Galatians Paul presents the Christian life as a progressive "con-figuration" with Christ: "My children, once again I suffer the pangs of birth until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19). In this perspective the Christian ideal is to put on "the form of Christ," which suggests an ontological transformation of the subject, in the measure in which he passes from the way of being of the old Adam to the new way of being in the image of the divine model. In one of the passages of the Letter to the Romans, taking up the same theme but in other terms, the Apostle emphasizes that "those he knew beforehand, he also predestined to be an identical image of his Son" (8:29). To be a Christian is to be invited to con-form one's life to the

⁷ F. NEIRYNCK (1969), «Doctrina de San Pablo sobre "Cristo en nosotros" y "nosotros en Cristo",» *Concilium* (50), pp. 610-619.

⁸ HANS URS VON BALTHASAR (1965), *Ensayos teológicos*, Madrid: Guadarrama, t. 2, p. 90.

⁹ G. Uríbarri emphasizes the meaning of the term "froneite" whose root is "fronesis" which means "reason," intelligence, wisdom, thought, spirit, feeling. All believers, therefore, are called to identify themselves in everything, with Christ (G. URIBARRI [1996], «La conformación plena con Cristo: peculiaridad de la Vida Religiosa,» *Razón y Fe* [234], pp. 326-327).

image of Jesus. In synthesis it is “reproducing,” here and now, the filial experience, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit.

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:19-20).

2.2.2. In Vincent de Paul

The attentive reading of the letters, conferences and documents left by St. Vincent leads us to the conclusion that his doctrine is developed in a way that is bound up with the person of Jesus Christ. The centrality of Christ is also confirmed by the number of times expressions like “to imitate Jesus” appear — around 400 times.¹⁰ For Vincent, Jesus is the absolute reference: “He is our father, our mother, our all” (SVP V, 511); “he is the rule of the mission” (SVP XI, 429); the “true model and the great invisible painting with which we should conform our actions” (SVP XI, 129).

The Christ of St. Vincent is not the glorious Christ, risen and seated at the right hand of the Father. He is rather the crucified Christ of St. Paul, not just the one who died for us in some distant past, but rather the One who is still nailed to the cross in the person of the poor person who suffers hunger or cold, who is the victim of violence, of injustice, of people’s selfishness. In Vincent’s view, those who have been marked by misery, by ill fortune have the honor of being the representatives of Christ crucified.

“When one serves the poor, one serves Jesus Christ. My Daughters, how true this is! You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here. A sister will go ten times a day to see the sick, and ten times a day she will find God in them.... Go to see the poor condemned to life imprisonment, and in them you will find God; serve the children and in them you will find God. My Daughters, how wonderful this is! You go to some very poor houses, but there you will find God. My Daughters, once again, how wonderful this is! Indeed, God is pleased with the service you render to the sick and he considers it, as you have said, as done to himself” (SVP IX, 240).

To honor these crucified Christs, “our lords and masters” (SVP XI, 273), it is necessary for the follower of Christ to be willing to die

¹⁰ Cf. F. GARNIER, « Enchiridion spirituale sancti Vincentii a Paulo, » *Vincentina* 3 (1979), pp. 15-18.

“in Christ” so that “with him he can live” (SVP I, 320). This “mystical death,” for example, is very clear in a letter written by the saint to a missionary (M. Portail):

“Remember, Father, that we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ” (SVP I, 320).

Therefore, St. Vincent has recourse to the Pauline language of the **Imitation of Christ**, of the **configuration** and **conformity** with the will of God to emphasize, again and again, the need of emptying ourselves of ourselves in order to put on the same Spirit of Jesus (SVP XI, 236). Only in that way can we become like the “divine model,” the Christ presented by St. Paul in the letter to the Philippians:

“Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8).

3. PASTORAL PRAXIS

The activities of the institutions founded by St. Vincent have markedly Pauline characteristics. Among these I would point out Charity as the motor of action and the missionary spirit of the organization. We will stop and look at these two aspects.

3.1. “The Charity of Christ Impels Us” (2 Cor 5:14)

The wish that the Daughters of Charity be true servants of the poor, the crucified of this world, moved Vincent to break the “yoke of the Law” which did not permit any form of religious life outside the convent cloister. The birth of the Daughters of Charity marks a milestone in religious history. That group of women who wore a habit without being religious, lived together by the same norms and purposes without taking vows — (their only purpose was) the corporal and spiritual relief of the poor. They were not religious because, if they were, they would not be able to walk about the streets of a miserable town to succor a beggar. But each year, in the

intimacy of their own hearts, each one of the servants of the poor renews the vows; that is, she “commits herself to do what Our Lord did on earth” (SVP IX, 34) in poverty, chastity and obedience.

Like St. Paul, St. Vincent knew how to value and make good use of women’s role in the church. With their action, they became privileged evangelizers, signs of the love of God to the crucified of this world. The driving force of this great but small revolution in the church was Charity. And the motto they made their own is also Pauline: “The Charity of Christ impels us” (2 Cor 5:14).

The love for these crucified Christs contributes decisively to bettering the conditions of the life of the poor, who were already benefitting from the work of the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity and the priests of the mission. The love for these crucified Christs moved St. Vincent to relativize some rules of community life which, even today, are a challenge to us. For the Saint it was perfectly legitimate to miss prayer when there was some sick person to aid. Even on Sunday, in case of necessity, if someone had to go to the home of a poor person instead of going to mass, St. Vincent recommended doing it without scruples, because to do so was “to leave God for God” (SVP IX, 725).

3.2. The Mission: “He Sent Me To Preach the Good News to the Poor”

It was also the love for these crucified Christs that motivated the missionary expansion of the little company, the C.M. Even in the time of the Founder, the missionaries travelled to foreign countries like Poland and Ireland. Among the missions “ad gentes,” the one that most consumed the energies of the already aged Saint was the Madagascar mission. Like St. Paul, St. Vincent wanted the gospel to be announced even to the ends of the earth and to all peoples, even when, associated with the mission, there was a great probability of losing lives. In the Madagascar mission all the missionaries sent by St. Vincent died — some during the voyage, others shortly after arriving at the island. In light of these tragic results, voices arose in the C.M. counseling prudence, the suspension of the sending of missionaries. Even though he was already quite weak, Vincent did not give in. Like an army which loses two or three thousand soldiers in a battle, but does not surrender, in the same way the Company should carry on this combat (cf. SVP XI, 297-298). Vincent himself shows a desire to participate in this distant mission. But he was already at the end of his life; he did not go. The work went on without him.

Like St. Paul, St Vincent had the firm conviction of having been chosen by God to bring the gospel to all peoples. The love for the crucified never let him abandon the road to Calvary. He knew that the Cross was the only sign of a greater love that, shortly afterwards, in communion with all the saints, he was to experience.

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