

# “Apostolic Men”

## A Priest from the Perspective of Vincent de Paul’s Experience

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Invited by the Church to deepen our understanding of priestly ministry during this year, we can once again draw closer to the way<sup>1</sup> that Vincent de Paul understood and lived priesthood. Vincent de Paul never wrote a program for priestly life but his experience and his ministry as he understood it and lived it can help us formulate some characteristics of priestly identity that will inspire us today.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Letter Proclaiming a Year of Priests on the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the birthday of the Curé de Ars* (June 19, 2009). Among some of the works on the priesthood as understood and lived by Saint Vincent we can cite: C. BRAGA, *Renovación de las formas de servicio al clero*, «Anales» (1983), 170-181; B. KOCH - CH. SENS - J.B. ROUANET, *El rostro del sacerdote según San Vincent de Paül*, Salamanca, Ceme, 2004; L. MEZZADRI, *Jesus-Christe, figure du prêtre missionnaire dan l’œuvre de Monsieur Vincent*, «Vincentiana» (1986), 323; L. MEZZADRI, *La espiritualidad sacerdotal*, «Anales» (1983), 627; L. NUOVO, *Sacerdocio. Diccionario de Espiritualidad Vicenciana*, Salamanca, Ceme, 1995, 550; J.M. ROMÁN, *La formación del clero en la tradición vicenciana*, «Anales» (1983), 182-200; L.G. COLUCCIA, *La vocazione sacerdotale di San Vincenzo de Paoli*, «Vincentiana» (1982), 38-43; A. TAMAYO, *El sacerdote según San Vicente de Paül*, «Vincentiana» (1987), 725-744; J.B. ROUANET - V. LANDERAS, *Vicente de Paül, sacerdote instrumento de Jesucristo*, «Anales» (1978), 265-336; J.M. ROMÁN, *The Priestly Journey of St. Vincent de Paul*, «Vincentiana» (2000), 201-217; R. FACÉLINA, *Vocation and Mission of the Priest According to St. Vincent de Paul*, *VINCENTIANA* (2000), 218-228; A. QUEVEDO, *St. Vincent, Priest of Charity at the Service of the Poor*, «Vincentiana» (2000), 239-249; R. MALONEY, *The Vincentian Priesthood, as Missionary*, «Vincentiana» (2000), 509-531. Cf. *Bibliography* in «Vincentiana» (2009) 435-436.

## I.

## A PRIEST IN THE TIME OF VINCENT DE PAUL

The New Testament provides us with evidence of a great diversity of ministries and ways of exercising ministry in order to serve the community. Only in the third century does the word "*priest*" appear and at first this word is applied to bishops and only later to clerics.<sup>2</sup>

The Patristic era offers a rich understanding of the ministerial priesthood with its wide range of dimensions that were emphasized in different regions:<sup>3</sup> ministry destined to effectively proclaim the wonders of God and communicate the mysteries of salvation.

In the Middle Ages we see a progressive reduction of the priestly ministry to liturgical-ritual activity, to sacramental and canonical matters and this is in detriment to the priests' evangelizing mission.<sup>4</sup> It is significant that the first statement of ecclesiastical teaching with regard to priestly ministry (the IV Lateran Council, 1215) is focused on this one dimension: *only the legitimately ordained priest, according to the power of the keys of the Church, is capacitated to celebrate the sacrament of the Eucharist.*<sup>5</sup>

The reflections of the Church during the last decades of the Lower Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era will once again accentuate the institutional aspects of the priesthood as the church

<sup>2</sup> GERMAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, *El ministerio sacerdotal*, Salamanca, Sigueme, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in Alexandria the ministry of the Word was accentuated; the priest is presented primarily as a teacher and missionary. On the other hand, in Antioch the accent falls on the offering of sacrifice. The Judea-Christian communities and the Roman church highlight the primary task of the priest as one of governing the community. Nevertheless, in all these cases we are presented with a focus that is more or less strong and not with "images of the priest" in some absolute and exclusive character. Together with these focuses there appears from the beginning (cf. 1 Timothy 6:2.18; Titus 2:14, 3:18) a primordial obligation of the priest to assist and support the needy and outcasts, persons who are alone. Faithful to this demand we find the priest throughout history as a silent servant, continually giving of himself, fulfilling a critical role of service to society according to the concrete demands of each historical era and its corresponding social situation and according to the possibilities of ecclesial ministry. GERMAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, *op. cit.*, 72.

<sup>4</sup> In a world definitively Christianized the missionary impulse is lost and pastoral attention is concentrated preferably on already existing communities. The life of these communities is made to prosper through the service of worship. In general terms the missionary perspective of the "ministry of the Word" as an internal element of priesthood is lost and this is replaced by the administration of the sacraments understood in its strictest sense. GERMAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, *op. cit.*, 74.

<sup>5</sup> DS 802. The first explicit statement of the magisterium on priesthood.

confronts anti-hierarchy spiritual movements<sup>6</sup> and the community movements that view the church as a “community of faithful.”<sup>7</sup> This tendency will become even more pronounced as the Church confronts the statements of the Protestant Reform. In effect:

*Protestantism discussed and denied all ecclesiastical mediation: magisterium, priesthood, sacraments, the authority of tradition and the role of the Church as teacher in matters of faith, the power of prelates, the dignity of bishops, the primacy of the Pope. Nothing remained of the institution. On the other hand, they proposed a notion of holy-church as the assembly of the faithful where the ecclesial reality is revealed in two aspects whose organic unity was unknown: on the one hand, the communion of saints (the true faithful, the predestined) who were the true Church but not visible and on the other hand, a visible organization, completely human, that in reality was not Church.<sup>8</sup>*

The Council of Trent (1545-1563), as a response to the reformed Protestant Church, proposed to define the existence of the ministerial priesthood and ecclesiastical hierarchy in their distinct levels.<sup>9</sup>

- In the New Testament there exists a visible priesthood endowed with special spiritual powers that enable them to consecrate in the celebration of the Eucharist and to forgive sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation.
- This priesthood is communicated in the sacrament of Orders and the effect of the sacrament is an indelible sign (character).
- The sacrament of Orders joins the individual to the hierarchical structure of ecclesial ministry established by the command of

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<sup>6</sup> The anti-hierarchy movement is a reaction, spiritual in nature, provoked by the same situation that the Church is presently living, many times “overly secularized, that becomes another force in this world.”

<sup>7</sup> A third factor that will influence the direction of the reflection on Church toward an insistence on its institutional aspects is represented by the discussion that extends over several centuries and that places in tension the pontifical monarchy and the Church as a gathering of faithful with the king. These statements will lead to different forms of Gallicanism which subordinates the authority of the Pope to that of the king or the head of state.

<sup>8</sup> Yves M.J. CONGAR, *Jalones para una teología del laicado*, Barcelona, Estela, 1961, 61. For a study of this matter see, G. ALBERIGO, *L'Ecclesiologia del Concilio di Trento*, «Rivista della Chiesa in Italia» (1964), 227-242; A. ANTÓN, *El misterio de la Iglesia. Evolución histórica de las ideas eclesiológicas*, Madrid, Editorial Católica, 1986, t. 1 y 2, BAC maior, n. 26 y 30; J.J. HERNÁNDEZ ALONSO, *La nueva creación. Teología de la Iglesia del Señor*, Salamanca, Sigueme, 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Doctrina de Sacramento Ordinis*, session 23, July 15, 1563, DS 1764 f.

Christ and thus this same individual is sent by Christ (and therefore Orders cannot proceed from below).<sup>10</sup>

Aware of the objectivity of many of the accusations of the reformers and the spiritual movements concerning the irregularities in the life of the clerics, the Council of Trent put forth measures to insure a more adequate formation of priests and for the renewal of their customs.

The decrees of the Council of Trent were accepted as law in France very late<sup>11</sup> and as a result the disciplinary and pastoral measures offered by the Council for the renewal of ecclesiastical life began to produce fruit only toward the latter part of the XVII century. Nevertheless, the understanding of priestly ministry could be summed up by the following commonly accepted statements of catholic theology in the XVII century:

- Priestly ministry is a divine institution.
- Without denying the common priesthood of the faithful, priestly ministry is considered to be superior.
- Priesthood involves the exercise of special “powers.”
- The mission of the priest is fundamentally related to “the sacred,” to the ritual-sacramental dimension, to the sacrifice of the Mass.
- As occurs among the angels, so, too, in the hierarchy of the church there is a certain gradation, perfectly established by which one moves from one level to another.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As a reaction against the Protestant position of restricting the priesthood to the universal priesthood of all the faithful and therefore, denying the existence of the hierarchical priesthood in the Church, Trent insisted on the hierarchical structures and gave them a clear predominance over the communal aspects. “With the priority attributed to the hierarchical conception of the Church, the separation between the faithful and the hierarchy is to be consolidated, replacing the unilateral movement of the center of gravity toward the pole of the hierarchy which for various centuries was able to impose a hegemony each day more encompassing of the hierarchical function over the laity in the ecclesiology of the Counter-Reformation.” A. ANTÓN, *o.c.*, t. 1, p. 753.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. P. BLET, *Le clergé de France et la Monarchie. Etude sur les Assemblées Générales du Clergé de 1615 à 1666*, Rome, 1959, 2 voll.; R. TAVENEAUX, *Le catholicisme dans la France classique: 1610-1715*, Paris, 1980, 2 voll.

<sup>12</sup> Influence of the classification of angels according to Pseudo-Dionisio is then applied to the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

## II.

### VINCENT DE PAUL, PRIEST

#### 1. The path toward the priesthood

The first biographers of Saint Vincent de Paul presented his life as an ascending path of holiness. Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century the studies on Saint Vincent de Paul have placed in relief the fact that there was a certain rupture, a true *conversion*,<sup>13</sup> highlighting the fact that for some years Vincent de Paul saw the priesthood as a way of providing for himself and for his family. He dreamed of acquiring benefits from his priestly life and climbing with honors in the Church. Some of Vincent's words confirm this point of view. In 1610 he wrote his mother: ... *the prolonged sojourn which I must necessarily make in this city [Paris] in order to regain my chances for advancement (which my disasters took from me) grieves me, because I cannot come to render you the services I owe you. But I have such trust in God's grace that he will bless my efforts and will soon give me the means of an honorable retirement so that I may spend the rest of my days near you... let him reflect [referring to one of his brothers] that the present misfortune presupposes good luck in the future.*<sup>14</sup>

Following this logic of viewing the priesthood as a path to advancement we can understand the fact that Vincent was ordained when he was just twenty years old, on September 23, 1600 by the elderly bishop of Périgueux, François Bourdeilles. Should we see this fact as the expression of some ill-will on the part of Vincent since it could appear that he deceived an elderly blind bishop in order to be ordained? It seems to me that we cannot allow ourselves to be led in that direction by such exaggerations. True, Vincent was ordained at

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. L. ABELLY, *Vida del venerable siervo de Dios, Vicente de Paúl, fundador y primero superior general de la Congregación de la Misión*, Ceme, Salamanca, 1994; P. COSTE, *El gran santo del gran siglo, el señor Vicente*, Ceme, Salamanca, 1990, 3 voll.; A. DODIN, *San Vicente de Paúl y la caridad*, Ceme, Salamanca, 1977; J.M. ROMÁN, *San Vicente de Paúl. Biografía*, Ed. Católica, Madrid, 1981; J. CORERA, *La noche oscura del Señor Vicente*, in «Diez estudios vicencianos», Ceme, Salamanca, 1983, 13-40; L. MEZZADRI, *La conversión de San Vicente*, «Anales» (1978), 9-15.

<sup>14</sup> CCD, I:15. All references to the works of Vincent de Paul are taken from *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, New York City Press, Hyde Park, New York. Future references will use the initials CCD followed by the volume and then the page. The only exception is the references to conferences which will simply state the conference and the date. I am in the process of obtaining volume XI which contains the early conferences of Saint Vincent, several of which are referred to in this text.

twenty years of age, four years younger than that prescribed by the Council of Trent, but the Council of Trent was received in France only in 1615. True, Vincent was ordained in the private chapel in the summer house of the elderly bishop of Périgue but he had “dimissorial” letters from his own diocese that were dated one year prior to his ordination.<sup>15</sup> Exaggerating the facts might actually highlight the significance of his conversion but it seems to me more correct to affirm that Vincent de Paul’s ordination took place according to the common practice of that time: it is true that the priesthood was seen as a way of social advancement and Vincent and his family understood priesthood in this way. Yet he did not want to be a priest in whatever way possible and so he undertook university studies and went forward with seriousness and good practices even though this must also be put in the context of his time.

It is true that after his conversion, Vincent de Paul speaks about his own story and affirms: *As for myself, if I had known what it was when I had the temerity to enter it — as I have come to know since then — I would have preferred to toil the soil than to commit myself to such a formidable life.*<sup>16</sup>

These are the words of a missionary who has committed himself to follow the guidelines of the Council of Trent in order to assist the reform of the clergy.

## 2. Saint Vincent discovers what it means to be a priest

What happened to Vincent de Paul that now he speaks about *temerity* when before he dreamt about *an honorable retirement so that I might spend the rest of my days near my family*.

Vincent has discovered that to be a priest is *the most sublime state on earth, the very one Our Lord willed to assume and follow.*<sup>17</sup> He refers to his experience and says *the older I get, the more convinced I am of this*. The Lord had guided him through the influence of good ecclesiastics (Pierre de Bérulle and André Duval) and above all through events. Through this process he not only discovers the great dignity of the priesthood but more importantly discovers the true identity of the priest.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. DEFOS DU RAU, *La ordenación de San Vicente*, «Anales» (1982), 437-446; E. DIEBOLD, *La primera Misa de San Vicente (1600)*, «Anales» (1982), 324-326.

<sup>16</sup> CCD, V:569.

<sup>17</sup> CCD, V:569.

This was a long process in which Vincent was led by the Lord; and through the distinct experiences which Divine Providence had involved him in and through his attentive listening that enabled him to interpret these experiences, he slowly discovers what it means to be a priest.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.1. *Clichy*

Ordained a priest in September 1600 it would not be until 1612 when he is appointed pastor at Clichy that Saint Vincent discovers the joy of direct pastoral ministry and savors ministry for the first time. *Mon Dieu! How happy you are to have such good people! And I would add, I do not think the Pope himself is as happy as a Pastor in the midst of such good hearted people.*<sup>19</sup>

In Clichy we discover the priest, Vincent de Paul, enthusiastic about the well-prepared liturgical celebrations and with hymns sung with the people's participation.<sup>20</sup>

Clichy offers him the opportunity to test the evangelizing potential of a small community of ecclesiastical aspirants animated by the Spirit of the Lord.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2. *Faith tested*

A little later, at the beginning of 1613 as tutor in the de Gondi family he is offered the opportunity of establishing relationships with the families of high society. Would this be the beginning of his *honorable retirement*.

It is then that Vincent de Paul begins to vacillate in his faith. But the Lord helps him to discover that to be a priest is to work (years later he confesses this fact in the third person): *Since he neither preached nor catechized, he found himself assailed, in the peaceful state of life he then enjoyed, by a strong temptation against*

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. J. MORIN, *Historie d'un regard su le pauvre*, «Vincentiana» (1981), 160-190; AA.VV., *La experiencia espiritual del señor Vicente y la nuestra (estudios para la Asamblea General de la Congregación de la Misión, 1980)*, «Anales» (1977), 247-286; J. DELARUE, *Vicente de Paúl, la fe que dio sentido a su vida*, Salamanca, Ceme, 1974.

<sup>19</sup> CCD, IX:507.

<sup>20</sup> CF. J.M. MUNETA, *San Vicente de Paúl, animador del culto*, Salamanca, Ceme, 1974.

<sup>21</sup> The young Antoine Portail, a future companion and collaborator of Saint Vincent, was a member of this group.

*faith. This should teach us in passing, how dangerous it is to remain in a state of complete mental or bodily idleness for, just as land, however good it may be, if left for some time to be fallow, it will begin to produce a crop of weeds and thistles, so too, our soil cannot remain for long in a state of repose and idleness without experiencing certain passions or temptations which incline it to evil.*<sup>22</sup>

### **2.3. Gannes-Folléville**

1617 is a decisive year in the life of Vincent de Paul.<sup>23</sup> The experience of Gannes-Folléville leads him to discover the spiritual abandonment of the poor people in the rural areas. While he sought and found a comfortable and accommodating situation among the influential, the rural poor people lived and died without any priest to evangelize them or assist them.<sup>24</sup> Vincent de Paul feels God calling him to live his priesthood proclaiming the gospel to the poor people in the rural areas.

In this first missionary experience, Vincent de Paul discovers not only the spiritual misery of the people but also experiences the ignorance in which the majority of the clergy lived as well as their lack of preparation to exercise priestly ministry.

In Gannes-Folléville, Vincent de Paul discovers that the spiritual needs of the poor are not served and that the priests are primarily responsible for this situation. They are ill-prepared and have little enthusiasm for the ministry of evangelization. He listens to the Lord interpolate these events: are there no priests who will concern themselves with the evangelization of the poor rural people? Vincent sees that the popular mission, with general confession and catechesis, can create new priests for the necessary evangelization of the poor.

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<sup>22</sup> Extract from a conference “An account of a temptation against faith,” pp. 42-43.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. J.M. ROMÁN, *El año 1617 en la biografía de San Vicente de Paúl, «Vincentiana»* (1984), 443-456; M. SAGASTAGOITIA, *Vicente de Paúl y la Misión, Ceme*, Salamanca, 1974.

<sup>24</sup> J. MORIN, *o.c.*, 387. The experience of Folléville in Saint Vincent de Paul: CCD, IX:49-51; Extract from a conference, “On the Mission that was preached at Folléville in 1617,” pp. 18-20; Conference to the Missionaries, May 17, 1658, pp. 417-419.

## 2.4. *Châtillon-les-Dombes*

A few months later Vincent de Paul asked Father Bérulle's permission to leave Paris in order to minister among the poor rural people. Providence sent him to a small parish about five hundred kilometers from the capital. Vincent arrives in Châtillon-les-Dombes between March and April, 1617.<sup>25</sup> It is in Châtillon where Vincent discovers that priestly ministry among the poor cannot be limited to evangelization and the celebration of the sacraments, but must be complimented with organized charity that alleviates their corporeal miseries.<sup>26</sup>

In Châtillon Vincent de Paul continues to listen to the interpolations of the Lord: the priest, evangelizer of the poor, cannot remain passive before the urgent needs of the poor and must utilize his best energies in order to organize material assistance. The laity, who are generous and well-animated by charity, are effective and indispensable agents of evangelization.

## 2.5. *Montmirail-Marchais*

At the end of 1617 Vincent de Paul returns to Paris and continues to serve as spiritual director to Madame de Gondi but is no longer tutor of her children. From this time on, his mission is focused on offering missions on the de Gondi estate and establishing confraternities of charity modeled on the foundation in Châtillon. Rural missions and confraternities to assist the sick poor will become the axes of his priestly ministry.

Between 1618-1625 his activity will move out from the rural areas and will include the galley slaves as he is appointed general-chaplain.<sup>27</sup>

What occurred in Montmirail-Marchais confirmed his discoveries. While Vincent was preaching in Montmirail, Madame de Gondi sent him three Huguenots hoping that he would convince them to once again embrace the Catholic faith. A few days later, two of them asked to make a recantation while each day the third person presented new objections: he could not believe that the Catholic Church was guided by the Holy Spirit because the poor were not attended.<sup>28</sup> Only later,

<sup>25</sup> Cf. CCD, XIIIb:49 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. CCD, IX:165-166; 192-193.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. L. ABELLY, *o.c.*, 77.

<sup>28</sup> Extract from a conference to the Missionaries, "On the conversion of a heretic" (undated), pp. 44-47.

when this individual was able to see the care and dedication of the missionaries as they instructed the poor in their faith did he come to Saint Vincent and confess. *I now see that the Holy Spirit guides the Roman Church, since such great care is taken to instruct and serve poor villagers. I am ready to enter the Church whenever you are pleased to receive me.*<sup>29</sup>

This experience was engraved on the mind of Saint Vincent and appears to be implied in what he repeated to the priests of his Company: *How blessed are we, missionaries, to be able to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit guides his work, working as we work for the instruction and the sanctification of the poor.*<sup>30</sup>

After the significant events in Folléville, Châtillon, the lived experience in Montmirail-Marchais confirmed that the poor are abandoned and that the Church could only reveal God to the degree that she returns to serve the poor. Priests are called to be concrete expressions of the Church and to be her effective voice with the poor.

## **2.6. Priests and missionaries for the poor**

The Lord helped Saint Vincent by revealing himself to him in events and by revealing to him the meaning of priesthood. At forty years of age Vincent saw clearly that the Church that God desired had to concern itself primarily with the poor who were abandoned. It was also clear that the workers (ministers and priests) were not prepared to care for this field where the harvest was plentiful.

Until 1625 Vincent de Paul had personally given himself over to charitable and missionary labor, helped occasionally by some companions who were related to him to achieve some concrete and determined project, but after 1625 he would rely on *some priests who commit themselves and come together to devote themselves by way of the mission to catechize, preach and exhort poor country people to make a general confession.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> The events at Marchais are reflected in the biographies of Vincent de Paul, all of which are based on the testimony of L. ABELLY, *o.c.*, 73-75; P. Coste has gathered this information together in Extract from a conference to the Missionaries, “On the conversion of a heretic” (undated), pp. 44-47.

<sup>31</sup> CCD, XIIIb:222-223. On April 24, 1626 the Congregation of the Mission was approved by the Archbishop of Paris. In 1627 Saint Vincent requests approval for the Congregation from Pope Urban VII. On January 12, 1633 Pope Urban VII gives official approval to the Congregation of the Mission with the Bull *Salvatoris Nostris*.

### III.

#### A PRIEST ACCORDING TO SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL

At the beginning of this study we stated that Vincent de Paul did not leave us any written manual about priestly life and thus we can identify what it means to be a good priest according to Saint Vincent de Paul only from his experience as he understood it and lived it.

There was a widespread movement of renewal in the Church during the years preceding and following the Council of Trent and as a result different proposals were put forth to cultivate priestly holiness — proposals that we once again put in relief on the occasion of this Year of the Priest 2009-2010.<sup>32</sup>

Each one of these proposals focuses on one or another dimension of ministry and offers a plan of priestly life.<sup>33</sup> Vincent de Paul was aware of these proposals. Now I dare to formulate a few affirmations that we could call Vincentian proposals: priesthood according to Saint Vincent de Paul.

#### 1. One can only be a priest if one has been called to this vocation by God

From a priest who was seeking a benefice to a priest following Jesus Christ, servant of the people and the poor: this great transformation that took place in the priest, Vincent de Paul, has been synthesized by J. Ibáñez Burgos: *from one seeking a benefice, Vincent de Paul was converted to one who unceasingly did the will of God.*<sup>34</sup>

His personal experience as a priest is a determining factor that helps him discover the meaning of priesthood. One can only be a

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<sup>32</sup> All religious communities are publishing studies about the contribution of their Founders to the understanding of the holiness of the priesthood. I was able to see this as I visited several religious libraries in Rome at the beginning of January.

<sup>33</sup> Before the time of Vincent de Paul we find serious proposals on priestly holiness among the diverse groups of “clerics regular,” like the Teatinos (1524), the Barnabites (1530) or the Camillians (1582), who cultivated a form of apostolic life, living in fraternal communion with their eyes focused on the apostolate. Saint Ignatius Loyola († 1556) or Saint Philip Neri († 1595) gave origin to new forms of priestly life: a promptness to serve the Church and an intellectual preparedness within the Ignatian community; a virtuous life and simple affability in the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri. Closer to the time of Vincent de Paul we see proposals put forth by P. Bérulle and the Oratorian communities of Olier, Bourdoise, Eudes, etc.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. J.M. IBÁÑEZ BURGOS, *Vicente de Paúl. Realismo y encarnación*, Sigueme, Salamanca, 1982, 36.

priest if one has been called to this vocation by God, if one has received this gift which is the vocation of ministry. One cannot aspire to the priesthood for any other motivation or interest; *loss seems inevitable for those who dare to enter it without being called.*<sup>35</sup>

It is this very personal experience that will lead him to exclaim: *if I was not already a priest, I never would become one. I have often said this to applicants and I have said it more than a hundred times when preaching to the country folk.*<sup>36</sup> Obviously we are not dealing with a lament that was evoked by some past mistake, but rather produced by the recognition and the persistence of one valid reason to become a priest: *It is a misfortune for those who enter it by the window of their own choice and not by the door of a legitimate vocation. Yet the number of the former is high because they consider the ecclesiastical state a soft way of life in which they seek rest rather than work. This has been the source of the scandalous havoc we see in the Church, for the ignorance, sin and heresies that devastate it are attributed to priests.*<sup>37</sup>

It is a discovery laden with the vital density of his experience and the starting point of a new way of understanding ministry and his work for the renewal of the life of priests. The priest is not a priest for himself or for his own interests, but rather he is a priest for all people and like Jesus Christ, the servant of all people: *We have been chosen by God as instruments of His boundless and fatherly love which desires to be established in and to replenish souls.... Our vocation is to go... throughout the whole world... to enflame the hearts of men, to do what the Son of God did. He came to cast fire on the earth, to inflame it with his love.... It is true, then, that I am sent, not merely to love God but to have him loved. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love Him.*<sup>38</sup>

## **2. The necessary holiness in the life of the priest, like Jesus Christ-priest**

Saint Vincent de Paul has no hesitation in referring to the priesthood as *the most sublime state on earth, the very one Our Lord willed to assume and follow.*<sup>39</sup> He sees the priests as *persons who have the power to cause bread to be changed into the Body of the Son of God;*

<sup>35</sup> CCD, V:570.

<sup>36</sup> CCD, VII:480.

<sup>37</sup> CCD, VII:479.

<sup>38</sup> Conference to the Missionaries, May 30, 1659.

<sup>39</sup> CCD, V:569.

*that by their ministry you are restored to God's grace; that from an enemy of God they make you His child; that God gives them authority for what they do with regard to sinners; and that they have the power to snatch a soul from the hands of the devil and restore it to God.*<sup>40</sup>

With expressions filled with admiration and gratitude Saint Vincent exhorts the members of his Congregation *to have a high opinion of priests, whose sacred character is a participation in the eternal priesthood of the Son of God who has given them power to offer up his own Body in sacrifice and to distribute it as food so that those who eat of it may live forever.*<sup>41</sup>

The greatness of the vocation to the priesthood, a greatness that demands a holy life, is derived from its participation in the priesthood of Jesus Christ: *The characteristic mark of priests is their participation in the priesthood of the Son of God who has given them the power to sacrifice his own Body to distribute it to others as food so that those who eat it shall live forever. It is an utterly divine and incomparable mark, this power over the Body of Jesus Christ, which fills the angels with awe. Divine, too, is the power to forgive the sins of people; and this also to the angels is a great reason for astonishment and gratitude. Is there anything greater or more wonderful? O gentlemen, how great is a good priest!*<sup>42</sup>

With these convictions Vincent de Paul will work on behalf of the formation and holiness of priests. He will ask for himself and for other priests a participation in the priesthood of Jesus Christ: *O Lord, grant us the spirit of your priesthood in which the Apostles and the first priests who followed them participated. Grant us the true spirit of that sacred character which you did confer on poor sinners, on working-men, on poor men of those days, on whom, by your grace, you did bestow this great and divine spirit. For, Lord, we too are poor people, poor laboring men and peasants.*<sup>43</sup>

### **3. The life of the priest is like that of Christ: reverence toward the Father, charity toward the neighbor**

Participating in Christ's priesthood, priests prolong the mission of Christ. Vincent de Paul did not hesitate to call priests *instruments of God to save others*,<sup>44</sup> *instruments by which the Son of God continues to*

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<sup>40</sup> CCD, IX:241.

<sup>41</sup> Conference to the Missionaries, December 13, 1658.

<sup>42</sup> Extract from a conference to the Missionaries (undated).

<sup>43</sup> Extract from a conference to the Missionaries, September 1655.

<sup>44</sup> CCD, V:566; CCD, VI:69.

do from heaven what he once did on earth.<sup>45</sup> Vincent de Paul highlights in the priest this characteristic of continuing, throughout the ages, the historical mission of Jesus Christ for the salvation of people, especially those who are poor.

L. Mezzadri has placed in relief the differences between the Vincentian vision of priesthood and the vision of Bérulle: *Bérulle had established a company to render perpetual homage to the sovereign priesthood of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, Vincent de Paul wanted his Congregation to render homage to the needs of Jesus Christ as contemplated mystically in the poor. For this reason he has left us a rule: we ought to run to attend to the spiritual needs of the neighbor as we would run to extinguish a fire. For Bérulle, a priest renounces himself, humbles himself in order to cling to Christ and thus accomplishes a most perfect glorification of the Father. For Vincent de Paul renunciation and clinging to Christ culminate in the service of souls. The priest belongs to the poor in the same way that he belongs to Christ. The encounter with people who are poor results in the memory of Jesus, fidelity to Jesus, and following Jesus.*<sup>46</sup>

The expression *instrument* used by Saint Vincent to refer to priests cannot be taken in some material mechanical sense but rather should be seen as a dynamism that has its origin in Jesus Christ: *how indebted we are to God for having sent us, as He sent His eternal Son, for their salvation!*<sup>47</sup>

At the time that he was encouraging a missionary in his work of priestly formation, Saint Vincent summarizes the mission of Jesus Christ in reference to the Father and on behalf of his sisters and brothers. Instruments of Jesus Christ and men who continue his mission, priests are *called to the most lofty ministry on earth, through which they must exercise the two great virtues of Jesus Christ, namely, reverence toward His Father and charity toward mankind.*<sup>48</sup>

In order to prolong the mission of Jesus Christ, in order to be living instruments of Jesus Christ, priests must live like Jesus Christ: *Remember, Monsieur, 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.*<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Conference to the Missionaries, December 6, 1658.

<sup>46</sup> L. MEZZADRI, *Jesus-Christe, figure de prêtre missionnaire dan l'œuvre de Monsieur Vincent*, cit., 332.

<sup>47</sup> CCD, VIII:41.

<sup>48</sup> CCD, VI:413.

<sup>49</sup> CCD, 276.

#### 4. Like Jesus Christ, priests are servants of the Word of God, servants of evangelization... missionary priesthood

We have entitled this study about the priesthood *Apostolic Men* and we began with Saint Vincent's experience. Without hesitation Saint Vincent affirms that what the Church needs are apostolic men, missionaries.

Contemplating the situation of the Church in Europe and after receiving news from missionaries who were to leave for Madagascar, Vincent de Paul insisted on the need that the Church had to have at her disposal missionaries, men who would continue the mission of Jesus Christ, true apostles. *Alas! the Church has enough solitaries, by His mercy, and too many useless ones, and even more who tear her apart. Her great need is evangelical men who work to purge, enlighten, and unite her to her Divine Spouse. This is what you are doing, through his Divine Goodness... to go and proclaim Jesus Christ to the poor people, and work at training priests. I beg you, Monsieur, let us labor at that with all our might, confident that Our Lord, who has called us to His manner of life, will give us a greater share in His Spirit and, in the end, in His glory.*<sup>50</sup>

He remembers with emotion the apostolic labor of the missionaries in Barbary and in Madagascar: *What have our missionaries in Barbary, and those in Madagascar, not undertaken, executed, carried out and suffered?... In Madagascar the missionaries preach, hear confessions, and teach the catechism continually from four o'clock in the morning until ten, and then from two o'clock in the afternoon until nightfall; they spend the rest of the time in reciting their Office and visiting the sick. There are workers! There are true missionaries! May the divine Goodness be pleased to give us the spirit with which they are animated, a big heart, vast and ample!*<sup>51</sup>

Vincent is convinced that they are *blessed who cooperate in extending the Church elsewhere.*<sup>52</sup> He is also convinced that we have been called *not to go to one parish, or even to one diocese, but throughout the whole world.*<sup>53</sup>

In his arguments he has recourse to the authority of Monsieur Duval who highlights the fact that priests should be tireless ministers, apostolic men: *Monsieur Duval, a great doctor of the Church, used to say that an ecclesiastic should have more work to do*

<sup>50</sup> CCD, III:204-205.

<sup>51</sup> Repetition of Prayer, July 24, 1655.

<sup>52</sup> CCD, III:41.

<sup>53</sup> Conference to the Missionaries, May 30, 1659.

*than he could get through, because as soon as sloth and idleness get a grip on an ecclesiastic, all the other vices pour in from every direction: temptations to impurity and many, many others! Shall I dare to say it?... I must think it over; perhaps another opportunity may arise. O Savior, O my dear Savior, may your divine goodness be pleased to deliver the Congregation of the Mission from the spirit of slothfulness, from the pursuit of comfort, and grant the Company an ardent zeal for your glory which will cause it to embrace all things with you and which will never allow it to let an opportunity go by of serving you.<sup>54</sup>*

### **5. Like Jesus Christ, priests to serve the poor, to assist them in their need... priests, servants of those who are poor**

For Saint Vincent de Paul, the following of Jesus Christ involves service, attending to people who are poor. This dimension of following Jesus Christ can be foreign to the ministry of priests: *If priests devote themselves to the care of the poor, has not that been the office of Our Lord and of many great saints who have not only recommended the poor to others, but have themselves consoled, comforted and healed them? Are not the poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Are they not our brothers? And if priests abandon them, who do you think will help them? So then, if there are any among us who think they are in the Congregation of the Mission to preach the Gospel to the poor but not to comfort them, to supply their spiritual but not their temporal wants, I reply that we ought to assist them and have them assisted in every way, by ourselves and by others.<sup>55</sup>*

In the Church, the Congregation of the Mission, composed of priests and brothers, has as its mission the evangelization of the poor: the poor constitute its own portion, its delight: ... *God and his Church, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, esteem the charity that is shown towards the poor. O my Brothers, how happy are we to find ourselves in a Company which professes to run to the relief of our neighbor. Charity at home, charity abroad, by means of the missions, charity toward the poor! And I can say that, by the grace of God, no opportunity of helping the poor in their necessities has presented itself to the Company that has not been seized.<sup>56</sup>*

Evangelization of the poor does not only involve the proclamation of the great truths of the faith, but as in Jesus' case, implies the fulfillment of the signs announced by the prophets as a way to

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<sup>54</sup> Repetition of Prayer, July 24, 1655.

<sup>55</sup> Conference to the Missionaries, December 6, 1658.

<sup>56</sup> Repetition of Prayer, November 11, 1658.

recognize the Messiah of God: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the poor are evangelized.<sup>57</sup> It may be said that, by coming to evangelize the poor, we do not mean to come merely for their salvation, but also for accomplishing the predictions of the prophets and the figures of the Old Law and for the purpose of giving effect to the gospel.<sup>58</sup>

Saint Vincent de Paul not only discovers that his priestly ministry ought to be a service to those who are poor but also realizes that this same reality was to be applied to all those who joined him in this missionary endeavor. *There is not in the Church of God a single Company which has the poor for its portion, and which gives itself so wholly to the poor as never to preach in large cities. This is what missionaries profess to do; it is their special characteristic to be, like Jesus Christ, devoted to the poor. Our vocation then is a continuation of His, or, at least, it is in harmony with His in its circumstances. Oh! What happiness, my brothers! But what obligations we are under to have an affection for it.*<sup>59</sup>

The perfection of all Christians and the holiness that ought to characterize the life of the priest is found in charity — charity that leads one to follow Jesus Christ and give of oneself in service to people who are poor: *Oh! what a happiness for you to work at doing what He did! He came to bring the good news to the poor, and this is your lot and your occupation, too. If our perfection lies in charity, as is certain, there is none greater than to give oneself to save souls and to sacrifice oneself for them as Jesus Christ did. This is what you are called to do.*<sup>60</sup>

Utilizing once again the word *instrument* to define the life of the priest, Saint Vincent states: *We have been chosen by God as instruments of His boundless and fatherly love which desires to be established in and to replenish souls.*<sup>61</sup>

## 6. Attentive to events, the place of God's revelation

Attention to events, especially events that involved the situation of poor people, was most important to Saint Vincent. Through events he came to an understanding of his own priestly ministry and so we cannot put aside this reality as we attempt to outline the identity of the priest from the perspective of a Vincentian experience.

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<sup>57</sup> These are the signs that distinguish the mission of Jesus. Cf. Luke 4:18 ff.

<sup>58</sup> Conference to the Missionaries, December 6, 1658.

<sup>59</sup> Conference to the Missionaries, December 7, 1658.

<sup>60</sup> CCD, VII:356.

<sup>61</sup> Conference to the Missionaries, May 30, 1659.

Events are the Vincentian place of theology.<sup>62</sup> Through them the Lord has been leading Vincent de Paul to a conversion as a missionary priest dedicated in doing the will of God, dedicated like Jesus Christ, in evangelizing the poor.

Saint Vincent de Paul insists on the importance of attentiveness to events and highlights the verb *to see*. He writes to the Pope about the sufferings caused by the wars: *It is a small thing to hear and read these things; they must be seen and ascertained with one's own eyes.*<sup>63</sup> He also writes to the Brother responsible for distributing the materials that were collected to help these victims: *these poor people should be observed in their own homes so you can see for yourself who are the most needy and who are less so.*<sup>64</sup>

As he became attentive to the events surrounding the life of the poor, Vincent de Paul, the priest, began to understand his ministry and was being formed for ministry.

## 7. The participation of the laity in the ministry of the apostles

The lived experience of Vincent de Paul in Châtillon, as we pointed out above, helped him discover the importance of the laity, and more specifically, the importance of women in the Church.<sup>65</sup> With the establishment of the Confraternities and the collaboration of Louise de Marillac and other women, with the foundation of the Daughters of Charity and the support of the Ladies of Charity, that first experience of lay participation became the ordinary way of understanding and living priestly ministry for Vincent de Paul and his followers.

Vincent de Paul refers to the women who were at Jesus' side and exercised an apostolic ministry: *Among those who were steadfast in following Our Lord, there were women as well as men, who followed Him even to the Cross. These women were not Apostles, but they formed a middle state, in which their duty was to feed the Apostles and contribute to their holy ministry.*<sup>66</sup>

It should be noted that Vincent de Paul, when speaking about the participation of women in the activities of the group that surrounded

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. AA.VV., *La experiencia espiritual del señor Vicente y la nuestra*, cit., 162-163.

<sup>63</sup> CCD, IV:446.

<sup>64</sup> CCD, VI:388.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. A. DODIN, *San Vicente de Paúl y la mujer en la vida de la Iglesia*, in *Lecciones sobre vicencianismo*, Salamanca, Ceme, 1978, 161 ff.

<sup>66</sup> CCD, XIIIb:436.

Jesus, did not hesitate to use words that were traditionally reserved for priestly ministry: *contribute to the ministry of the Apostles.*

In a text, parallel to the one in which he describes the ministry of priests, Vincent de Paul explains the ministry of women: *In visiting those that are poor, you visit God Himself in them; and the service you render them is rendered to God himself.... You cause the goodness of God to be seen and felt through your own goodness to those persons, and have God glorified.... You cooperate with Jesus Christ in the salvation of those poor souls.... You edify the whole Church... and you edify one another.... You wipe out your past sins... and you go on gaining the merit of a good death... and you put yourself in the position of going before God at judgment with your head held high: "Come, blessed of my Father...."*<sup>67</sup>

The ecclesiastic that Vincent de Paul was calls to mind the theology of his time but then enters into a discussion of possible objections with true genius: *You practice what widows of the primitive Church did, namely, to meet the material needs of the poor as they did, and even the spiritual needs of persons of their own sex, as they did. In this you will be released, as it were, from the prohibition placed upon you by Saint Paul in 1 Cor 14, "Women should keep silent in the churches; nor are they permitted to speak." And in 1 Tm 2, "I do not permit a woman to act as a teacher."*<sup>68</sup>

Without the active participation of the laity it is impossible to understand or explain the priestly ministry of Vincent de Paul. The fundamental mission of the missionary priest and servant is the promotion of the laity as protagonists of the Apostolic ministry. The Eucharist, the center of priestly life, is equally the center of the life of the laity: *It is not only the priest who offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass but also those who are present at it.*<sup>69</sup>

#### IV.

#### A PRIEST TODAY, LIKE VINCENT DE PAUL

To formulate a systematic proposal about the meaning of the life and ministry of the priest today, and to do this from the perspective of the experience of Saint Vincent de Paul, is beyond the scope of this work. But it would be opportune to open two paths of reflection for dialogue and study in our houses, particularly, in our seminaries.

<sup>67</sup> CCD, XIIIb:404-405.

<sup>68</sup> CCD, XIIb:380.

<sup>69</sup> CCD, IX:5.

## 1. The new ecclesial understanding of ministerial priesthood

The great shift in perspective in the understanding of priestly ministry has been marked out by the Second Vatican Council and has continued to be reflected in the teachings of the Church in the years following the Council as well as in the theological reflections of our time.<sup>70</sup>

This new understanding has not consisted of simply rereading the affirmations of the Council of Trent and framing them in the tradition of the Church. The Second Vatican Council has opened new perspectives. Priestly ministry is presented in relation to the common priesthood of the faithful<sup>71</sup> and as a service within the Church and a service to the world.<sup>72</sup> *With this concept of ecclesial ministry the Council has taken a decisive step. The priest no longer appears on the first line as the “man of sacraments.” The priests’ multiple ministerial labor is understood from the point of view of one sent by Christ and this reality is the center and origin and fullness of ecclesial ministry. Thus the priest acquires an authentic participation in the realization of the apostolic salvific, pastoral, and charitable work in all its dimensions. Once again priests enter into close contact with the apostolic ministry in order to continue the work of the apostles and acquire a new participation in the government of the Church. Their powers are not simply powers of jurisdiction but are rooted in a deep Christology and bestowed upon them through the reception of the sacrament of Orders.*<sup>73</sup>

One of the fruits of the new understanding of priestly ministry is its ecclesiastical recovery of and a more adequate relationship with the laity and with the world. The ordained priest is a member of the ecclesial community and participates in the mission of the Church in his own proper, but not exclusive, way. *Priests have a positive and helping relationship to the laity. Priests are there to serve the faith, hope and charity of the laity. They recognize and uphold, as brothers and friends, the dignity of the laity as children of God and help them to exercise fully their specific role in the overall context of the Church’s*

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<sup>70</sup> Recent studies such as a complete Bibliography: AA.VV., *Diccionario del Sacerdocio*, Madrid, Editorial Católica, 2005 (prepared by Professors of the Theology Faculty of Burgos for the Library of Christian Authors). Cf. D. COZZENS, *La fe cambiante del sacerdocio*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 2004; J.M. URIARTE, *Seguidores y testigos*, San Sebastián, Idatz, 2003; I.M. URIARTE, *Ministerio presbiterial y espiritualidad*, San Sebastián, Idatz, 1999.

<sup>71</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 10; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 28; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2, 5.

<sup>73</sup> GERMAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, *El ministerio sacerdotal*, cit., 86.

*mission.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, precisely because within the Church's life the priest is a man of communion, in his relations with all people he must be a man of mission and dialogue. Deeply rooted in the truth and charity of Christ, and impelled by the desire and imperative to proclaim Christ's salvation to all, the priest is called to witness in all his relationships to fraternity, service and a common quest for the truth, as well as a concern for the promotion of justice and peace.<sup>75</sup>*

A fruit of this new understanding is the focus on the missionary understanding of priestly ministry. *From the moment that the Church is constituted to provide not just for herself but to seek out, in Christ, all people and to transmit to them God's salvation, the priesthood of the Church is in essence, missionary. What Christ was for people at one time, what he is today and what he will continue to be tomorrow — the priest must be the one sent to the Church and to the whole world in service of the Lord.<sup>76</sup>*

Another fruit of this new understanding is the concretion in his ministerial mission of the call to holiness, a call directed to all the baptized. *Priests will acquire holiness in their own distinctive way by exercising their functions sincerely and tirelessly in the Spirit of Christ.<sup>77</sup>*

## **2. The present challenges to Vincentian ministerial priesthood**

The Second Vatican Council opened new perspectives for understanding ministerial priesthood. As often occurs with the magisterial statements of the Church, diverse theological and pastoral sensitivities take hold of those aspects that support their specific proposals. Is it not possible that a specific way of understanding priestly ministry can be dominant in a specific place or time and thus cloud the rich Vincentian experience of being a priest and living priestly missionary ministry?

Today we live in a time of searching rather than a time of certainty. Are we indifferent to understanding and living priestly ministry from a theological and spiritual perspective that is far removed from Vincentian spirituality?

The pastoral reality of certain geographical areas in which we are present cries out for our involvement in new forms of apostolate. Are we successful at offering our ministry as a missionary ministry?

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<sup>74</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 17.

<sup>75</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 18.

<sup>76</sup> GERMAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, *El ministerio sacerdotal*, cit., 88.

<sup>77</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 13; *Lumen Gentium*, 41.

The participation of the laity and the community understanding of ministry are two aspects that characterized our mission from the time of Saint Vincent de Paul. Are they also distinctive characteristics in our way of understanding and living Vincentian priestly ministry?

Pastoral weariness in light of a lack of answers and “the eclipse of God” in the life of the priest, are they also influencing our Vincentian ministerial priesthood?

Without a doubt the list of challenges could continue endlessly. But these challenges are an invitation to return to the experience of Vincent de Paul and to his discoveries about the essence of and the ways of living priestly ministry.

## **Conclusion**

Saint Vincent de Paul understood that being a priest is living out the following of Jesus Christ and prolonging his mission of service to the poor. I am convinced that the Church and the poor continue to need, today as yesterday, apostolic men.

Translation: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.