

Vincent as Priest

A Personal Reflection

by Patrick J. Griffin, C.M.

Last year (2008-2009), we celebrated the “Year of Paul.” It was a wonderful opportunity for us — and for me — to come to know Paul better by reading his writings and reflecting upon his character and message for our time and place. This year, that same kind of opportunity is given to us with regard to Vincent and Louise, and our Vincentian Heritage. During the summer, I began my “Year of Vincent” and went back to start my reading (and re-reading) of his life and teaching. I have come to love Vincent more deeply already in this year. I am forming some different ideas about his character. I am seeing him in a new light which, admittedly, reveals as much about myself and my emphases as it does about Vincent. My hope is that at the end of this year, I will know him (and other members of the Vincentian family) much deeper, and be better for the journey.

Right now, however, I am privileged to have the opportunity to share some thoughts on Vincent as priest — which coincides nicely with Benedict’s “Year for Priests.” Our Provincial, Mike Carroll, gave me lots of latitude in the organization of this presentation. I have decided to offer a personal reflection on some aspects of Vincent’s priesthood and what it means for me and for us.

Some years ago, Bob Maloney wrote a compelling piece on Vincent’s priesthood for his (Vincent’s) 400th anniversary of ordination entitled: “Vincentian Priesthood as Missionary.” Bob speaks of how Bérulle, Olier, and John Eudes all influenced Vincent and of how they are very conscious of the “exalted” role of the priest. Vincent took a different path. After considering different models of priesthood as proposed by Avery Dulles, Rembert Weakland, Raymond Brown, and Karl Rahner, Bob concludes: “For Vincent, in his mature years, Jesus the priest is most of all *the missionary* of

[This talki was given in Philadelphia on October 8, 2009 at the Superiors’ Meeting of the confreres of the Eastern Province of the USA by Patrick J. Griffin, C.M., a priest of that province.]

the Father, the Evangelizer of the Poor.” And this model of priest as missionary is what characterizes the ministry of Vincent in Bob’s view. It is a reasoned and supported conclusion, and one which should nourish our idea of priesthood as Vincentians. I recommend this article, and I am not going to plow that ground again.

INTRODUCTION: Vincent and Priesthood

Vincent said some very interesting things about priests. On the one hand, he says:

“If there is a masterpiece in this world, it is the formation of good priests; nothing greater, nothing more important can be conceived” (CCD 12, # 181).

And on the other:

“The Church has no worse enemies than priests” (CCD 12, # 195).

He says:

“Oh, Messieurs! What a great thing a good priest is! What is there that a good priest cannot do and what conversions can he not obtain? Just look at that excellent priest M. Bourdoise; what is he not doing and what can he not do! The success of Christianity depends on priests; for, when good parishioners see a good member of the clergy, a charitable Pastor, they honor him, do what he says, and try to imitate him... the priesthood is something so lofty... it is... the most important ministry there is for the salvation of souls and the advancement of Christianity!” (CCD 11, # 4, p. 6).

And yet he says:

“My experience... causes me to advise those who ask my opinion about receiving it [priesthood], not to do so unless they have a genuine call from God and a pure intention of honoring O[ur] L[ord] by the practice of His virtues and the other sure signs that His Divine Goodness is calling them to it. I feel so strongly about this that, if I was not already a priest, I never would become one” (CCD 7, # 2792, pp. 479-480).

[Vincent identifies three elements (as recognized by ROMAN, p. 50) as important for carrying out the ministry of a priest: “A real vocation from God,” “a pure intention of honoring God,” and (Roman adds) an adequate pastoral preparation — something which Vincent placed at the heart of the formation retreats directed by the Congregation.]

People have noted, and I am in firm agreement, that at the center of Vincent's theology, his spirituality, his ministry, and, yes, his priesthood was the incarnation. We can see it in the way in which he describes the call to be a member of the Congregation, "the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me, he has sent me" — God's Spirit is incarnated in the missionary. The selection of the Conversion of St. Paul as the foundation day of the Congregation with the preaching of the first mission also has that incarnational character — being knocked to the ground, blinded, with the accusation of persecuting Jesus in the poor, and then sent on the road to preach the Gospel. Louise felt that same incarnational character in her spirituality, "the Charity of Christ urges us" and her selection for the renewal of vows on March 25 — the Incarnation — which holds the promise of bringing Christ to and finding Christ in the poor for one more year. The immediacy of God's presence in the world and in people and in Divine Providence was foremost in Vincent's thinking and acting — and all this points to the incarnation.

In this presentation, I would like to emphasize four points which characterize the incarnational priestly ministry of Vincent. These are: Penance, Preaching, Prayer, and the Poor. These elements capture something of the priesthood of Vincent as I appreciate it. [Interestingly — and without my intending it so — they also define the character of the Eucharist: Penance and the Penitential Rite; Preaching and the Liturgy of the Word, Prayer and the entering into the presence of God (to whom we are speaking), and the Poor to whom we are missioned.]

1. PENANCE

Let me begin with Penance.

We are all familiar with the story of Folleville in which Vincent hears the confession of a man on the de Gondi estate. This man then proclaims publicly that he would have been damned if he had not confessed his sin, and this causes Madame de Gondi to get worried because of the obligation which she feels toward those who live on her property. We know what happens next:

"In the month of January 1617, on the twenty-fifth, the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, that lady asked me to preach a sermon in the church of Folleville to urge the people to make a general confession, which I did, pointing out to them its importance and usefulness. Then I taught them how to make it properly; and God had such regard for the confidence and good faith of that lady — for the large number and enormity of my sins would have

hindered the success of this act — that he blessed what I said; and those good folk were so moved by God that they all came to make their general confession.... That was the first sermon of the Mission and the success that God gave it on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul” (CCD 11, # 2, pp. 3-4).

Vincent is moved by the enormous response. It is more than he can handle and help must be summoned from far and near to help the people go to confession. And thus begins Vincent’s responsibility to preach missions throughout the de Gondi holdings.

I wonder about the change which comes about in Vincent through this experience. It is not simply the man who confessed who is changed, Vincent is in the same moment. He realizes the responsibility which he has for the salvation of these people because of the call to priesthood, and he recognizes that he must carry out this mission. He discovers himself in the exercise of this ministry. It is no coincidence that this happens on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. Vincent, too, is converted in this moment. From now on, the responsibility of carrying out the priestly ministry of bringing the sacrament of penance to God’s people is high on his mind.

One does not have to look hard at the writings of Vincent to see how often he encourages his priests to give missions and call the people to repentance. The Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity are all encouraged in the midst of their ministrations to prompt people into reflecting upon their need for this sacrament and to help them to prepare for it worthily. Vincent suggests how they can raise the question “subtly.” They can say things like: “*Well, brother, what are your thoughts about making the journey to the other world?*” Then to another, “*Well, my child, you wish to go and see our Lord, do you not?*” (MAYNARD [1961], p. 125).

One question which is raised for us as priests and Vincentians, then, is how we are called to invite people to take advantage of this sacrament. We can say all kinds of things about how no one wants to partake of this sacrament in these days, but that is not the only answer — and one which Vincent would find difficult to accept. How well do we speak about it, how well have we provided it, how well have we celebrated it? All good questions, and worthy of good answers in this year in which we celebrate priests and Vincent.

One could also add here the way in which Vincent is driven early to care for the reform of the clergy. This, too, flows from the experience of Penance. Mme. de Gondi notes that the priest who hears her confession does not know the words of absolution, and Vincent de Paul notices the same. And so begins his resolution to train priests who can better serve the needs of God’s people (CALVET, p. 56).

The other side of this question of Penance, of course, is Vincent's own participation in the sacrament. Reading his writings (or those of St. Louise) for any short period of time will reveal how often they speak about their own sinfulness. Even in the telling of the story of Folleville, notice how he attributes the success of his preaching not to his own eloquence (rather he points to the enormity of his sinfulness) but to the goodness of Mme. de Gondi. I sometimes have to laugh when I read some of Vincent's adventures. He may be offering a correction to a confrere, and immediately says that he has much greater faults; he tells someone what he is doing wrong, and confesses that it must be because of Vincent's own bad example; he wants to admonish the confreres who are leaving some doors open, but immediately admits that he undoubtedly does that more often than anyone else; someone assails him because they think that he is responsible for the high taxes, he falls to his knees and maintains that he has nothing to do with the taxes but he is a great sinner. The one which really amused me, however, was when he was reading the new rules to the Daughters. As he continues, one DC confesses that she has not kept the rule, then another, then another. And Vincent, in the midst of all this falls on his knees and confesses that he has never kept the rules of the Congregation. He cannot stand being out of the confession circle!

Vincent liked to go to confession daily, and when, as apparently was usual, his confessor admitted that he could not find sufficient matter for absolution, Vincent simply told him: *"Ah, sir, if you could see my soul as God makes me know myself, you would judge differently"* (MAYNARD [1961], p. 52).

Vincent had a profound sense of his own sinfulness and thus of his need for the sacrament. Either he is faking all this, or he really had such a sense of the closeness of God and his own unworthiness, that he could see how even his small peccadilloes (though he would not describe them as such) were offenses against God.

All this leads us to two considerations around the sacrament of Penance: first, how we are called to provide and encourage the sacrament for others; and secondly, how much we need to reverence and partake of it ourselves as a result of our awareness of our own sinfulness. In fact, our own experience of the sacrament could and should nourish the way in which we offer it to others.

We need to make this the year in which we promote and partake of the sacrament of penance better. And Vincent leads the way. It is an important part of his priesthood.

2. PREACHING

If the sacrament which gives rise to the foundation of the Congregation is Penance, then the context in which it makes a difference for the priest is preaching. Think of two of the most famous events in the early formation of Vincent. One, we have already considered: Folleville. Vincent preaches the first sermon of the Mission there and it makes a wonderful difference in people's lives.

But the second experience was Chatillon. Again, the story is very familiar to us. Vincent is the local pastor. He is preparing to celebrate mass when he is informed that there is a family in which everyone is sick and no one can care for anyone else. The family is in need of food and care. Vincent mentions this in his sermon, and then after mass — after he has made his thanksgiving and taken care of business — he heads to see the family. On his way there, he meets his parishioners who heard his message and went to serve the other. Again, it is the power of speaking God's word effectively to God's people.

A third familiar focus on preaching in the Congregation flows from the passage from Luke which becomes the motto of the Congregation: "He has sent me to preach the Gospel to the poor." Jesus speaks these words in a preaching context in Nazareth, and the call which he hears is to preach the Gospel to the people of his time. Vincent takes up this passage and this summons and refers back to it many times in his writings and conferences.

He speaks of how Missioners even at the end can celebrate these words: *"How happy will those be who, at the hour of death, can say these beautiful words of our Lord, Evangelizare pauperibus misit me Dominus"* (CCD 11, # 100, p. 122).

Vincent never saw himself (or a missionary) excused from this responsibility. I love the passage where he speaks about this:

"If I could not preach every day, eh bien, I would do it twice a week! If I could not give long sermons, I would try to give short ones; if, again, people did not understand me at those short ones, what would prevent me from speaking plainly and simply to those good people in the way I am speaking to you right now, gathering them around me, as you are?" (CCD 11, # 100, p. 123).

When I was in the Novitiate, I heard the story about Fr. Judge who was convinced to go to a movie theater by some friends; when the film broke, he asked his friends to introduce him and then he went up to the front of the theater and began to preach until the film had been repaired. There is a certain zeal which goes along with preaching. Or is it the weekly drag for us?

Preaching was important for Vincent, and it flowed as the fruit of one's prayer and meditation on the Word of God. Vincent noted: *"Prayer is a great book for a preacher: from it you will draw the divine truths of the Eternal Word, who is their source, and you in turn will pour them forth upon the people"* (CCD 7, # 2591, p. 171).

For Vincent, preaching, as so many other things, depended on simplicity. This was the way in which he knew Jesus to preach:

"Give yourself to God so that you will speak in the humble spirit of Jesus Christ, acknowledging that your doctrine is not your own, nor coming from you but from the Gospel. Imitate especially the simplicity of the words and comparisons Our Lord uses in Holy Scripture when he speaks to the people.... You see how plainly he speaks and how he uses familiar comparisons — a farmer, a wine grower, a field, a vineyard, a mustard seed. That is how you must speak if you want to make yourself understood by the people to whom you will be announcing God's word" (CCD 11, # 153, pp. 313-314).

This style of preaching was characterized by: simplicity of matter (one clear theme), simplicity of form (uncomplicated in presentation), simplicity of tone (no drama) (see COSTE II, p. 215).

Of course, Vincent recommends the "little method" for preaching. We know how this plays out: nature, motive, means — what you are talking about, why it is important, how to do it. And at the heart of this method was simplicity itself. Vincent was not attuned to the verbose style of preaching which characterized his time. He thought that people became too attached to their words and images and lost sight of the Gospel and the most important message for the people, and so Vincent preferred to use the "little method" which, in its simplicity, truly changed people's minds and hearts because people truly understood the point.

I was touched by a story about how when Vincent was sending some of his men on a mission around Paris, they observed that there was a great difference in giving a mission in a city like Paris and in the country — what succeeds with country folk would only excite ridicule and laughter in Paris. Vincent was not amused. He heard this as the "spirit of the world" inspired by human prudence and perhaps self-love. *"You go to combat the spirit of the world, which is a spirit of pride, and you will overcome it only by attacking it in the spirit of Jesus, which is a spirit of simplicity and humility"* (MAYNARD [1877], p. 236). Do you hear the call to preach simply and not as scholars or entertainers?

The responsibility to preach well was at the heart of the missions on which he sent his priests. And this preaching depended on

simplicity and reflection on God's word. Literary allusions and turns of phrase were not favored by Vincent. He simply wanted people to understand the message of the Gospels and be aided in how they might put it into practice. I have been surprised at how reading Vincent's writings now, I find them so peppered with scriptural allusions and illustrations. He knew the Word of God and he thought in Gospel terms. Look at the *Common Rules*. Vincent always begins a section by directing our attention to the life and teaching of Jesus. [I have wondered if his famous directive about "leaving God for God" flows from reflection on the Good Samaritan — but that is another talk.] In decision-making, he sought guidance in the words and example of Jesus, and he offered these to his followers.

And so the question arises as to how we as missionaries prepare ourselves to preach and how our preaching touches the hearts of people and invites them to change and be comforted. We are called to be good preachers. We can make this the year in which we meditate more deeply on the Gospels and allow the message to emerge for us and for others. Vincent did.

3. PRAYER

One of Vincent's most famous lines for us is probably: "*Give me a man of prayer, and he will be able to do anything*" (CCD 11, # 67, p. 76). And our Constitutions develops that theme:

"According to the mind of St. Vincent, prayer is the living source of the spiritual life of a missionary; through it he puts on Christ, becomes steeped in the teachings of the gospel, discerns things and events as before God, and remains always in God's love and mercy. In this way the Spirit of Christ will always make our words and actions effective" (Constitutions 41).

Our Constitutions also reminds us of the importance of liturgical prayer in the Eucharist, the sacrament of penance, the liturgy of the hours, and popular devotions — all in keeping with Vincent's own priorities.

Vincent's confidence in the power of prayer flows into eloquence as he exhorts his followers to be men of prayer. One can feel the energy of his words as he calls us to be pray-ers:

"Let us all of us really devote ourselves to this practice of meditation, since through it all good things come to us. If we persevere in our vocation, it is thanks to meditation; if we succeed in our works, it is thanks to meditation; if we do not fall into sin, it is thanks to meditation; if we remain in charity,

if we are saved, all that is thanks to God and to meditation. Just as God refuses nothing in meditation, so he grants almost nothing without meditation: Rogate Dominum messis; no, nothing; not even the spread of his Gospel and what concerns His glory the most. Rogate Dominum messis.... No matter! Rogate Dominum messis. So then, let us ask God very humbly to help us to adopt this practice” (CCD 11, # 168, p. 361).

It is difficult to imagine him speaking any clearer. Prayer and meditation are the means which we use to stay in touch with the Lord and through which God responds to our needs.

The teaching of Vincent about prayer which stands out most forcefully for me, however, is his insistence on the need to be attentive to the presence of God in one’s prayer and meditation. He teaches:

“So now, this is what we have to do; first of all, place ourselves in the presence of God, considering him either as he is in heaven, seated on the throne of his majesty, from where he looks on us and contemplates all things; or in his immensity, present everywhere, here and elsewhere, in the highest heavens and in the lowest part of the abyss, reading our hearts and penetrating even the most secret folds of our conscience; or in his presence in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar: ‘O Savior, here I am, a weak and miserable sinner, here I am at the foot of the altars on which you repose; O Savior may I do nothing unworthy of this holy presence’; or, lastly, within ourselves, pervading us entirely and dwelling in the depth of our hearts” (CCD 11, # 168, p. 359).

It is that awareness of God’s presence which gives power to my understanding of Vincent’s sense of his own sinfulness, of his surrender to Divine Providence, of his recognition of Christ in the poor, of his incarnational thinking. God is with us — in our prayers and people, in our work and words. And this directly impacts Vincent’s sense of priesthood because a priest is nothing if he is not one who can witness to the presence of God in our world and in each other.

And prayer leads to action:

“The Church is compared to a great harvest that requires workers, but hardworking ones. Nothing is more in conformity with the Gospel than to gather light and strength for our soul in meditation, reading and solitude on the one hand, and then to go out and share this spiritual nourishment with others. This is to do as Our Lord did, and his Apostles after him; it is to unite the office of Martha to that of Mary...” (CCD 11, # 25, p. 33).

Calvet says something interesting about the development of Vincent's spirituality. I am not familiar enough with Vincent's writings to pronounce on the conclusion, but it is something which sounds correct:

"From 1620 until 1640 — these are approximate dates — his spirituality has an active orientation, that is, the principles which he took from spiritual writers are turned in a different direction so that instead of leading to a contemplative life they become the basis of an active apostolate; after 1640, while maintaining increasingly remote contact with the authors who form his sources, his teaching takes on the appearance of a spirituality derived from action; its principles are conclusions, the fruit of his experience" (CALVET, p. 277).

What were in Bérulle premises of speculation and contemplation, in Vincent became the springboard for action. "Bérulle loves God in God, Vincent loves God in man." Vincent's experience among the poor in Clichy and Chatillon moved him away from the lofty theology of Bérulle to that more appropriate for the poor. Vincent's was a spirituality bred for action. "Prayer, then, is the source of love and of action; of action through love" (CALVET, pp. 278 and 283).

Vincent has a lot of things to say about prayer. (1) He promotes the practice of "repetition of prayer" because it reflects his appreciation that we can learn from each other on our spiritual journeys. (2) He would insist that "Making good resolutions is one of the most important parts — even the most important part — of meditation" (CCD 11, # 70, p. 79). Thus, meditation and prayer lead to change/action. (3) Vincent was a believer in common prayer. He loved to gather with the confreres. Even when he was sick or returned from a journey or was up late on the previous night, the stories tell us that he was the first one at common prayer in the morning. There is a lesson there.

And so, what can we say of what Vincent teaches us about prayer? Can we make this year one in which we are faithful to the opportunities of common prayer? One in which we take the presence of God seriously in our prayer and celebration? One in which we allow our actions to be informed by our prayer, and our prayer directed by our actions?

4. POOR

And now we come to that towards which all the above tends: the poor. The sacrament of penance, the preaching, the prayer, all of these drive us as Vincentians to the poor who are served by our ministry and to whom we are inextricably bound.

“Two men looked out through prison bars; one saw mud, and one saw stars.” Ordinarily when we hear this saying, it intends to make us think about a person’s point of view: how two people can be looking at the same scene, and one sees only the negative (the mud) while the other sees the positive (the stars). I have thought that a Vincentian might hear it in a different way. One person can look out and be taken up with the transcendent and “spiritual” side of things, and thus exalted, look up and see only the stars. Another can look down and see the reality of the human condition and be attentive to that which is made in the image and likeness of God from the mud of the earth. Vincent looked out and saw the mud and how God chose to come and play with us in the mud. He invites us to that same incarnational perspective.

When I was at Mary Immaculate Seminary before ordination, one of my teachers said something in class which touched me deeply. He said that to be a good priest, one must love the people whom one serves. In one way it sounds like the simplest and most mundane of statements, but it resonated with me on that day and has made me thoughtful on occasion when I consider my own ministry in light of that of Vincent. Vincentians must think of those we serve with respect and with a willingness to overlook faults. [One of the clear stories of the SS portrays the attitude of the Pharisees and Sadducees as disregarding their people — people who know nothing and are damned anyway.] I have found that Vincent taught this attitude of love for those served:

“Our Lord had to predispose with His love those whom He wished to have believe in Him. Do what we will, people will never believe in us if we do not show love and compassion to those whom we wish to believe in us” (CCD 1, # 197, pp. 276-277).

In the last line of the movie “Monsieur Vincent,” our Founder is portrayed as saying something similar to capture the attitude which should influence the service of others: “It is only with your love that the poor will forgive you for giving them bread.” Service should always be carried out with the dignity of others in mind. Again, Vincent is famous for saying “*Let us love God, brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow*” (CCD 1, # 25, p. 32).

Vincent believed deeply that:

“God loves the poor, consequently, he loves those who love the poor; for when we truly love someone, we have an affection for his friends and for his servants. Now, the Little Company of the Mission strives to devote itself ardently to serve persons who are poor, the well-beloved of God; in this way, we have good reason to hope that, for love of them, God will love us. Come then, my dear confreres, let us devote ourselves with renewed love to serve persons who are poor, and even to seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned; let us acknowledge before God that they are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy of rendering them our little services” (CCD 11, # 164, p. 349).

Really, what does it mean to call the poor “our lords and masters”? Does it mean that they exercise jurisdiction over our time and efforts? That they control the way in which they are treated? That they need not be grateful for any care provided to them since we are only their servants? Does it mean that we depend upon them for our well-being? Does it mean that our salvation is intertwined with theirs — like the rich man’s was to Lazarus, or the one who fed (or did not feed others) was bound to the hungry, or the one who did not forgive the debt was bound to that of the debtor? If the poor are indeed our “lords and masters”, then our treatment of them as priests and Vincentians has eternal consequences for us.

Is there any topic about which Vincent speaks more frequently or stirringly or from more different angles than the poor?

“We live on the patrimony of Jesus Christ, on the sweat of poor people. When we go to the refectory, we must always think, ‘Have I earned the food that I am about to eat?’ I have often had this thought which puts me to shame: ‘Wretched man, have you earned the bread you are about to eat, that bread that comes to you from the labor of the poor?’ If we do not earn it like them, at least let us pray for their needs” (CCD 11, # 125, pp. 190-191).

Did anyone speak more honestly or frankly or pointedly about the poor:

“I must not judge a poor peasant man or woman by their appearance or their apparent intelligence, especially since very often they scarcely have the expression or the mind of rational persons, so crude and vulgar they are. But turn the medal, and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is represented to us by these poor people.... He describes himself as the Evangelizer of the poor: Evangelizare pauperibus misit me” (CCD 11, # 19, p. 26).

And the experience of poverty was not just something for the other in Vincent's mind. It is good for us also and we are called to embrace it. Vincent writes:

"That is what poverty does; it makes us think of God and to raise our hearts to him, whereas, if we were comfortable, maybe we would forget God. That is why I am overjoyed that voluntary, real poverty is practiced in all our houses" (CCD 11, # 64a, p. 72).

Note how Vincent connects the presence of God with the experience of poverty.

At various times, I have been asked to justify the position of the "preferential option for the poor" as both a teaching of Vincent and a cornerstone of the social teaching of the Church. It seems unfair. Have you thought about why there is a preferential option for the poor? Yes, it is because it was there that Jesus said that he would be found. But why there? What is so bad about finding Jesus among the wealthy or the middle class? It seems to me that the answer is not that Jesus is not found in those places, but rather that among the poor we can find the meeting place of need and service, of receiving and giving, of obedience and purpose. Among the poor is where virtue can find expression. There is a line attributed to Willie Sutton, the famous bank robber. When asked: "Why do you rob banks?" his reply was the evident "because that is where the money is." If we were asked "why do you serve the poor?" our answer might well be "because that is where the need is." Without the poor, there would be no venue for virtue. We should be grateful for the poor and the needy and the helpless, because they put us in touch with that which is greatest and deepest within ourselves. And the fact that they do not always make it easy should add to the gratitude because if service and generosity were great pleasures, everyone would be doing it for their own enjoyment, and thus it would be self-serving.

Reflecting upon our Vincentian call as priests and brothers to serve the poor brings us back to the reflection on the incarnation. It is Christ present among the poor whom we seek and serve, and all our ministries need to have this as a focus. We are called not only to love the poor, but to be grateful to them for providing us with the opportunity to serve God in them. And we identify with them symbolically through our practice of poverty. It is the Vincentian way.

CONCLUSION

How else might we speak of Vincent as priest: as planner — community organizer — and pastor and partner, as one who dealt with people and situations in practical and personal terms, as one who relied upon divine Providence and valued perseverance (stability). We can speak of Vincent as priest in these and lots of other ways.

Clearly, Vincent grew into his priesthood. He had the possibility of being an ordinary priest who simply did what he needed to do to live a comfortable and reasonably faithful life. But he did not. He responded to the grace of God in an extraordinary way and was converted. It was not so much the grace which was extraordinary but his response. The spectacular character of the conversion of St. Paul and the way in which it led to his ministry offers a nice contrast to the conversion of St. Vincent de Paul which happens more gradually, but no less deeply.

In this year when we can celebrate Vincent as priest, we have the opportunity to be changed, to rediscover how we can live faithfully as priests and brothers in following Christ evangelizing the poor. Let us take advantage of it.