

Bertrand Ducournau

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with Justin Blanc and Rubén Villareal

Who knew Vincent de Paul best of all? Most, I suspect, would name Louise de Marillac, the co-founder of the Daughters of Charity, with whom Vincent collaborated so closely for 30 years and exchanged hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of notes and letters. Others might propose Antoine Portail, since he was one of the original members of the Congregation of the Mission, was often second in command, served frequently as Vincent's emissary to the Daughters of Charity, and remained at the founder's side until 1660, when he died shortly before Vincent.

Let me suggest, however, that the person who knew him best was Brother Bertrand Ducournau. He and Brother Louis Robineau served as Vincent's secretaries from 1645 and 1647, respectively, until his death. We owe to these two brothers a large part of the oral and written tradition that we possess about St. Vincent. They prepared the materials which Abelly, St. Vincent's first biographer, used in writing his work. Since Abelly knew St. Vincent less intimately than did the two brothers and surely lacked their familiarity with his letters and discourses, it seems clear that the bulk of the biography emanated from them.

Vincent often asked Ducournau and Robineau for information and counsel. Brother Ducournau accompanied St. Vincent on trips, most notably on a six-month tour of western France in 1649. Ducournau's own biographer stated that "M. Vincent loved, cherished and esteemed him."² Vincent, in fact, laments Ducournau's absence

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² *Notices sur le prêtres, clercs et frères défunts de la Congrégation de la Mission*, 1^{ère} Série, Compagnons de Saint Vincent, Tome I^{er}, Paris, Pillet et

whenever the latter was sick³ and, in his letters, urges others to pray for Ducournau on those occasions. Since there was no “separation” of priests and brothers in those days, Brother Robineau lived right next door to St. Vincent and Ducournau was nearby. Being strategically located and having daily contact with Vincent, they jotted down many of the things that they saw and heard. Fr. Alméras, Vincent’s successor, asked that these recollections be gathered in a manuscript entitled *Remarques*, which was finally published in 1991 by André Dodin.⁴ Interestingly, in the process for St. Vincent’s canonization, the best of the documents submitted to the Holy See was written by another of Ducournau’s close collaborators in the secretariat, Brother Pierre Chollier, who succeeded Ducournau as secretary to later Superiors General and was the author of the biographical notice published upon Bertrand’s death.

Since Brothers Ducournau and Robineau were St. Vincent’s frequent companions and his secretaries for the last decade and a half of his life, we might ask: how did they function in their role as secretaries? The response to that question is complex. At times, undoubtedly, they merely wrote down what St. Vincent dictated. But, pursuing the question, we may further ask: on other occasions, did Vincent simply say to them, “Brother, would you please write a letter to Fr. Blatiron saying ‘Yes.’ Thank him for all the news he sent and give him a little information about what has been happening around here over the past few days?” In some letters, that is almost certainly the case. In Vincent’s later years, did they read the mail as it came in? It seems clear that they did. Did they then draft responses and bring them to him to be signed? In other words, were they so in tune with his thinking that they wrote a number of letters, to which he then merely affixed his signature? That seems to be the case. In fact, occasionally Ducournau himself wrote to Louise de Marillac⁵ and others,⁶ forwarding messages and information from Vincent.

Dumoulin, 1881, p. 433. This long biography was written by Brother Pierre Chollier.

³ Cf. SV V, 177, 181, 183, 206, 219; VIII, 185.

⁴ ANDRÉ DODIN, *Monsieur Vincent, Raconté par son secrétaire: Remarques sur les actes et paroles de feu Monsieur Vincent de Paul, notre Très Honoré Père Fondateur* (Paris: O.E.I.L., 1991). In his introduction, Dodin gives some brief bibliographical data about Ducournau and Robineau. He points out that much of the material in the book was gathered by Robineau.

⁵ Cf. SV V, 645, “Appendices,” letter of November 29, 1655; cf. also, SV VI, 641; VII, 628, 629.

⁶ Cf. SV VIII, 513.

Given Ducournau's important role, in this article I wish to offer a brief description of the life, contribution and character of this remarkable brother, who was the founder's closest collaborator in his later years.⁷

His Background

Bertrand Ducournau spoke with the same accent as Vincent de Paul. A Gascon like Vincent, he came from Amou, not far from the founder's birthplace, where he was born in 1614. The youngest child of a poor family and the son of illiterate parents, he learned to read and write at age six, when his father sent him to study under a teacher from Paris who had recently moved to the region to found a school. This early opportunity to become literate would prove a providential step for the young Gascon. On his own initiative, Bertrand also began to learn math and quickly proved a capable, versatile pupil. While his father's original intention was for the boy to be educated in order to assist in family business affairs, word of Bertrand's intelligence and graceful handwriting soon spread throughout the region so that, by the age of 10 or 11, he was carrying out important secretarial tasks for his teacher and others in the region.

After the death of his father, the 15-year-old Bertrand was left with only a meager inheritance; soon, however, he attracted the attention of a notary and began to earn a good living, moving up quickly. After only three months, his employer realized that he did not have enough work to keep the young man busy. The notary introduced Bertrand to a friend in Bayonne, and soon thereafter he accepted a job as secretary to one of the most important families in the city. If the previous position failed to provide enough work to keep Bertrand busy, his new employer proved demanding and difficult to please. Nevertheless, Bertrand served him well for three years, functioning practically as master of the house. When his

⁷ There is considerable biographical information about Bertrand Ducournau. Perhaps most important is the lengthy account of his life and death, written by Brother Pierre Chollier and later published in *Notices sur le prêtres, clercs et frères défunts de la Congrégation de la Mission*, 1^{ère} Série, Compagnons de Saint Vincent, Tome I^{er}, Paris, Pillet et Dumoulin, 1881, pp. 377-451. One can also find abundant information in PIERRE COSTE, *La Congrégation de la Mission* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1927), chapter V on "Les Frères Coadjuteurs," 115 ff., and in STAFFORD POOLE, "Brother Bertrand Ducournau," *Vincentian Heritage* VI (#2, 1985), 247-256, which offers a clear, brief presentation of Ducournau's life which was very helpful in the preparation of this article.

employer died, Ducournau was courted by numerous other families of Bayonne. Despite these offers, however, he remained with the family of his former employee and continued to work for them for another six years.

Then the Bishop of Bayonne, François Fouquet, upon seeing Bertrand's gifts as a writer, hired him and brought him to the episcopal palace, but Doucournau quickly became disillusioned there because he found himself a "hotel manager." He left the job after only a year, but his time in the service of the Bishop had brought him some useful contacts. It was through Fouquet that Ducournau first met a number of priests who were members of Vincent de Paul's Tuesday Conferences, including Louis Abelly, with whom he was later to collaborate in writing the first biography of St. Vincent.

The following six years were a turbulent time in his life. He was thinking about marriage and eventually signed a formal proposal to wed a young woman, but, despite the pressures of the girl's mother, he kept putting the marriage off. Receiving a convenient job offer in Paris, he accepted it and escaped there. While in the city, he came to know Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, the famous "Abbé de Saint Cyran," a friend of Vincent's and soon the center of controversy for his Jansenist tendencies. The Abbé liked Bertrand and helped him get a job as secretary to Urbain de Maillé, Marshall de Brezé, who had just been assigned to represent the king of France in Catalonia, which at that time had come under French control. Ducournau accompanied him there. Upon their arrival in Catalonia political conditions changed unexpectedly, so they returned to Montpellier.

While traveling with his employer in Languedoc, he went to confession one day to a Recollect Father, who told him that he should change his life completely and dedicate himself to God's service through a religious vocation. He was stunned. He raised the question of his promise to marry, but the priest simply replied: "That was then. What God wants of you now is to give him your life." Ducournau began to pray about the matter and decided to seek the counsel of Saint Cyran. Returning to Paris, however, he learned of the death of Saint Cyran, the timing of which he later considered providential, as Saint Cyran would likely have directed him away from the Congregation of the Mission. Ducournau consulted a theologian, who supported what the Recollect Father had said and told him not to let his signed marriage proposal deter him. He encouraged him to join a new community that had not yet lost its first fervor. Not convinced, Ducournau consulted another theologian, who reaffirmed what the others had said.

A young friend suggested that he make a retreat at St. Lazare and offered to accompany him. On the day they were to go, the friend

failed to show up, so Ducournau went alone. During the retreat, he asked the priest who was directing him if the Congregation of the Mission accepted laymen who wanted to leave the world and serve God. The priest said that the Congregation did receive such people, but only if the superiors judged them fit. He promised to talk with the founder, Vincent de Paul. Vincent met with Ducournau and agreed to receive him into the community. Bertrand was a tiny, bright man of 30 years of age when he met the founder, who was then 63.

When he returned to his job, he told his employer the whole story. The employer encouraged him, but asked him to stay on for a while, so that he could complete various business affairs. Ducournau went back to Vincent and asked him what he thought. Vincent, who was on retreat at the time, gave him this evangelical response through Monsieur Alméras: "Let the dead bury their dead" (Mt 8:22; Lk 9:59). Ducournau went home, packed his bags, came back and entered the Congregation on July 28, 1644.

For the first three weeks, he worked in the kitchen, but it was soon apparent to his superiors that his skills were more secretarial than culinary. They proposed that he be Vincent's secretary. This seemed all the more urgent because it was evident that, with his entrance onto the Council of Conscience in mid-1643, Vincent was becoming over-burdened. Vincent's next circular letter to the superiors of the Congregation of the Mission is written in Ducournau's handwriting. The first of St. Vincent's letters to a confrere that shows Ducournau's hand was addressed to Jacques Chiroye on May 3, 1645.

As mentioned above, from January 14 to June 7, 1649, he accompanied Vincent on a trip to western France. It included an audience with the queen, a tense conversation with Cardinal Mazarin, and visits to the houses of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. Vincent got sick a couple of times during that journey. It was toward the end of the trip, when once again Vincent visited the court, that the Duchesse of Aiguillon sent Vincent a carriage to use, which he called his "ignominy."

Basically, Ducournau was Vincent's right-hand man from there on. He received the mail, wrote letters for Vincent to sign, and sent them out. Vincent also entrusted money to him and asked him to investigate delicate matters. He was often the intermediary between Vincent and Louise de Marillac, carrying messages back and forth. When, in 1660, it became evident that Vincent was approaching death, confreres and others began to write directly to his secretary. Ducournau was there at his side, as he had been for years, when Vincent died.

Ducournau then served until the end of his life as secretary to Vincent's successors, Fr. Alméras and Jolly, and as archivist for the Congregation.

His Interventions to Preserve Vincent's Conferences and Letters

As time went on, Ducournau grew in his conviction of the importance of Vincent's role in the Church, his position as founder, and his holiness. Sensing that he was serving at the side of a saint, Ducournau felt a responsibility to preserve Vincent's words for posterity. In fact, Pierre Coste states that no one understood Vincent's holiness and genius better than Ducournau.⁸ This is illustrated by a memo which he wrote, dated August 15, 1657,⁹ encouraging the preservation of Vincent's addresses to the priests and brothers of the Mission. As one might expect from someone who was an extraordinary secretary, the memo presents a well-organized case for documenting Vincent's discourses. He states that "the best legacy of fathers is the good instruction they leave to their children." He argues that, since Vincent is the common father of the priests and brothers of the Mission, it would be an act of injustice if his words were not passed on and shared among his children. Furthermore, Ducournau adds, Vincent's works seem to be from God, and, as such, his teachings ought to be gathered up like manna from heaven and preserved "for our absent and future confreres, who will someday have an ardent desire for this food of the soul."

Replying to the objection that Vincent usually said only ordinary things, Ducournau points out that there are many who need guidance in commonplace matters and that even ordinary things, when spoken by Vincent, took on extraordinary force. His teachings need not be novel in order to be of importance, for "the best food for babies is their own mother's milk, and the loving instruction of their father makes a greater impression on their mind than their teachers do."

The members of the Congregation of the Mission knew that Vincent rarely put his own teaching into writing and that he also discouraged his Missioners from publishing books, lest they be distracted from their work, so Ducournau realized that Vincent would not agree to have his words written down. Consequently, he recognized that they had to proceed discreetly with the project. He suggested that two or more priests be assigned to remembering the content of Vincent's conferences. These men would meet later

⁸ COSTE, *op. cit.*, 118.

⁹ SV XII, 445.

and compose a document based on what was said, or, ideally, one person with a quick mind and hand would write down Vincent's words verbatim as he spoke them. Despite his already busy schedule as Vincent's secretary, Ducournau himself ended up being commissioned to undertake the task he had suggested and, offering his free time to this project, compiled three large volumes of material from Vincent's talks.¹⁰

Ducournau intervened again in 1658, when he helped to preserve copies of the two letters, dated 1607 and 1608, in which Vincent describes his captivity in Tunisia. An old friend of Vincent, the Canon de Saint-Martin, rediscovered the letters and sent copies along to Vincent, thinking that he would enjoy having them. Vincent destroyed the copies immediately and would have done the same with the originals had not Ducournau secretly sent a warning to Saint-Martin that he should preserve these extraordinary accounts. In a letter to Saint-Martin, Ducournau marvels that Vincent had never spoken of his adventures in Barbary or told the Congregation of his success in converting his captors and ministering to oppressed Christians. Comparing Vincent's work in Tunisia and Algiers to alchemy, Ducournau says that Vincent was more successful than those who undertake to change the nature of metals, for he turned evil into good, the sinner into the just, slavery and hell into freedom and paradise. Continuing the analogy he writes, "[Vincent] found the philosopher's stone. His charity, inflamed with a divine fire, converted all into pure gold."¹¹

His Character

Clearly, Ducournau deeply admired Vincent. His peers tell of his removing his hat out of respect at the mention of the founder's name. While his literary talent sometimes lent itself to poetic presentations of Vincent's character, he had a sober understanding of Vincent's holiness. He defended Vincent's humble, practical virtues against those whose idea of holiness demanded miraculous events. He insisted that, while Vincent may not have announced new truths, his faith and works were deeply rooted in the Gospel, and his love for God and neighbor had borne abundant fruit. Ducournau responded firmly in writing to what he saw as the libels of Jansenists who attacked Vincent publicly.

¹⁰ The Daughters of Charity had been quicker to find a way to preserve Vincent's talks. They took some initial steps toward jotting down his conferences in 1634 and did so continuously from 1640 on.

¹¹ SV VIII, 514.

Accounts of Ducournau's life and work reveal a deep love for his vocation as a brother. He united zeal for his secretarial duties with an interior love of God. He spoke of the grace attached to the office of brother, which he described as a life of humility and service of Christ. In fact, he felt that the brothers of the Mission were in a preferential position to be united to the life of the Lord. He encouraged brothers in their vocation, stating that their state of life, which was often considered "the least of all," was like a sacrament, in which abundant grace is disguised as something lowly. He spoke of a brother's vows as a treasure, saying that each renewal of a brother's vows is as valuable as the first time he made them, just as a sin is a sin as many times as it is repeated.

Ducournau's desire to embrace a life of service and imitate Vincent's virtues was recognized by his peers. They saw him as a man conformed to the will of God. Like the founder, he was convinced of the importance of mortification of body and mind. In addition to fasting and uniting his suffering to the Cross, he strove to eliminate in his life whatever would be a distraction to his memory, intellect, and will. But despite his rigor toward himself, he was affable among his brothers. He valued gentleness, believing that it flowed from the warmth of God's love.

He had great devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and longed for the happiness of the early centuries of the Church, when the faithful received communion every day. Without frequent communion, which was not a common practice in 17th century France, he considered his soul a dry land without water. Being filled with the Lord's love in the Eucharist, he said, produces peace.

His biographer, Brother Chollier, states that Ducournau understood his radical dependence on God. He once shared with a colleague his satisfaction in knowing that "God is everything and everything outside of God is nothing."¹² He went on to exclaim, "Ah! It is good to be lost in God!" He added, "My plan is to put all my obedience, my humility, my patience, my resignation and virtue, and all my hope in God." He expressed his fear of displeasing God and used this fear as a stimulus to love.

In addition to gentleness, other qualities flowed from Ducournau's love of God. Among the traits noted by his peers was a love of silence. This complemented his natural eloquence, since he understood the value of language and was able to express his faith clearly. In addition to helping him listen for the voice of God, his love

¹² *Notices sur le prêtres*, cit., 388.

of silence aided him as a secretary, since he could be trusted with private affairs.

Ducournau was also an avid reader of spiritual texts. In order to benefit from spiritual reading, he would reread a book until he felt he had absorbed its contents. Once he consoled a colleague who complained that his spiritual reading went in one ear and out the other. He told him that the Spirit acts in the memory even if one does not seem to be retaining much, and assured his brother that lifting up one's mind and heart to God in spiritual reading provides food for the soul even when we seem distracted.

Prominent in his spiritual reading were books on the lives of the saints. He would celebrate their feast days and meditate on the saints' teachings, striving to imitate them as masters of the art of living and dying. He took notes on their lives and kept a list of their virtues on his desk in order to incorporate them into his own life.

First in his devotion to the saints was his relationship with Mary. While vocal prayer did not especially appeal to him, he had learned by heart a number of prayers in honor of the Blessed Mother, whose picture he kept pasted on his desk. He attributed his advancement in virtue, especially humility and chastity, to his imitation of Mary, and he spoke joyfully and enthusiastically in her praise.

Chollier reports that, as his death approached, Ducournau was free of anxiety and resigned to the will of God. He died on January 3, 1677, at sixty-three years of age. The reaction to the news is telling. He was mourned by his brothers in the Congregation and also by the Daughters of Charity, many of whom wept when they heard of his death. The day after Ducournau's burial, Fr. Jolly, the Superior General, wrote of the community's loss. He described Ducournau as a man of prayer who was filled with the spirit of God. He listed Bertrand's virtues, especially humility and obedience. Ducournau's death, Jolly said, was like his life, "having endured his sickness in constant union with God and our Lord crucified." Indeed, he added, the motherhouse was "still perfumed with the fragrance of his virtues, especially his great kindness and charity to everyone."¹³

In his vocation as a brother and as secretary to Vincent de Paul, Ducournau did not merely live in the shadow of the saint, but actively acquired many of his virtues. A government worker who had collaborated with Ducournau described him as "a ray of the great man" whom Bertrand admired so dearly and served so faithfully.¹⁴

¹³ *Notices sur le prêtres*, cit., 448.

¹⁴ *Notices sur le prêtres*, cit., 438.