

# Father Antoine Portail, C.M.

by José Vega Herrera, C.M.

Anthropologists and psychologists maintain that the human person develops especially through relations and encounters with other persons. The web of vital relationships forms and sustains the human personality.

Antoine Portail met Vincent de Paul when he was pastor at Clichy and they walked together and supported one another for forty-five years. The personal relationship between Vincent and Portail did not stop there: the both of them lived an intense relationship with God who took the initiative in their lives and led them along unexpected paths. Portail cannot be understood without Vincent. So also Vincent cannot be understood with his collaborators and Portail is the first among those collaborators. Very quickly he became Vincent's confidant and Portail placed all his trust in Vincent. Many years later he expressed the motive of his admiration and support: he says that *Saint Vincent was one of the most perfect images of Jesus Christ that he had ever known on earth.*<sup>1</sup>

Interiorly Saint Vincent is in the midst of a decisive process of conversion that radically changes the course of his life. This process divides his life in a "before" and an "after" and results in seeing Christ and the poor and himself in a new way. He would always maintain that it was God who through the events of his life led him to develop his charism and moved him toward the poor.

Portail unites himself to Vincent in this on-going adventure. The two begin to discover in these events the ways in which God is united with the poor. Clichy, Chatillón, Folleville... these events impel them to the encounter with God-in-the-poor and with the poor-in-God,

Antoine Portail was born in Beaucaire, in the Diocese of Arles, on November 22, 1590. He studied at the Sorbonne until 1612 and entered a group of aspirants to the priesthood that was led by Vincent who at that time was in Clichy. Their two lives would develop along parallel lines and only death would separate them.

The parish in Clichy could be considered as a rehearsal for the rest of Vincent's life. In Clichy the embryo of all future Vincentian

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<sup>1</sup> ABELLY, *Vida del venerable siervo de Dios, Vicente de Paúl*, CEME, p. 608.

undertakings was developed. The year 1617 is key for the whole Vincentian movement. Vincent was totally dedicated to the missions but on January 25<sup>th</sup> he feels himself transformed because of the experience of Folleville: he would say that it was the birth of the Congregation of the Mission. In May he was pastor in Chatillón and discovers the potential of organized charity. At the end of the year he returns to the de Gondi family and makes a commitment to give missions on their lands.

Vincent begins to involve Portail, even before his ordination to the priesthood, in his own apostolic activities. When Vincent returns from Chatillón, Portail becomes his assistant in educating the de Gondi children. Portail lives in the area called Saint Honoré, in a house that was rehabilitated as a hostel and a prison for the galley slaves. Thus the beginning of his apostolate is undertaken with these rude men who were condemned to the galleys. Alongside Vincent he alleviates and evangelizes these men. In 1622, Vincent goes to Marseilles as the royal chaplain of the galley slaves and leaves Portail in Paris as his representative. Portail is ordained a priest in 1622 and continues his ministry with the galley slaves until he is transferred to the Bons-Enfants in 1624.

### **We went, gladly and in a simple way, to evangelize the poor like Our Lord**

Saint Vincent and Portail are the roots of the Vincentian Family tree. The two, with a diocesan priest, form the first triad of the missions. Something new is being born in the Church and they are absolutely convinced that this something is from God. Later, with a certain nostalgia, Vincent will remember this: *Sent by the bishops, we went, gladly and in a simple way, to evangelize the poor like Our Lord. This is what we did and God did what he had foreseen from the beginning of time. He blessed our works. On seeing this some other good ecclesiastics joined us and asked us to receive them.... Oh Savior! Who would have thought that things would develop in this way? If someone would have told me this I would have thought they were mocking me. Nevertheless this is how God wanted to begin the Company. Can we call a work that no one thought of... can we call this a human work? Neither I nor poor Father Portail had thought of it... we were far from thinking about such a thing!*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Notices sur les pretres, clercs et freres defunts de la Congrégation de la Mission, I Les premiers compagnons de S. Vincent: Antonio Portail, p. 5* (hereafter cited as: *Notices I: p. xx*).

Portail was in charge of catechesis during the missions: he was a shy man. In 1630, during the mission at Croissy, he preached for the first time: he was forty years old and had been at Vincent's side for eighteen years. Vincent congratulates him: (even though *you have begun late*) and asks the Lord to bless all his preaching and thus enable him to fulfill the desire that Portail revealed to him, namely, that of being an example to the Company.<sup>3</sup>

We are able to follow Portail's journey through his correspondence with Saint Vincent. For example we find him on the mission as a companion to and perhaps a counter-balance to Father Antoine Lucas, young and impetuous to the extreme of prudence. Portail also has his own temperament and Saint Vincent writes him: *I am hoping for much fruit from on high through the goodness of Our Lord, if union, cordiality, and support exist between you two.... Because you are the older, the second in the Company, and the Superior, bear with everything, I say, everything, on the part of good M. Lucas. I repeat, everything, so that, laying aside your superiority, you may adapt yourself to him in charity. That is the way Our Lord won over and directed the Apostles, and that is how you shall succeed with M. Lucas.*<sup>4</sup>

Later in 1635 Vincent's confidence in Portail and the intemperance of Antoine Lucas gives rise perhaps to one of Vincent's most beautiful letters. It is addressed to Portail and Lucas is reprimanded: *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 in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ.*<sup>5</sup> From a life in Christ he points out the personal attitudes that the missionaries must clothe themselves with in order to be credible and in order for the missions to produce fruit (and thus not be mere noise and fanfare).

At this time Portail is strongly committed to giving missions in different places and maintains frequent correspondence with Vincent. Portail writes him about the fruits of the missions and Vincent gives him instructions about his own actions telling him *to take care of directing the group.*<sup>6</sup> In the same way Portail is informed about the events at Saint-Lazare and other news about the Company.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> CCD I: 82-83.

<sup>4</sup> CCD I: 110.

<sup>5</sup> CCD I: 276.

<sup>6</sup> CCD I: 178.

<sup>7</sup> CCD I: 331-332; II: 217.

In 1631 preparation of the ordinands began in Saint-Lazare and the following year the doors were opened to priests and lay persons who desired to make a retreat. Vincent finds in Portail a teacher: in him shine forth solid and pious teaching and the example of priestly virtue. Portail translates the meditations of Bosée into French and uses these meditations in his ministry with the ordinands. He enhances this work with the addition of new themes and adds notes for retreatants and directors. His *Introduction* is a masterful work.<sup>8</sup>

Collet says that Portail was a good student at the Sorbonne and that he wrote very well but was outstanding in the practice of humility.<sup>9</sup> In 1643, Saint Vincent gave a conference to the students at the time of the beginning of their courses. The author of the “Notices” about Portail believes that without mentioning him, all those listening recognized *the characteristics of the humble and wise missionary, Portail.*<sup>10</sup> *Although all priests are obliged to be knowledgeable, yet we are especially obliged to be so because of the ministries and exercises to which the Providence of God has called us, such as our work with the ordinands, the direction of ecclesiastical seminaries and missions... those who were both learned and humble were the treasure of the Company, just as good, devout theologians were the treasure of the Church.*<sup>11</sup> For Saint Vincent, Portail is one of those treasures, his right arm in all the important works that he undertakes.

## **I do not know how all of this came about**

*Had we ever imagined the ministries the Company now has, with the ordinands, for example, who are the richest and most precious deposit the Church could entrust to us? That had never entered our minds. Did we ever think of the Confraternity of Charity? How did we happen to undertake the rescue of poor foundlings? I do not know how all this came about; for my part, I could not tell you. M. Portail over there can attest that nothing was further from our thought than all that.*<sup>12</sup>

On April 17, 1625 the Congregation of the Mission is officially born under the shadow and protection of the de Gondi family:

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<sup>8</sup> *Notices* I: pp. 10, 13-15.

<sup>9</sup> *Notices* I: pp. 10, 13-15.

<sup>10</sup> *Notices* I: p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> CCD XI: 115.

<sup>12</sup> CCD XII: 8.

the Congregation is composed of two people who sign the act of foundation, Vincent de Paul and Antoine Portail. Very soon two others join them and their missionary activity becomes more intensive and extensive. The mission is sustained by preaching and the confraternities of charity are established as a permanent fruit of these same missions. Then will come the work with the ordinands, retreats, the Tuesday conferences, the great gestures of charity in the regions devastated by war....

Very soon Vincent proposes assuring the stability of the Congregation and is confronted with three great challenges: approval of the Congregation, approval of the vows, and approval of the Rules and Constitutions. Three long distance obstacle races that are entwined, upsetting and yet complimentary. The Vincentian concept of community and the vows breaks with traditional schemas and brings about opposition, small advances, and some rejections. But Vincent is firmly convinced that his intuition comes from God: very important because he is going to need much strength to confront the internal and external difficulties that he will encounter during the next thirty years. It is incredible to see the unwavering position of Vincent and his followers while they await pontifical approval. During this time the Company is modeling its internal, spiritual and juridical structure and is also beginning to expand.

In harmony with Saint Vincent, Portail is found on the front lines in these three questions. The biographers of Saint Vincent point out that Portail *had been Vincent's right arm from the time of Clichy and would continue in this role until his death in 1660. This was especially true in those matters concerning the Company and the Daughters of Charity* (Corera). Portail *was the first to join Vincent on the missions, the first priest of his Congregation; he was secretary and first Assistant' he was the one who was most helpful in governing the Congregation and the one whom Vincent most trusted* (Abelly). Román presents Portail *as the first of Vincent's spiritual sons and his friend through thick and thin during all the vicissitudes of the history of the Mission... he was Vincent's confidant, sharing his every concern and counseling him in his doubts.*<sup>13</sup>

The most fruitful period for Portail begins in 1642. His name often appears in the documents of the Congregation and in Vincentian correspondence. Saint Vincent convokes the first General Assembly and resigns from the position of Superior General but is re-elected.

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<sup>13</sup> J. COREA, *Vida del Señor Vicente de Paúl*, CEME, p. 129; ABELLY, *Vida del venerable siervo de Dios, Vicente de Paúl*, CEME, p. 218; J.M. ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul*, Melisende, London 1999, p. 654.

Portail is appointed first Assistant and secretary to the Superior General. The objective of the Assembly was to study the Rules and the Constitutions of the Congregation. After eighteen sessions and many amendments and observations a commission of four members is appointed to redact a final document (Portail is named the head of this commission). He shows himself to be an intelligent and prepared man, one who works diligently and who is willing to engage in dialogue.

The commission does not hand over their task to a secretary and thus their Rules and Constitutions will not be the preconceived product of a laboratory. Rather they will be the expression of the life of the missionaries as lived during the thirty years of the Company's growth. In 1651 the second General Assembly returns to the theme of the Rules and Constitutions and in 1655 the Holy See approves the Rules. But some details must still be resolved and the Rules are not distributed until 1658. It had been a slow process but Saint Vincent could say that *with the help of God's grace, delaying like this has saved us from such a risk. It has also made it possible for the Congregation gradually and smoothly to get used to living the Rules before having them in print. You will not find anything in them which you have not been doing for a long time, and I must say how pleased I am that you do live by them and that they have enabled you all to help one another.*<sup>14</sup>

"The practice and approval of the vows came about after a long process similar to that followed by the development of the rules. In some way it was more difficult and more controversial."<sup>15</sup> The Vincentian intuition breaks with juridical molds and traditions: the struggle for a Congregation of secular priests who form a community and who take vows that bind them to the community but do not make them religious and they are exempt from the Ordinary. He encounters opposition within and outside the Congregation and some of his attempts to gain approval of the vows will meet with rejection.

The Assembly of 1651 was dedicated to the study of the vows and the discussion unfolded in some arduous sessions. Portail intervened and offered a compromise which affirmed the fact that the vows were made voluntarily, but finally adhered to the opinion of Saint Vincent. It was agreed that the Holy See must approve all of this and Portail was entrusted with this task.

In 1655 at the same time that the Rules are approved, the taking of simple vows is also approved. Saint Vincent announces this fact on December 31. On January 25, 1656 Portail writes three documents:

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<sup>14</sup> CCD X: 430-431.

<sup>15</sup> J.M. ROMÁN, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

first, the act of taking vow which had just been approved and which he signs after Saint Vincent; second, the vow formula; third, the explanation of the vow of poverty.

### **A zealous and wise visitor**<sup>16</sup>

In 1642, seventeen years after its foundation, the Congregation had ten houses. In the following three years a great expansion took place: eleven new houses were established. In 1646 Saint Vincent believed it necessary to unify the communities with the order and spirit that governed Saint-Lazare and sent Portail to visit the houses as his representative.<sup>17</sup> He himself had lived and experienced the birth and the development of the charism. He lived his vocation in a profound manner and his life and actions were animated by more than just words.

He left Paris at the beginning of March, 1646 and did not return there until three and a half years later, in September, 1649. Saint Vincent gave him an authentic renewal program<sup>18</sup> and the two of them frequently exchanged communication concerning the results, the orientations and the animation. Some visits lasted three months. Portail participated in the missions and activities of the communities. He lived with the missionaries. On several occasions Saint Vincent congratulated the Visitor for his wise management and for the blessings that he receives as a result of organizing the communities. He also followed the rhythm of the visits and reminded Portail that it is not good to prolong these visits:<sup>19</sup> *I cannot tell you what [a consolation this is to me] be[cause you]are awaited patiently elsewhere, and are needed, especially in Rome. I ask Our Lord Jesus Christ to conduct you there, and continue to grant you the same grace to restore things to the point He desires, in what remains for you to do, as in what you have done.* On another occasion he opens his heart to him: *May God preserve you, Monsieur, for whom His Divine Goodness has given me extraordinary sentiments of affection and esteem.*<sup>20</sup>

A letter of Saint Vincent, dated July 1646, gives us an idea of Portail's role and prestige in the Company as he carried out the responsibilities that were entrusted to him. Portail informs Vincent about his travels and shares with him news about the houses he is

<sup>16</sup> *Notices* I: p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Notices* I: p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Notices* I: pp. 30-31.

<sup>19</sup> CCD III: 124-125.

<sup>20</sup> CCD III: 133, 137-138.

visiting. Vincent tells Portail that he agrees with him in certain details concerning the Daughters of Charity: *It will be good for you to have them moderate this.* More significantly he says: *My opinion is that you should still put off receiving the vows of Messierus Gobert and Lucas. As for what you ask about how to act with regard to M. du Coudray, I cannot tell you a better way than that of gentleness and humility. But I beg you to fear nothing with these virtues. Our Lord will bless whatever you do there, and I hope you will have the same facility as elsewhere to introduce the practices of the Company and banish those that are not proper to it. You will also be able to moderate his authority with regard to the change of officers, just as for other Superiors. In short everything should be as uniform as possible.*<sup>21</sup>

When Portail returned to Saint-Lazare after a prolonged absence, the community received him warmly, a sign of the way in which he was esteemed and loved by the confreres: Father de la Fosse dedicated a lengthy poem (written in Latin and more than eighty verses) to him.<sup>22</sup>

We are able to see that from the beginning his relationship with Saint Vincent was decisive in the formation of his personality. But it did not remain static. He enriched and expanded his better qualities. Saint Louise told the Sisters that Saint Vincent had a special gift from God that enabled him to know and lead people on the path that God desired. This made him different from other directors who gave their own advice and not that of God.<sup>23</sup> Saint Louise is a good example of this and so is Portail — the two looked toward God and sought to know the will of God and Saint Vincent made them give the best of themselves.

### **The perfection that God asks of the entire Company requires your advice and your guidance**

A whole chapter could be dedicated to Father Portail as the first Director of the Daughters of Charity, a ministry which he began in 1642. Portail appears as a man who had matured spiritually, who walked forever between two saints committed to God and the poor and who seems to have walked with the same rhythm as they. He walked with confidence and humble obedience to the saints and was valued and trusted by the both Louise and Vincent. He is

<sup>21</sup> CCD II: 675-676.

<sup>22</sup> *Notices* I: pp. 69-75.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Vincentiana*, September-October 2009, p. 398 (“La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines,” *Document* 822, p. 946).

consulted and consults with them. In them he sees the revelation of the will of God as the supreme norm. The Superior General gives advice and weekly conferences to the Daughters of Charity: Portail assists him and is asked his opinion, and when Saint Vincent is late or absent, Portail, in a very natural way, takes charge of the situation. He is so imbued with the spirit of Vincent that he presents the same fundamental doctrinal elements.

Saint Vincent maintained the general direction of the Daughters while Portail seemed to have maintained a more personal relationship with them. During a long absence of three and a half years while Portail was visiting the houses of the Congregation, Louise writes him frequently revealing *the need which your poor Daughters of Charity have of your return.... It seems that the perfection that God asks of the entire Company depends on your charitable advice and guidance. It is true that your very lengthy absence has been painful for us.... Return quickly, Monsieur, to help us acquire this perfection.*<sup>24</sup> *I must tell you, in all truth, that your absence is costing the entire Company dearly; every day we experience it more and more.*<sup>25</sup>

At a given time there arose a misunderstanding between Portail and Louise. This explains the intention of the letter she wrote to him.<sup>26</sup> Portail assures her and affirms that she has worked well. On occasions, he tells her, the saints are able to disagree but this in no way breaks the bond of charity and love.<sup>27</sup>

In their frequent correspondence Portail and Saint Louise reveal a mutual appreciation, confidence and respect for one another. During his prolonged absence from Paris, Portail made numerous visits to the Sisters and gave detailed reports of his visits to Saint Louise. In her own name and in the name of the Sisters she thanks Portail for his letters that *were a great joy and consolation to us... tears were shed. It was the hope of seeing you soon which comforted us, although we have awaited this happiness for a long time.*<sup>28</sup> Portail responds saying that *I truly believe that your Institute is a work of God and is governed by God's hand in the same way that a good father would care for his beloved children.*<sup>29</sup>

In Angers he leaves the Sisters extensive regulations, twenty-three points that he encourages them *to read and listen to each month*

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<sup>24</sup> SWLM: pp. 202-203.

<sup>25</sup> SWLM: p. 148.

<sup>26</sup> SWLM: pp. 538-539.

<sup>27</sup> *Notices I*: p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> SWLM: pp. 286-287.

<sup>29</sup> *Notices I*: p. 69.

*and also to practice them and to use them as themes for prayer.*<sup>30</sup> He frequently promises Saint Louise that he offers Mass for the Daughters of Charity: *so that God will preserve them, fill them with courage, strengthen and sanctify them more and more in the exercises of their holy vocation.*<sup>31</sup> He continues directing many Daughters... even six months before his death he directs them with lengthy letters.<sup>32</sup> After counseling one of the Daughters he tells her that he will offer Mass *so that the Lord might be your guide, your consolation, your strength, your courage and thus one day after having combated worthily and suffered for his love you will be rewarded in heaven.*<sup>33</sup>

### **He will be more useful to us in Heaven**

At the beginning of 1660 he felt fatigued. He suspended his regular visits to the Daughters. On February 14<sup>th</sup>, after an illness of nine days, Portail proceeded Saint Louise and Saint Vincent in the journey to heaven. Collet writes: *Saint Vincent has lost Antoine Portail, a priest of true value, of profound humility, of exemplary charity who was united with our saint from the time they lived in the de Gondi house, that is, for more than forty-five years. He had provided essential services to the Congregation; he was secretary and first assistant, Director of the Daughters of Charity, filled with the spirit of his good father, willing to relieve him on an infinite number of occasions and thus we see that a trusted man is a great resource.*<sup>34</sup>

On March 5<sup>th</sup>, Saint Vincent communicated the death of Father Portail to Father Desdames in Warsaw. We are left with this last homage to the first companion, the best disciple and close friend: *Father, God has been pleased to take from us good M. Portail. He died on Saturday, the fourteenth of this month. It was the ninth day of his illness, which began with a sort of lethargy that developed into a constant fever and other complications. Throughout it, his mind and speech remained quite clear. He had always been apprehensive about death but, on seeing it approach, he faced it with peace and resignation, saying to me on several occasions when I visited him that he no longer felt any trace of his past fear. He died as he had lived, in the good use of suffering, the practice of virtue, and the desire to honor God and to end his days, like O[ur] L[ord], in the accomplishment of His Will.*

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<sup>30</sup> Notices I: pp. 42-47.

<sup>31</sup> Notices I: p. 61.

<sup>32</sup> Notices I: pp. 89-92.

<sup>33</sup> Notices I: p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> Notices I: pp. 92-93.

*He was one of the first two men engaged in the missions, and he always contributed to the other works of the Company, in which he rendered important services. Consequently, were it not that God disposes all things for the best and causes us to find our good where we think we will receive harm, the Company would have lost a great deal in losing him. There is reason to hope that this good servant of His will be more useful to us in heaven than he might have been on earth. Please offer the customary prayers for him, Monsieur.<sup>35</sup>*

## **Epilogue**

Antoine Portail, Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, three intertwined lives: intertwined among themselves, intertwined with God and the poor. In 1660 the three hear directly from Christ, the call, *Come, blessed of my Father...* This year 2010 millions of men and women in heaven and earth, co-disciples and poor, celebrate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of glory of these three individuals.

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<sup>35</sup> CCD VIII: 288.