

OF CURRENT INTEREST

Vincent de Paul on Divine Guidance in Prayer

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It seems to me that paragraph 40 of the *Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission* is not only insightful, but extremely relevant today. It says,

“Christ, the Lord, remaining always in intimate union with the Father, used to seek his will in prayer. That will was the sole aim of his life, mission, and giving of himself for the salvation of the world. He likewise taught his disciples to pray always in the same spirit, and never to lose heart. We too sanctified in Christ and sent into the world, should try to seek out in prayer the sign’s of God’s will and to imitate the responsiveness of Christ, discerning everything according to his mind” (C. 40).

In this essay, I will discuss what St. Vincent de Paul said, and did not say about the subject of divine guidance in prayer.

Christocentric Focus

When asked what was the chief virtue of St Vincent de Paul a colleague who knew him well replied, “It was undoubtedly the imitation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, for he always kept him before his eyes to serve as his model. Christ was his light and mirror, and in him he saw everything else. If in some particular case he doubted how he should act, to be perfectly agreeable to God, he reflected on how our Lord acted in similar circumstances, or what he said, or what he taught in his various sayings.”¹ Bishop Louis Abelly, Vincent’s first biographer, described the Saint’s spirit by saying that he was motivated by the imitation of Christ.² That point is evident in a particularly eloquent passage in a letter Vincent wrote to his friend Fr. Portail:

¹ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, vol. III (New York: New City Press, 1993), 88.

² ANDRE DODIN, C.M., *Vincent de Paul and Charity* (New York: New City Press, 1992), 49.

“Remember that we live in Jesus Christ by the death of Jesus Christ and that we ought to die in Jesus Christ by the life of Jesus Christ and that our life ought to be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ and that in order to die like Jesus Christ it is necessary to live like Jesus Christ.”³

Toward the end of his life, in 1656, Vincent appointed a young priest, Antoine Durand to be the superior at Agde seminary. In the course of encouraging him, Vincent wrote,

“There is no human element in Christian activity; it is not a human work but God’s. It is to continue the labors of Jesus Christ. And hence, human effort here is of no avail unless God is intimately united with it. No, neither philosophy, nor theology, nor talks influence souls. It is essential that Jesus Christ be intimately united with us or we with him; that we operate in him and he in us; that we speak like him and in his spirit as he himself was in his Father and preached the doctrine taught him by the Father. That is what holy scripture teaches us. It is therefore, essential for you to be empty of self in order to put on Jesus Christ.”⁴

St John Gabriel Perboyre C.M. composed a prayer in which he expressed St. Vincent’s Christological focus in these profound words:

“O my Divine Savior, transform me into yourself. May my hands be your hands. May my tongue be your tongue. Grant that every faculty of my body may serve only to glorify you. Above all, transform my soul and all its powers, that my memory, my will, and my affections may be your memory, will, and affections. I pray you to destroy in me all that is not of you. Grant that I may live but in you and by you and for you and that I may truly say with St. Paul, ‘I live now – not I – but Christ lives in me.’”⁵

It is worth noting that paragraph 521 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* echoes that same sentiment when it says, “Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in us” (CCC, 1992, No. 521). While this principle applied to the outward activities of Christ it also applied to his inward activities such as praying.

³ VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, vol. I (New York: New City Press, 1985), 276.

⁴ DODIN, *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, op. cit., 81.

⁵ Quoted by Charles Edward Miller in *Mass on Sunday: And Other Ways of Being Catholic* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 45-46.

The Nature of Prayer

In one of his talks to the Daughters of Charity, St Vincent described the nature of prayer in simple terms: “Prayer is an elevation of the mind to God by which the soul detaches itself, as it were, from itself, so as to seek God in himself. It is a conversation of the soul with God, an intercourse of the spirit, in which God interiorly teaches it what it should know and do, in which the soul says to God what he himself teaches it to ask for.”⁶ The phrase, ‘prayer is an elevation of the mind to God’ is reminiscent of a well-known saying of St. John Damascene (676-749) who said, “Prayer is the raising of one’s mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God.”⁷ While this is a classic description, it could be argued that it is inadequate insofar as it is too one-sided. While it describes what the praying person does, it says very little about the all-important role of God, who wants to communicate with us. But as we saw, St Vincent said that in prayer, “God interiorly tells the soul what he wishes it to do.”⁸ Notice how this description sees prayer in relational terms and how it puts the emphasis on what God does.

Dispositions Needed for Divine Guidance

When one reads what Vincent says about prayer, it is clear that although he thought God can communicate the divine will in many ways (e.g. through providential events, properly constituted authority, the teachings of scripture etc.), he also thought that Christians can receive direct inspirational guidance in prayer. For a number of reasons he thought that some people were more likely to receive it than others. For this to occur, the praying person needed to have a wholehearted desire to know God’s will. In this connection, he referred to Our Lord’s words, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” and added, “For our Lord put these words in the daily prayer because he wants us to ask every day for the grace to do his will.”⁹ He also believed that God favored the simple and the humble. Speaking about them, he said:

“It is into hearts without worldly knowledge, who seek God in himself, that he is pleased to pour forth the most excellent lights and the greatest graces. He manifests to those hearts what all the aca-

⁶ ST VINCENT DE PAUL, *The Conferences of St Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity* (London: Collins, 1979), 373.

⁷ De fide orth. 3, 24: PG 94, 1089C.

⁸ *Correspondence, Entretiens documents*, ed. Pierre Coste (Paris: Gabalda, 1920-1925), vol. IX, 583.

⁹ VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, vol. XII (New York: New City Press, 1985), 135.

demical schools have not discovered, and develops in them mysteries that the most learned fail to have the least sight of.”¹⁰ Thirdly, he maintained that those who had a spirit of detachment from worldly things and who mortified themselves were better disposed to hear God’s voice. Speaking about this he said, “Mortification is a means which will be a great help to you when you pray... Learn to mortify yourselves. He will have regard to the humility of his servants, for mortification springs from humility, and in this way he will make you partakers of the secrets he has promised to reveal to the little and the humble.”¹¹

Desirability of Divine Guidance

Here are a number of representative quotations in which Vincent talked about the desirability of divine inspiration and guidance in prayer. Speaking to Daughters of Charity in 1648 he stated, “We learn in prayer what is the will of God.”¹² Later in the same conference he added, “It has been said that God lets us know in prayer what we should do, and what we should avoid. Now that is true, for there is no action in life that makes us know ourselves better, or shows us more clearly what is God’s will than prayer.”¹³ When speaking to Antoine Durand, he said,

Prayer is the reservoir in which you will receive the instructions you need to fulfill the duties on which you are now about to enter. When in doubt, have recourse to God and say to him: ‘O Lord, you are the Father of light, teach me what I ought to do in this circumstance. I give you this advice not only for those difficulties which will cause you pain, but also that *you may learn from God directly* [my italics] what you shall have to teach, following the example of Moses who proclaimed to the people of Israel only that with which God had inspired him: ‘The Lord says this.’¹⁴

A year before his death, Vincent said in the course of a conference on prayer, “There is another way of knowing God’s will, and its by inspiration: for often he enlightens our understanding and gives impulses to our heart to be inspired by his will.”¹⁵ That sentiment was

¹⁰ DODIN, *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, op. cit., 375.

¹¹ *The Conferences of St Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, op. cit, 380.

¹² VINCENT DE PAUL, “Conference on Prayer,” *Conferences of Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity* (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1979), 364.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 372.

¹⁴ ANDRE DODIN, C.M., *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, op. cit., 82.

¹⁵ VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, vol. XII, op. cit., 133.

reiterated when he said, “Whenever there is a question of doing a good work, say to the Son of God: “O Lord, if you were in my place, what would you do? How would you instruct the people?”¹⁶ On yet another occasion he said, “God communicates many and excellent lights to his servants. In prayer, he enlightens their understanding with many truths incomprehensible to all save those who give themselves to prayer.”¹⁷

Contemplation and Guidance

Although I cannot remember St Vincent referring explicitly to *Lectio Divina*, he advocated a method of prayer similar to it. He said that it begins with meditation. The process of reflection and praying is arduous, like men rowing by their own efforts against the tide. But when grace touches the soul with its inspirations and promptings, there is no more need to row because the sail of the soul is filled with the gentle breeze of the Spirit. On another occasion, Vincent used a another homespun image to get across the distinction between the reciprocal role of human effort and divine grace. “When at nightfall a man wishes to illumine his room, what does he do? He takes his flint and steel, strikes a spark and lights his candle. When he has done so, he does not go on striking the flint, he does not go looking for another flint and steel to strike a light, for he does not need it; the light he has suffices for all his needs.”¹⁸ On another occasion he said, “The thoughts and considerations which come from our own reflections are feeble lights, showing us only the outside of things, and nothing else. The light of grace which the Son of Justice shines into our souls penetrates to the very depths of our heart, bringing forth marvelous fruits. We must ask God to enlighten us himself and to inspire in us what pleases him.”¹⁹

In reviewing these statements, it may be inferred that Vincent was describing contemplation. Speaking about that subject to the Daughters of Charity he said, “The other sort of prayer is called contemplation. In this, the soul, in the presence of God, does nothing else but receive from him what he bestows. It is without action, and God himself inspires it, without any effort on the soul’s part, with all it can desire, and far more.”²⁰ He added, “God communicates many and excellent lights to his servants. In prayer, he enlightens their under-

¹⁶ ANDRE DODIN, C.M., *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, op. cit., 85.

¹⁷ *The Conferences of St Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, op. cit., 374.

¹⁸ ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, vol. III, op. cit., 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁰ *The Conferences of St Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, op. cit., 374.

standing with many truths incomprehensible to all, save those who give themselves to prayer.”²¹ No doubt the truths which Vincent referred to included, not only truths about the divine mysteries, but also about the purposes and will of God. On one occasion he went so far as to encourage the sisters to become like Teresa of Avila.²²

When one takes into account how practical a man Vincent was, it is surprising, not to say a little disappointing, to find that apart from saying that God can and does inspire and guide people inwardly, he does not say a great deal more about the precise ways in which such guidance occurs. Catholic spirituality would maintain that there are normal and charismatic ways in which that can happen. Vincent does refer to some of the ordinary means of receiving divine guidance such as the scriptures, such as promptings, through other people, and providential events. However, because of his misgiving about mysticism and a lack of interest in the charisms mentioned by St Paul in 1 Cor. 12:8-10 he had few positive comments about the more unusual ways that God inspires and guides a person, such as through dreams, visions, apparitions, locutions, words of knowledge and prophetic revelations. (as we know, some of these were experienced by St. Catherine Labouré.) Anyone interested in these more unusual forms of guidance would do well to read Poulain’s classic, *The Graces of Interior Prayer: A Treatise on Mystical Theology*.²³ It can also be mentioned in passing that I have written a book entitled, *Guided by God: Ordinary & Charismatic Ways of Discovering God’s Will* which seeks to describe, in some detail, how these forms of inspiration can be experienced.²⁴

God’s Will Expressed in Providential Events

There can be little doubt that Vincent de Paul had great devotion to the providential plan and provision of God. He believed that whatever the Lord allows to happen, good or bad, is an expression of either God’s active or permissive will. As he said in a letter to St Louise de Marillac, “Follow the order of providence. Oh how good it is to let ourselves be guided by it.”²⁵ This is a big subject which deserves to be examined at length. Fortunately, others have already done this, such as Robert Maloney, C.M. in his “Providence Revisited,” in *He Hears the Cry of the Poor: On The Spirituality of Vincent de Paul*.²⁶ I want to propose just

²¹ *Ibid.*, 374.

²² *Ibid.*, 377.

²³ (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1910).

²⁴ (Luton: New Life, 2014).

²⁵ ST VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste (Paris: Gabalda, 1920-25), 241.

²⁶ (New York: New City Press, 1995), 52-72.

one thought. The late John Lennon of the rock band The Beatles wrote a song about his son entitled, "Beautiful Boy." It contained a very perceptive line: "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." I suspect that St Vincent would have identified with this observation, because he was aware that we tend to be in control when we make our own plans. But God is more likely to be in control when our plans are disrupted by unexpected, but providential events. He believed prayer could enlighten one through the Spirit to recognize the hand and purpose of God in those events.

Writing on this point, Bishop Abelly said that Vincent, closed his eyes to all human considerations, abandoned himself to the designs of his divine master, and said in his heart, 'Lord, what would you have me do?' In this spirit of dependence, he never undertook an enterprise of his own accord. He waited instead for divine providence to show him the work to be undertaken, either by the orders of those he regarded as his superiors, by the advice and persuasion of those he recognized as virtuous persons, or by contemporary conditions and needs that manifested the will of God to him, which he always followed but never anticipated.

Speaking about Vincent, Abelly added, "The will of God is known in two ways : either in those events we have no control over, those which depend solely on God's good pleasure, such as sickness, losses, or other accidents of life, or those which his commandments or his counsels reveal to us."²⁷ Vincent said on another occasion, "Divine providence will never fail us in those things we undertake by its direction."²⁸ I have reason to believe that he would have agreed with this quotation from a 1981 document entitled, *The Contemplative Dimension of the Christian Life*, published by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes. It states that,

"The contemplative dimension is the real secret of renewal for every religious life. It vitally renews the following of Christ because it leads to an experiential knowledge of him... The more open a person is to the contemplative dimension, the more attentive they will be to the demands of the Kingdom... because they will look on events with the eyes of faith. This will help them discover the divine will everywhere" (*The Contemplative Dimension of the Christian Life*, 1981, No. 30).

²⁷ ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, vol. III, op. cit., 181.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

Discernment of Spirits

As with other saints, Vincent de Paul felt that discernment of inspirations and promptings was necessary to establish whether they were the genuine voice of the Lord or not. He said that, “A supernatural enlightenment from God is necessary in order to discern true insights from false ones.”²⁹ It is simply naïve to think, as some Christians seem to do, that every pious thought or scripture text that crosses their minds was inspired by God rather than their own imperfect human nature or even the evil one, who can appear as an angel of light (cf. 2 Cor. 11:14). As William Shakespeare reminded us in Act 1, Scene 3 of the *Merchant of Venice*, “The devil can quote Scripture for his purpose.”

St. Vincent said, “Among the multitude of thoughts and inspirations that come to us, some are apparently good, and yet they don’t come from God and are not according to his pleasure.”³⁰ He proposed four main guidelines in a conference entitled “Illusions and Genuine Inspirations” (October 17, 1659). First: ask yourself is the prompting contrary to the commandments of God, the Church or State law? Is it contrary to ones solemn obligations e.g. marriage or priestly vows? Second: is there an element of superstition present? (e.g., that an action has to be performed so often in a certain way?) Third: is the prompting persistent and troublesome so that it makes one uneasy? “The Spirit of God,” observed St. Vincent, “is a Spirit of peace, a gentle light which infuses itself into the soul without doing it any violence. Its action is sweet and agreeable.”³¹ We will know an inspiration is from God “if it instills itself gently into our souls and inclines us to seek whatever concerns the greater glory of God.”³²

St. Ignatius of Loyola said something similar in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Those “who go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God... it is characteristic of the good spirit... to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace. This He does by making all easy, by removing all obstacles so that the soul goes forward in doing good” (*Spiritual Exercises*, No. 315). Fourth, Vincent said, “we should take advice. If a person is graciously, peacefully and quietly receptive to the advice given to him (e.g. by a confessor, spiritual director, or a person exercising legitimate authority), and takes account of it, that is a sign that there is no illusion whatever in what he does.”³³ But if a person receives a

²⁹ ST VINCENT DE PAUL, “Illusions and Genuine Inspirations,” *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, vol. XII (New York: New City Press, 2010), 286.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

³² *Ibid.*, 285.

³³ *Ibid.*, 285.

prompting which he or she is unwilling to share with anyone for discernment it is a bad sign. Vincent said, "The Spirit of God inclines those it animates to submission. The Spirit of the gospel is a spirit of obedience."³⁴

Vincent concluded his talk by saying that he had spoken to experts who knew much about the rules for discernment of spirits. Others could be added, he admitted, but he thought that these four would suffice. "All the others," he said, "were connected with those I have mentioned."³⁵ He felt that if a person used a more elaborate method he might be tempted to become overly introspective. Vincent practiced what he preached. In 1653, one of his priests wrote to him to say that he wanted to leave the Congregation in order to join the Capuchins. In a letter dated June 4, Vincent discerned that his desire had not been prompted by the Lord. To begin with, Vincent thought that having put his hand to the plough in the Congregation of the Mission, the confrere was not being led to join another religious community, no matter how good it was. "Another sign," he added, "which makes me think that God has not called you to the Capuchins, is that the desires which have come to you about this matter, trouble and disturb you by their insistence, as those suggested by the evil spirit generally do; while on the contrary the inspirations of God are gentle and peaceful, inclining us in a loving way to the good he desires of us."³⁶

Practical Resolutions and Action

Because of the teaching of Scripture, Vincent was convinced that once a person received divine guidance, it was important to carry it out. He warned, Sentiments of love of God, of kindness, of good will, praiseworthy as these may be, are often suspect if they do not result in good deeds. Our Savior said that his Father is glorified in our bearing much fruit. We should be on our guard, for it is possible to be well mannered exteriorly and filled with noble sentiments toward the Almighty in our minds and stop there. When the occasion for action arises such people fall short."³⁷

This is typical of Vincent's practical, down to earth approach to the Christian life. The person listens to God in order to express what he

³⁴ *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, vol. IV (New York: New City Press, 1993), 569.

³⁵ *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul* (Philadelphia: Vincentians, Eastern Province, 1963), 472.

³⁶ VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, vol. IV, op. cit., 569.

³⁷ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, vol. I, op. cit., 106-107.

or she has heard in the form of loving acts of evangelization and service. Not surprisingly Vincent stressed the importance of making practical resolutions at the end of one's prayer time. They should flow from one's contemplation of the presence and purposes of the Lord. He said, "Making resolutions is one of the most important parts of our prayer, and perhaps *the* most important... The main fruit of prayer consists of personal resolutions strongly and firmly made. They should be resolutions which you are convinced of and which you are prepared to undertake, taking into account the obstacles to be overcome."³⁸

Conclusion

Following the pioneering work of Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., some modern authors use models theory to study theological and spiritual topics. For instance John C Haughey, S.J., has suggested that there are three models of spirituality operating in the contemporary Church, programmatic, pneumatic and autogenic.³⁹ It wouldn't be appropriate to describe them here, but I have done so elsewhere.⁴⁰ It seems clear from what Haughey says that St Vincent de Paul's spirituality was mainly programmatic.

However, as Haughey points out, although one model predominates in each person's spirituality, it can and should incorporate good elements from the other two. Arguably, St Vincent's understanding of divine guidance in prayer is quite pneumatic in nature, while his insistence on the importance of expressing divine guidance firstly, in the form of resolutions that are single, precise and possible, and secondly in practical action, is typical of an autogenic approach. The net result? "Whoever conforms himself in everything to the will of God," says Vincent, "and takes his pleasure in it, leads a truly angelic life upon earth. He can even be said to be living the very life of Jesus Christ."⁴¹

³⁸ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, vol. III, op. cit., 68.

³⁹ JOHN C. HAUGHEY, S.J., *The Conspiracy of God: God's Spirit in Us* (New York: Image, 1976), 97 ff.

⁴⁰ PAT COLLINS, C.M., "Models of Spirituality," in *Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Dublin: Columba, 199), 13-36.

⁴¹ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, vol. III, op. cit., 40.