

ADVENT LETTER 2018

„GIVE ME A MAN OF PRAYER,
AND HE'LL BE ABLE TO DO ANYTHING“



Rome, 19 November 2018

To all the Confreres of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear confreres,

May the grace and peace of Jesus be always with us!

Two years ago, in my first letter for the feast of Saint Vincent, I wrote to you about Saint Vincent de Paul as a Mystic of Charity. When we reflect on Saint Vincent as a Mystic of Charity and try to follow his example in this regard, we need to remind ourselves that he was not a Mystic in the generally understood sense of the word, the way the Church usually describes a Saint as a Mystic. Vincent de Paul was a Mystic, but a Mystic of Charity. With eyes of faith, he saw, contemplated, and served Christ in the person of the poor. When he touched the wounds of the marginalized, he believed that he was touching Christ's wounds. When he attended to their deepest needs, he was convinced that he was worshiping his Lord and Master.

This Advent, I want to speak with you about one of the principal founts from which Vincent drank as a Mystic of Charity: **daily meditative prayer, daily meditation**. He urged all the groups that he founded or with which he associated – the lay members of the Confraternities of Charity; the priests and brothers of the Little Company, the Congregation of the Mission; the Daughters of Charity; the Ladies of Charity; the priests of the Tuesday Conferences – to drink deeply from the fount of meditation every day.

One of Saint Vincent’s most quoted statements, from a conference given to the members of the Congregation of the Mission, expresses Vincent’s attitude eloquently:

Give me a man of prayer, and he’ll be able to do anything: he can say with the holy Apostle, “I can do all things in Him who sustains and comforts me” (Philippians 4:13). The Congregation of the Mission will survive as long as it’s faithful to the practice of meditation because meditation is like an impregnable rampart, which will protect the Missioners against all sorts of attacks.¹

Vincent was speaking of daily meditative prayer, daily meditation. He assured his followers,

Let’s all of us really devote ourselves to the practice of meditation, since through it all good things come to us. If we persevere in our vocation, it’s thanks to meditation; if we succeed in our works, it’s thanks to meditation; if we don’t fall into sin, it’s thanks to meditation; if we remain in charity, if we’re saved, all that is thanks to God and to meditation. Just as God refuses nothing in meditation, so he grants almost nothing without meditation.²

To encourage his sons and daughters to meditate, he used many of the metaphors commonly found in the spiritual writers of his day. He told them that what food is for the body, prayer is for the soul.³ It is a “fountain of youth” by which we are invigorated.⁴ It is a mirror in which we see all our blotches and then change our appearance to be more pleasing to God.⁵ It is refreshment in the midst of our difficult daily work in the service of

¹ Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XI, p. 76; Conference 67, “Meditation.” Future references to this work will be indicated using the initials CCD, followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD XI, 76.

² CCD XI, 361; Conference 168, “Repetition of Prayer,” 10 August 1657.

³ CCD IX, 327; Conference 37, “Mental Prayer,” 31 May 1648.

⁴ Ibid., 328.

⁵ Ibid., 327.

the poor.⁶ It is a sermon, he told the missionaries, that we preach to ourselves.⁷ It is a resource book for the preacher in which he can find eternal truths to share with God’s people.⁸ It is a gentle dew that refreshes the soul every morning, he tells the Daughters of Charity.⁹

Vincent urged Saint Louise de Marillac to form the young sisters well in meditating.¹⁰ He gave them many practical conferences on the subject. He assured the sisters that meditating is really quite easy and that it is like having a conversation with God for half an hour. He stated that if others are thrilled to have a chance to talk with the king, we should be delighted to have a chance to talk heart to heart with God every day.¹¹

Meditative prayer, for Vincent, is a conversation with God, with Jesus, in which we express our deepest feelings (he called this affective prayer) and in which we seek to know what God is asking of us each day, especially in our service to the poor. It is characterized by deep gratitude for Jesus’s many gifts, especially our vocation to serve the poor. It results in resolutions about how we might serve them better in the day ahead. For some, even many, it moves toward quiet contemplation of Jesus’s love for us and for the poor, and it draws us to throw “darts of love” that “pierce the clouds” and touch Our Lord’s heart.¹²

For Vincent, the principal subject of prayer was the life and teaching of Jesus. He emphasized that we must focus again and again on the “mysteries” of Jesus’s humanity: his birth, his relationship with Mary and Joseph, the events of his public ministry, his miracles, his preferential love of the poor. He urged us to meditate on what Jesus did and taught in the scriptures.¹³ Among Jesus’s teachings, he called special attention to

⁶ CCD IX, 316; Conference 36, “The Good Use of Instructions,” 1 May 1648.

⁷ CCD XI, 76; Conference 68, “Meditation.”

⁸ Cf., CCD XII, 13; Conference 181, “Repetition of Prayer,” [1658].

⁹ CCD IX, 316; Conference 36, “The Good Use of Instructions,” 1 May 1648.

¹⁰ CCD IV, 53; Letter 1240 to Saint Louise, [Between 1647 and 1651].

¹¹ CCD IX, 94; Conference 15, “Explanation of the Regulations,” [14 June 1643].

¹² CCD IX, 32; Conference 5, “Fidelity to Rising and Mental Prayer,” 16 August 1640.

¹³ Cf., Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, I, 1

the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁴ Most of all, he recommended that our prayer focus on the passion and cross of Jesus.¹⁵

The method that Saint Vincent taught was basically that of Saint Francis de Sales.¹⁶ He made only slight modifications. He was more restrained than Francis when speaking about the use of the imagination. While valuing affective prayer highly, he insisted vigorously on the need for practical resolutions. Particularly in his conferences to the Daughters about meditation, there is a lovely mingling of spiritual wisdom and common sense. He cautioned the sisters about cultivating “beautiful thoughts” that lead nowhere. He warned the priests against using prayer as a time for speculative study.

The method that Saint Vincent de Paul proposed had three steps:

I. Preparation

- a. First, we place ourselves in the presence of God. This can be done in a variety of ways: by considering Our Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament, by thinking of God reigning over the universe, by pondering God’s presence within our own hearts.
- b. Then we ask for help to pray well.
- c. Finally, we choose a subject for meditation, such as a mystery in Jesus’s life, a virtue, a reading from scripture, or a feast day.

II. Body

- a. We reflect on the subject we have chosen.
- b. If the subject is a virtue, we search for the motives for loving and practicing the virtue. If it is a mystery in Jesus’s life, like the passion, we picture what happened and ponder its meaning.
- c. As we reflect, we express to God what is in our heart (e.g., love of Christ who suffered so much for us, sorrow for sin, gratitude). Basically, Vincent encouraged his followers to:
 - **mull over the subject of meditation,**
 - **identify motives for embracing it,**
 - **make concrete resolutions to practice it.**

¹⁴ CCD XII, 101; Conference 197, “Gospel Teachings (*Common Rules*, Chapter II, Article 1),” 14 February 1659

¹⁵ CCD IX, 42; Conference 7, “The Jubilee,” 15 October 1641.

¹⁶ CCD X, 471; Conference 105, “Order of Day (Articles 1-7),” 17 November 1658.

III. Conclusion

We thank God for this time of meditation and for the graces we received during it. We place before God the resolutions we have made. Then, we ask help in carrying them out.

Daily meditative prayer, daily meditation is an indispensable part of our spirituality. Saint Vincent was utterly convinced of its importance in our life and work for the poor. He saw it as the “soul of our souls”¹⁷ and felt that without it we would be unable to persevere through the difficulties involved in our service to the most abandoned.

In this Advent letter, I want to encourage every member of the Congregation to engage or to keep engaging each day in at least a half hour of daily meditation. I urge you to do this half-hour meditation alongside your brothers in community, supporting each other in drinking from this life- giving fount. I urge you not to shorten it (15 minutes, 20 minutes), but keep the meditation literally to half an hour.

Vincent in the Common Rules encouraged us to meditate one hour every day. Bringing this into practice, we can find the second half hour any time during the day and meditate individually.

Vincent recognized that there are many ways of meditating and encouraged their use. Some will surely employ methods other than the one that he often taught and that I have described above. Although confreres may use other methods of meditation, it is of utmost importance for us that each member of the Little Company, the Congregation of the Mission, know and keep in mind the method Saint Vincent de Paul left us and to which we were introduced during our Internal Seminary. In the end, the most important thing is that we engage our minds and our hearts in meditative conversation with Jesus and that we do so daily and perseveringly.

In our Constitutions and in the Common Rules, the list of topics for frequent meditation is long:

- **Jesus’s relationship with God as Father**
- **his deep human love for his friends**
- **his compassionate and effective love for the marginalized**
- **the kingdom he preached**
- **his community with the apostles**
- **his prayer**
- **the presence of sin in the world and in ourselves**
- **Jesus’s eagerness to forgive**

¹⁷ CCD IX, 327; Conference 37, “Mental Prayer,” 31 May 1648.

- his healing power
- his attitude as a servant
- his love of truth/simplicity
- his humility
- his thirst for justice
- his desire to bring peace
- his struggle with temptation
- the cross
- the resurrection
- Jesus's obedience to the Father's will
- Jesus's gentleness/meekness
- mortification
- apostolic zeal
- poverty
- celibacy
- obedience
- Jesus's joy and thanksgiving.

All these topics relate to our mission to the poor. All will help us to follow Vincent as a Mystic of Charity. What a wonderful opportunity we have to revive or deepen, from this Advent onwards, daily meditation that will remain part of our spiritual life until our departure from this earth into eternity.

May our meditations be always based on the Bible, on the daily liturgical readings. May we not spend the time of meditation reading a spiritual book; that we can leave for our spiritual reading at some other time of the day.

To meditate is to place ourselves before God, Jesus, through His word. It is to place our hearts at Jesus's total disposition, allowing Him to speak to us as we listen. It is to dispose ourselves to listen to what Jesus would like to communicate to us every single day. It is to trust in Providence, battling any temptations to avoid or omit daily meditation. It is simply to be with Jesus every day in the silence of our minds and hearts, even if our minds remain empty and we have the feeling that nothing was accomplished, that we wasted half an hour doing nothing, because Jesus did not communicate any idea, feeling, or message to us. It is simply to believe in Jesus's way of communicating with God His Father. He often spent the whole night in meditation. It is simply to show Jesus our total love for Him, to show it by simply being there with Him, ready whenever and however Providence will think appropriate for Jesus to communicate His message to us. It is simply to be there every day, ready when Jesus will think best, not letting the moment of grace pass, not missing Jesus's visit.

More and more in his final years, Vincent uttered ecstatic words about God’s love. They clearly flowed from his meditation. On 30 May 1659, he prayed aloud in a conference to his confreres:

Let’s look at the Son of God; what a heart of charity He had; what a fire of love! Please tell us, Jesus, who pulled You away from heaven to come to endure the curse of earth and the many persecutions and torments You suffered? O Savior! Source of love humbled even to our level and to a vile agony, who showed, in that, greater love for the neighbor than You yourself did? You came to lay yourself open to all our misfortunes, to take the form of a sinner, to lead a life of suffering and to undergo a shameful death for us; is there any love like that? But who else could love in such an outstanding way? Only Our Lord, who was so enamored with the love of creatures as to leave the throne of His Father to come to take a body subject to weaknesses. And why? To establish among us, by His word and example, love of the neighbor. This is the love that crucified Him and brought about that admirable work of our redemption. O ..., if we had only a little of that love, would we stand around with our arms folded? Would we let those we could assist perish? Oh, no! Charity can’t remain idle; it impels us to work for the salvation and consolation of others.¹⁸

Few saints have been as active as Saint Vincent, yet his actions flowed from his deep immersion in God, in Jesus. How fortunate we are to have such an extraordinary founder.

Many blessings in these Advent days.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,



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Superior General



¹⁸ CCD XII, 216; Conference 207, “Charity (Common Rules, Chapter II, Article 12),” 30 May 1659.