

# St. Vincent de Paul and the Five Fundamental Virtues

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It is common to hear those who are familiar with St. Vincent de Paul assert that he did not write methodically. And they are correct. The saint did not feel the need for the systematic. He is more animator than teacher. The book to which he returned again and again was that of experience. He lives events, looks at people, sees the instances of hardship and shares, with those to whom he speaks and corresponds, what he feels and what moves him to action. He is first and foremost a man of action: "*Totus opus nostrum in operatione consistit*" (SV XII, 41).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, he knows how to communicate a message and succeed in teaching it. This would only be for his own. We must pay particular attention when he teaches like this. In this (case) he speaks more than he writes.

A small portable notebook (about 10.5 cm by 5 cm) is the exception and offers a more structured and organised view, namely *The Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*.<sup>2</sup> St. Vincent made them live, trying them out for 30 years before writing them down and distributing them to his confreres on 17 May 1658 during the course of a memorable conference (SV XII, 1-14). Besides, he has a history of printing. Even when he has decided on publishing, on setting his thought in print, St. Vincent only does so after confirmation by experience. Life must first verify the script. It is always an absolute with him, in short, a golden rule. This little

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<sup>1</sup> We have 14 volumes of St. Vincent's Works, eight of letters (Volumes I to VIII), two of Conferences to the Daughters of Charity (Volumes IX and X), two of Conferences to the Missionaries (Volumes XI and XII), one of Documents (Volume XIII) and one of Tables (Volume XIV) edited by Fr. Pierre COSTE, Priest of the Mission, and published by Gabalda between the years 1920-1925. In 1960, Fr. André DODIN produced a volume of 144 letters in a special issues of the revue *Mission et Charité*. In that study, every Roman numeral indicates the volume and the Arab numeral the page, as is the custom.

<sup>2</sup> *Regulae seu constitutiones communes Congregationis Missionis*, Parisiis 1658, in 24.

book of Rules, today the basis of the new Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, is a document of 12 chapters, of a few paragraphs each.<sup>3</sup> Chapter two is particularly important where Vincentian spirituality is concerned. It deals with Gospel teaching, spiritual disposition towards realities which the disciple should put on so as to be a true and good missionary. "Christ's teaching will never let us down, while worldly wisdom always will."<sup>4</sup> He suggests "seeking the kingdom of God" in devotion to Providence and trust in carrying out at every opportunity "the will of God," in attention to simplicity and prudence, in the practice of gentleness, humility, mortification of "one's" own will, the renunciation of one's own judgement and all one's senses, of excessive affection for one's parents, in cultivating the virtue of indifference, in seeking to preserve unity through a certain "uniformity," in carrying out "acts of charity," in putting up with slander, etc.

In short, it concerns doing everything possible "to keep the Gospel teachings, as they are very holy and practical, having in them more application to us than others, to know those that especially advise **simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal for souls.**"<sup>5</sup>

These are the "fundamental virtues." St. Vincent points to them, insisting in a very particular way: "*The Congregation should pay special attention to developing and living up to these five virtues so that they may be, as it were, the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation, and that everything each one of us does may always be inspired by them.*"<sup>6</sup>

The Constitutions of 1980-1984 summarised, more or less, the essentials contained in chapter II but they condense them, citing the core and referring to them explicitly. We have, therefore, the best of the Vincentian tradition.

The five virtues do not constitute the entire spirit of the Mission but they are a direct consequence: they bring out the profile of the Missioner. This point is important. In texts of great worth, in the works of important people, in interesting turns of phrase, one could

<sup>3</sup> Caput I: "De fine et Instituto Congregationis," Cap. II: "De documentis evangelicis," Cap. III: "De paupertate," Cap. IV: "De castitate," Cap. V: "De obedientia," Cap. VI: "De iis quae ad infirmos spectant," Cap. VII: "De modestia," Cap. VIII: "De mutua nostrorum conversatione," Cap. IX: "De conversatione cum externis," Cap. X: "De piis exercitiis in Congregatione observandis," Cap. XI: "De missionibus caeterisque Congregationis functionibus erga proximum obeundis," Cap. XII: "De nonnullis mediis et adjuamentis ad praedictas functiones bene et fructuose obeundas requisitis."

<sup>4</sup> *Common Rules* II, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Common Rules* II, 2-14.

<sup>6</sup> *Common Rules* II, 14.

have been led to believe that we had here the summary of the Vincentian spirit. This approach is incorrect and we have to situate these virtues in their proper place in a context of a wide-ranging spirituality. We tend to simplify, which can prove dangerous in the long term. Take, for example, the end of the Congregation of the Mission. We spent many months in personal and collective reflection, two months of intensive work each summer for two years, preceded by five years of coming and going between a central commission and local communities in order to arrive at the celebrated text of paragraph 1 of the Constitutions:

*“The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ evangelizing the poor. This purpose is achieved when, faithful to St. Vincent, the members individually and collectively:*

1. *make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself (CR I, 3) in order to acquire a holiness appropriate to their vocation (CR XIII, 13);*
2. *work at evangelizing the poor, especially the more abandoned;*
3. *help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor.*

But, in practice, one is aware of an oversimplification setting in as the years go by: “The Congregations is for the poor!” This is true and false. The Congregation has certainly given priority to the poor without ceasing to see to their evangelization. But its true end reveals itself in other ways: its mission is “to follow Christ evangelizing the poor” and all its life and that of its members calls to an imitation of Christ. An imitation, with Bérullian accents, and which assumes a configuration in the missionary acting. Fr. Koch shows us the basics of these assertions:

*To express these two ways, Bérulle often uses two words that are found some times in the Bible (in Latin): “adherer” (translated in English — NJB, NRSV, NAB — as to hold fast do, to be near, and to be united to) in Deuteronomy 11:22; 13:14; and 30:20; Psalm 73:28; 1 Corinthians 6:17; and its noun “adherence,” and “to imitate,” four times in St Paul: 1 Thessalonians 1:16; 2 Thessalonians 3:7; 1 Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1. In Bérulle, “to imitate” and “imitation” appear almost as often as “to hold fast to” and “holding fast to” in the indexes of several volumes.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Bernard Koch on FAMVIN, the website of the Congregation of the Mission, the francophone pages: *Bérulle et St Vincent*, No. 13.

We have absorbed the demanding reality of the imitation of Christ, which probably comes to us from Thomas of Kempis, the author of the *Imitation*, via Bérulle:

*St. Vincent quotes and recommends reading the Imitation, but he also uses "to imitate" and "imitation" in the spirit of Bérulle. Just like him, Monsieur Vincent aspires to the imitation of Jesus especially in his virtues, in his interior life and renunciation much more than in his acts of healing and preaching which will follow easily if we are first filled with the Spirit, the inclinations, the state of Jesus.*<sup>8</sup>

The first characteristic of the Congregation is mystical, because it is Christological, and for that to be forgotten runs the serious danger of dereliction and spiritually aridity. St. Vincent, who waged war on what was false, knew this well:

*Our vocation, therefore, is a continuation of his (that of Jesus Christ), or, at least, it is related to its circumstances. What happiness, my brothers! But what an obligation to have any feeling for it!*

*We have a great reason then for this, it is the dignity of the thing — to make God known to the poor, to tell them about Jesus Christ, to say to them that the kingdom of heaven is near and that it is for the poor. How wonderful! But that we should be called to share in the works of the Son of God, this is beyond our comprehension. What! For us to take on, I dare not say it is so much, so elevated a service as evangelizing the poor, this is "par excellence," the work of the Son of God, and we are applied to it as instruments by which the Son of God continues to do from heaven what he did on earth. A great reason to praise God, my brothers and to thank him unceasingly for this grace (On the End of the Congregation of the Mission, 6 December 1658, SV XII, 80).*

It is well to recall, in order to respond to the kind invitation of the editor of this journal:

1. What is the spirit of the Mission?
2. What is the content of the five virtues?

There are two steps in the process that we undertake and that are supposed to be complementary.

Others will be responsible for saying how to update them and especially how they are alive today.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

## I. THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST, THE SPIRIT OF THE MISSION

We repeat it emphatically: M. Vincent does not deal in the least with spirituality. All the same, the informed and careful reader is going to finish by finding constants in the life, the letters and the oral contributions of St. Vincent. He has very strong convictions, which show a way of thinking to which we can — in avoiding betraying it — give organization and substance.

### a) Christ, Messenger and Servant of the Father

From the experience of Folleville and Châtillon and the two realities, which give strength and cohesion to his actions, “Mission and Charity,” St. Vincent came quite naturally to turn himself towards Christ, Missioner and Servant. This Christ is at the centre of his life. He irradiates it, stimulates it and above all gives him a subject of imitation.

Monsieur Vincent presents Christ as he himself presents himself: “Evangelizer of the poor,” “Missioner of the poor,” “Messenger of the Father.” This has to do with Isaiah 61:1, taken up again in Luke 4:8. Eight times in the texts that we possess, St. Vincent recalls this New Testament episode to which he connects the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission: “He sent me to bring good news to the poor” (SV XI, 32; XI, 108; XI, 135; XII, 3; XII, 79; XII, 90; XII, 367). The Lord is charged with bringing the good news which liberates and the missioner ought not do anything else:

*Our end is to work for (the) salvation (of the poor), in imitation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the one true Redeemer and who has perfectly fulfilled this amiable name of Jesus, that is to say, Saviour.... While he lived on earth, he directed all our thoughts to the salvation of man; and he continues still in the same sentiment, because it is here that he finds the will of the Father.<sup>9</sup>*

This Mission registers in the core of St. Vincent’s conscience and mobilises his energies. Jesus is the Messenger of the Father, following him we are his new messengers. For Fr. Morin, an excellent student and populariser of M. Vincent, Jesus is the typical

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<sup>9</sup> LOUIS ABELLY, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul*, F. Lambert, Paris 1664 (three volumes in one tome). This fundamental and indispensable work was reproduced identically in 1981: it is available through the Congregation of the Mission - 95, rue de Sèvres - 75006 Paris. The reference to this book will always be indicated by the name of the author, “Abelly,” followed by reference to the book, then the chapter and finally the page: here ABELLY, I, III, pp. 89-90.

missioner<sup>10</sup> whom he meets each day in his ministry. He follows Christ, Evangelizer of the poor in the sense of the *sequella Christi* from which comes this wonderful summary that he grasped one day, and gave as a rallying sign to his missionaries: “*Jesus Christ is the Rule of the Mission*” (SV XII, 130).

Jesus Christ is also servant. He did not content himself to preach to the poor. He served them. This second function of Christ anchors itself on the scene of the washing of the feet where Jesus kneels before his Apostles and pronounces the famous, “*exemplum dedi vobis*” (John 13:15). Christ sends the Missioners in turn into a role that is not subsidiary but integral. It is about living day by day Matthew 25:31-46, the eminently Vincentian: “*All that you have done to the least among mine, you did to me.*”

He encourages his confreres to work in this manner, in the celebrated conference of 6 December 1658, often called (his) “testament conference” where he berates his own forcefully:

*If there are among us those who think they are on Mission to evangelise the poor and not to bring them relief, to remedy their spiritual needs and not the temporal, I respond that we must assist them and have them assisted in every way, by ourselves and by others.... To do this, is to evangelise by words and actions, and it is the most perfect, and that practised by Our Lord, and it is also what they must do who represent him on earth by appointment and by nature, as priests (SV XII, 87-88).*

He also explained to the Daughters of Charity: “*The poor are our lords, they are masters*” (SV IX, 119). He takes the formula of the vows of the Hospitalers of Italy as a formula of reference which says word for word: “*I vow... to serve our lords the poor*” (SV IX, 25).

This same turn of phrase is found in his conferences to his confreres. One cites most often in spiritual literature this significant extract:

*Turn the medal and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who wished to be poor, is presented to us by these<sup>11</sup> poor.... Oh God! It is good to see the poor, if we see them in God and with the esteem that Jesus Christ had for them (SV XI, 32).*

His spiritual experience takes a shortcut here, heavy with meaning and commitment: Jesus Christ is in the poor person; the

<sup>10</sup> « Vincent de Paul, son expérience et la nôtre », p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Note the demonstrative pronoun: “these poor” and not those of whom one would dream or hope. The poor are given to us; we do not choose them. They are our lot.

poor person is Jesus Christ. These are the two faces of an identification desired by Christ himself. One would say today, in a more open theology: the poor person is the sacrament of Christ, the real presence of the poor Christ. Is not his greatest destitution when he is raised on the Cross? Paradoxically, it is he, then, who draws all people and who knew, in his act of extreme love, his divinity. St. Vincent is not mistaken in this when he proposes this love to his confreres:

*Let us look at the Son of God: oh! what a heart of charity! What a flame of love! My Jesus, please tell us a little, you who left heaven to come to suffer the curse of earth, such were the persecutions and the torments that you received here. O Saviour! O Source of love humiliated to our level and to a despicable agony, who in this has loved the neighbour more than yourself? You came to expose yourself to all our miseries, to take the form of a sinner, to lead an oppressed life and to suffer a shameful death for us; is there any love like this? But who could love in such a surpassing way? There is only Our Lord, so taken with the love of creatures to the throne of this Father, to come to take a body subject to weakness. And why? To establish between us by his example and his teaching love of the neighbour. It is this love which crucified him and which accomplished the admirable work of our redemption. O messieurs if we had a little of this love, would we remain with our arms folded? Those we could help, would we allow them to perish? Oh no! love cannot remain idle; it applies us to the salvation and the consolation of others (SV XII, 264-265).*

Jesus is the divine model, the one whom it is necessary to contemplate at length in order to assume his disposition and gentleness. Sentiments of compassion and pity, we were saying earlier. The missionaries are “*chosen by God as instruments of his great and fraternal love, that wants to establish itself and grow in souls*” (SV XII, 262).

## **b) Christ, the perfect homage of the Father**

In contemplating Christ, St. Vincent finds him also in his relationship with the Father and with the Spirit and therefore with the Trinity. It is the source and the end of the whole spiritual dynamic of St. Vincent. The Congregation of the Mission must honour, “*in a very particular way, the ineffable mysteries of the Most Holy Trinity and the Incarnation.*”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Common Rules X, 2*, which propose to honour them: 1° frequently honoring these mysteries by a prayer of faith and adoration, coming from our

St. Vincent would almost present Christ as “*Adorer of the Father,*” which is a Bérullian idea.

*Still following Bérulle, he would consider Jesus as the first adorer of the Father, the model of religious people, but always tied to his love for people. The most typical passage is, at the same time, the shortest, towards the end of a presentation on the eminence of the ministry of the formation of priests, whose date is missing: “Oh! how fortunate you are to be the instrument of Our Lord in forming good priests... these men, called to the most lofty ministry on earth, through which they must exercise the two great virtues of Jesus Christ, namely, reverence toward his Father and charity toward mankind” (SV VI, 393).<sup>13</sup>*

For him, the basis of religion is dependence on the Father. Christ is the Son who by his nature as Son pays homage to the Father. He receives his life, his being, from God himself. Through his prayer and action, he gives him every worship and praise. One is close to the Christ of Bérulle, often presented in a simplistic manner, in whom God acts where: “*His action becomes integrated into the activity of men.*”<sup>14</sup>

For St. Vincent, Jesus receives everything from the Father, he is totally dependent on him. He recognises that the Father is the author and the principle of all the good that is in him (SV XII, 109). He is sent by him as the price of a costly love (SV X, 85). One is almost into the contemporary theology of “*the suffering of God.*”<sup>15</sup> Jesus gives all thanks to his Father by his obedience. For the Son is united to the Father, in a perfect intimacy, not only as Word but also as man (SV XII, 147-148). We touch here on the relationship of love between Jesus and his Father: he accomplishes his will (SV XII, 109).

It goes without saying that this privileged relationship, the prototype of every human relationship, between the Father and the Son blossoms in the living person of the Spirit. Vincent often contemplates the Holy Spirit, the unity of the Father and the Son and gives it as a model to his emerging communities.

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inmost heart; 2° dedicating certain prayers and good works each day to their honor and, above all, celebrating their feast days with special dignity and the greatest possible personal devotion; 3° trying constantly, by our teaching and example, to get other people to know these mysteries and to honor and worship them.

<sup>13</sup> BERNARD KOCH, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Cf. RENÉ BOUREAU, *L'Oratoire en France*, Cerf, 1991, pp. 31-35.

<sup>15</sup> “To believe in a God who suffers is to render the mystery more mysterious but in a more luminous way; it is to dispel a false clarity so as to replace it with ‘radiant darkness’” (FRANÇOIS VARILLON, *La souffrance de Dieu*, Le Centurion, p. 23).

### c) Christ, the guarantor of the love of the Father

Jesus is the guarantor of the love of the Father in accomplishing his work. Again, this is a very strong idea with Vincent. He is concerned about the honour of God. “*God is God,*” says Bérulle. The soul must be amazed by his greatness and praise, bless, admire and bow before him. Vincent, always pragmatic, aims at more than the concrete: to work for the coming of the Kingdom in peoples’ hearts and the hearts of the poor, to be attentive to justice is his primary concern. It is to glorify God: “*I pray to God every day, twice or three times, that he destroy us if we are not useful for this glory*” (SV XI, 2). As we have already had the occasion to write, “the ultimate point of reference of the missionary vocation always lies in a question that one should know to ask oneself before setting out: ‘*If this is done, will God be glorified by it?*’” (SV XIII, 629).” And to Bernard Codoing, charged with “negotiating” the approval of the vows of the Congregation in Rome, he writes: “*Let us seek the glory of God; he will see to our affairs*” (SV II, 263).<sup>16</sup> Often he will speak of the “good pleasure” of God, another “very 17<sup>th</sup> century” way of speaking of the will of God. For him, this divine will accomplishes itself pre-eminently through the evangelisation of the poor. In this, it is very personal, it is faithful to the Gospel and it “renews spirituality.” And, if we doubted it, here is the proof among others:

*Oh! What happiness, what happiness, Fathers, always and in everything, to do the will of God! Is it not to do this that the Son of God came on earth, as we have already said? The Son of God came to evangelise the poor; and we too, Fathers, are we not sent for the same reason? Yes, missionaries are sent to evangelise the poor. Oh! What happiness to do on earth the same as the Saviour did here, which is to teach the poor the way to heaven!”* (SV XI, 315).

### d) Christ, who does the Father’s work

The missionary, according to St. Vincent, must continue the work of Christ. He carries on, he is his continuation. Work, work, act, act, such is his watchword. He willingly goes back to the terse phrase: “*Totus opus nostrum in actione consistit*”; all our work is in action (SV XI, 41); he wants a hardworking piety, “*with rolled up sleeves.*”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> J.-P. RENOARD, «La gloire de Dieu et le Règne de Jésus-Christ,» in COLLECTION, *Monsieur Vincent, témoin de l’Evangile*, Animation Vincentienne - 16, Grande rue St Michel - 31400 Toulouse, pp. 87-98.

<sup>17</sup> The expression belongs to Fr. Jean Morin, C.M., who left many handwritten notes. Moreover, it is necessary to say, but it is impossible to be thorough, that the theme of work has very great importance for St. Vincent de

By our works, we show God that we love him. We will be inclined to respond by an all-out offensive!

And it is there the five fundamental virtues are grafted. They are the concretisation, the visible stamp of the Vincentian spirit, which we are trying to describe. St. Vincent has a marvellous word to encourage his missionaries to live by them:

*Let us enclose ourselves in these five virtues, like snails in their shells... with them, we will go everywhere, we will accomplish everything; without them we will only be "cartoon" missionaries (SV XII, 322).*

Everything follows on from there logically.

## II. THE FIVE BASIC VIRTUES

We have a teaching of St. Vincent on the whole of the five virtues, which has a global merit, even if we present ours after his with a view to updating it.

### 1. The general teaching of St. Vincent on the five virtues

As one knows, the most general and most appropriate text to the request made of us by the editor of *Vincentiana* is the Conference of 22 August 1659 on the five fundamental virtues explaining the *Common Rules*, chapter II, article 14 (SV XII, 298-311).

The paragraph concerned says:

*Although we should do our best to observe these Gospel teachings, being as they are holy and useful, there are among them, however, some that are more appropriate to us than others, namely those that advise especially simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal for souls, the Congregation will pay special attention to them so that these five virtues may be, as it were, the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation, and that everything each one of us does may always be inspired by them (SV XII, 298).*

M. Vincent's main argument, which pleads in favour of the choice of the five virtues is, as one might have expected, Christ. To do the will of his Father, to speak of his goodwill and to teach people, he

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Paul. In faithfulness, sometimes badly understood or exaggeratedly, the Daughters of Charity were often workaholics and were formed to be so. The formators often took literally and taught the recommendations of their blessed Father: "A Daughter of Charity should always be busy" (cf. SV IX, 7, 117, 221, 496). Today's more accurately sought-after balance depended on it!

left *“advice on the evangelical practices.”* The expression merits attention, because St. Vincent shows us in passing that here we are in the area of the counsels and that we would be well advised spiritually to receive them and live them as such. This is an invitation and proposition that leads us towards the perfection desired from the very first paragraph of the Common Rules.

Moreover, Christ practised *these Gospel teachings*, which are *simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal for souls*. Monsieur Vincent strongly affirmed that: *“This was his aim, his glory and his honour, thus let us take it that our intention ought only to be to follow Our Lord and conform ourselves entirely to him”* (SV XII, 299).

It is in our interest to live them for our growth in holiness as we have just said. They pull us out of mediocrity, freeing us from, *“the love of the things of earth”* (SV XII, 300) and from, *“the three powerful, deadly enemies, which are: good, pleasure and freedom.”* The practice of these Gospel teachings is a great advantage according to St. Vincent!

*“They give a person Christian liberty. You were, in the past, slaves of your passions; the attachment to wealth, to pleasure and to your own will had become your master; now, look, you are free through these Gospel teachings; neither the world with its delights, nor the flesh with its pleasures, nor the devil with his tricks can hold you captive, because the love of poverty, the mortification of your pleasures and submission to the will of God make you triumph!”* (SV XII, 301-302).

As there are many Gospel teachings, on this subject it is good to reread all of chapter II of the Common Rules, in which our founder zooms in on five of them and he “always” remains insistent on them. Note his insistence: *“Because they are numerous, I choose those principally which are more suitable for missionaries; and which are they? I have always believed and thought that they were simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal”* (SV XII, 302).

*Simplicity consists in doing everything for the love of God, and having no other end in all one’s actions but his glory. This really is what simplicity is. All the acts of this virtue consist in saying things simply, without duplicity, or subtlety; in being straightforward, without prevarication or evasion. Simplicity, therefore, is to do everything for the love of God, one encounters no fabrication, we say that it is a very pure act and a very simple being. It is necessary, therefore, to banish all confusion in order to have only God in view. Now, my brothers, if there are people in the world who must have this virtue, they are missionaries, for all our lives are dedicated to*

*acts of charity, towards God or the neighbour. And for both, it is necessary to proceed simply, so that, were it something we had to do, concerning God and depending on us, we must flee from subtlety, because God is not pleased and only communicates his graces to simple souls. If we look at our neighbour, we must assist him corporally and spiritually, good God! How necessary it is to guard against appearing cunning, clever, sly and above all ever saying an ambiguous word! Ah, far be that from any missionary! (SV XII, 302).*

In a crafty and dual way, simplicity! In an inquiry made at the time of the post-conciliar *aggiornamento*, it was discovered that what most pleased those who had been taught by French Vincentians (this was very evident then among faculty in seminaries and apostolic schools) was, precisely, simplicity. The practice was in keeping with the wishes of St. Vincent. I like this short and amusing admonition very much: “*Away with the Mission, farewell to its spirit if it has not that of simplicity*” (SV XII, 303).

Moreover, we know that, in the conference reserved to simplicity, St. Vincent indicates his own way of acting: It “*is the virtue I love the most and to which, I think, I pay the most attention in my actions...*” (SV I, 284) and he adds: “*God has given me such a high esteem of simplicity that I call it my Gospel*” (IX, 606).

The second point of Gospel teaching is humility: to annihilate oneself before God, to destroy oneself (one will note how badly the expression sounds today even though all advocate annihilation!); but the research is very positive, one wishes in this way “*to place God in one’s heart*” (SV XII, 304). And the reason for this work of annihilation, *kenosis*, one should say perhaps, is apostolic:

*Our purpose is the poor, coarse people; if we do not adapt to them, we will be of no benefit to them at all; the way to do it is by humility because through humility we annihilate ourselves and establish God, the Supreme Being... I will say... that this state is appropriate to the Mission; and not being such, we have reason to fear that we do not have the spirit of a true missionary (SV XII, 305).*

We have here a line of argument dear to St. Vincent: all the basic virtues have a missionary purpose. They reveal our vocation; they are useful to our apostolic work and allow us to live in witness.

The third point of Gospel teaching is of very Salesian origin: this is gentleness. It has the same goal: to put up with those whom we evangelise, “*so coarse, uncultivated, obtuse, and not to say, so stupid.*” It allows fidelity to reality without being aggressive but of service. The witness of St. Vincent is convincing:

*Even convicts, with whom I spent some time, are not won over in any other way. Whenever I happened to speak sharply to them, I spoiled everything; on the contrary, when I praised them for their resignation and sympathized with them in their sufferings, when I told them they were fortunate to have their purgatory in this world, when I kissed their chains, showed compassion for their distress, and expressed sorrow for their misfortune, it was then that they listened to me, gave glory to God, and opened themselves to salvation (SV IV, 53).*

This is the schema that is in place: simplicity models us on God, humility clothes us in him and gentleness puts us in the position of servant. It remains that these three emphases presuppose a radical method, which is mortification, to live together<sup>18</sup> (without “constantly bickering” XII, 307) and to evangelise. It will be easy then to be zealous! Zeal is

*... this pure desire to make oneself pleasing to God and useful to the neighbour. Zeal to spread the kingdom of God, zeal to gain the salvation of the neighbour. Is there anything in the world more perfect? If the love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is what is most pure in the love of God (SV XII, 307-308).*

As for St. Vincent’s conclusion it is imperative and connects with us across the centuries: *“These five virtues must be like the faculties of the soul of the entire Congregation; as the soul knows through understanding, wishes by will and remembers by memory, so must a missionary act only by means of these virtues”* (SV XII, 309) and further on he hammered home this principle: *“Let us make sure, each one of us, to enfold ourselves in these five virtues, like snails in their shells, and let us make our actions have the savour of these virtues”* (SV XII, 310).

## **2. Attempt at synthesis of the five virtues**

This article must give an account of Vincentian thinking. To gather the essentials here is a modest attempt at synthesis.

1. Monsieur Vincent invites us to focus our gaze on Christ. The fundamental virtues are, above all, Christological. St. Vincent asks us to contemplate Christ simple (true), humble (servant), gentle (he masters himself perfectly), mortified (he chooses to save the world on the cross) and zealous, let us say ardent (the

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. especially, FERNANDO QUINTANO, « D  fis que la culture actuelle lance    la Congr  gation de la Mission, » in *Cahiers St Vincent, Bulletin des Lazaristes de France*, N   190, Spring 2005, pp. 5-19, especially pp. 14-17.

zeal of God devours him: "I have come to light a fire on the earth..." Lk 12:49).

2. Our vocation carries us to the poor; to adopt Vincentian behaviour is to clothe oneself in functional, practical virtues. The purpose of the fundamental virtues is apostolic, pastoral, missionary; it has been said, "*professional*."
3. We are simple, humble, gentle, mortified and zealous among ourselves to be better so with those for whom we are responsible. They would not understand that we are made for them by vocation in Christ's sphere of influence and without practical consequence in our behaviour with them and right into our character and our own psychology because we are changed by the principle of imitation implemented for the poor.
4. One lives the five virtues in community so that it may be more evangelising. Our first commitment is in the area of witness. People will better understand that we strive for these virtues if we begin by living them among ourselves.
5. Through the definition of the virtues we see appear points of insistence that can gather around the idea of commitment, energy, strength. It seems that the Vincentian attitude of the five virtues demands of us first of all the will. Because he is a man of action, the Vincentian takes risks, dares, undertakes. He holds firm after having made a decision that he thinks to be the best. He has this will because he is inhabited by *the force of love*.
6. This implies a certain non-violence to the benefit of real violence. It is like a shifting of violence. Our energies are employed in a struggle against ourselves so as to become good workers for evangelising the poor.

It is necessary to do oneself violence to master anger and to appear gentle; it is necessary to do oneself violence in order to be simple in one's lifestyle, in one's way of thinking and communicating, even though it is easier to appear wise or important; it is necessary to do oneself violence in order to be humble, at the level of the little ones, even though it is more gratifying to live with the rich and have a certain power; it is necessary to do oneself violence in order to opt for the crosses in our life, even though it is easy to run away from effort and sacrifice; finally, it is necessary to do oneself violence in order to opt resolutely for the spread of the Kingdom of God, even though laziness or insensitivity tempt us. This is the only acceptable meaning of mortification.

7. The practice of the fundamental virtues cannot exist without the grace of God. Only the Spirit gives the strength to be simple, humble, gentle, mortified and zealous. To live in this way, one

must act in this way and pray to achieve it. In this way, the man of prayer is capable of everything.

8. The five virtues put us on the path of the Beatitudes. It would not be difficult to find points of convergence with each one of Beatitudes. The five virtues are a digest of the Gospel. If Monsieur Vincent said: "*Simplicity, this is my Gospel,*" we can say: "*The five virtues, these are our Gospel.*"
9. Finally, one has noticed that the five virtues were "*virtues in balance.*" The phrase belongs to Fr. Jean Morin shortly before his death. We must say that St. Vincent is the saint of balance. There is nothing excessive in him. In positioning ourselves in truth in relation to God, in humility in relation to our being, in gentleness in relation to others and in walking in the footsteps of the crucified (through mortification, of course), we become the enthusiasts of the Kingdom (we are full of zeal).

## Conclusion

For St. Vincent is an enthusiast. He is someone from the south of France who has put all his energy into the service of God in the poor. He is inhabited by passion, by enthusiasm, ardour. It seems to me that his passion is very present in the text which can serve us as a final meditation and which has the value of a testament:

*In Madagascar the missionaries preach, hear confessions, teach catechism continually from four o'clock in the morning until ten, and from two o'clock in the afternoon until night time; the rest of the time, it is the office, visiting the sick. These are workers, these are real missionaries! May it please the goodness of God to give us this spirit that animates them, a big heart, huge, full! Magnificat anima mea Dominum our soul must magnify, amplify God, and for that may God amplify our soul, may he give us a depth of understanding to know well the greatness, the extent of the goodness and the power of God; to know how far our obligation to serve him extends, to glorify him in all possible ways; an extent of will to grasp all the opportunities of bringing about the glory of God. If we can do nothing ourselves, we can do everything with God. Yes, the Mission can do everything, because we have in us the germ of the almighty power of Jesus Christ (24 July 1655; SV XI, 203-204).*