

My Gospel.... Let then Simplicity Live...¹

by Richard McCullen, C.M.

Province of Ireland

Introduction

1. Some two years ago there was published a book entitled *The Times Book of Saints*. A selection was made of more than 300 saints and the editor gave a brief résumé of the life and works of each saint. A distinguishing feature of the volume is the inclusion of a short extract from the writings of each saint, if such writings exist. St. Vincent finds his place in the volume and it was with a certain eagerness that I searched out the two pages devoted to our Founder, curious to know what passage the editor would have selected from the writings of M. Vincent. It would surely be an extract from one of his impassioned addresses to the community of St. Lazare or to his beloved Daughters of Charity on the urgency of evangelisation and the importance of service of the poor. To my surprise this is what I read:

Jesus, the Lord, expects us to have the simplicity of a dove (Mt 10:16). This means giving a straightforward opinion about things in the way we honestly see them, without needless reservations. It also means doing things without double-dealing or manipulation, our intentions being focused solely on God. Each of us, then, should take care to behave always in the spirit of simplicity, remembering that God likes to deal with the simple, and that he conceals the secrets of heaven from the wise and prudent of this world and reveals them to little ones.

However, while Christ recommends a dove's simplicity, he also tells us to have a serpent's prudence. He means that we should speak and behave with discretion. We ought, therefore, to keep quiet about matters which should not be made known, especially if they are unsuitable or unlawful. When we are discussing things which it is good and proper to talk about, we

¹ SV XI, 286.

should hold back any details which would not be for God's glory, or which could harm some other person, or which would make us foolishly smug.

In actual practice this virtue is about choosing the right way to do things. We should make it a sacred principle, admitting of no exceptions, that since we are working for God we will always choose God-related ways for carrying out our work, and see and judge things from Christ's point of view and not from a worldly-wise one; and not according to the feeble reasoning of our own mind.²

2. The choice of this piece as illustrative of the life and mission of St. Vincent is interesting. It is, of course, taken from the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission which St. Vincent had printed in 1658, two years before his death. The choice made by this editor — Bert Ghezzi, a layman — is particularly significant. It would seem that he perceived that M. Vincent's grasp and appreciation of the virtue of evangelical simplicity and prudence was the secret of the flowering and growth of that great and dense forest of works which — as Daniel Rops remarked — hides the man Vincent de Paul as in a fog. Bert Ghezzi's perception of the secret of the fecundity of the life of Vincent de Paul is rooted in that virtue which the Saint himself describes as *my gospel*. "*God has given me such a high esteem of simplicity that I call it my gospel.*"³

3. One of the first references M. Vincent makes to the virtue of simplicity occurs in the Rules drawn up for the Confraternity of Charity in November-December 1617. We read that the members are to *take care in practising humility, simplicity and charity, each deferring to her companion and to others, performing all their actions for the charitable intention of persons who are poor and with no human respect.*⁴

That passing reference to the three virtues of humility, simplicity and charity is like the first trickling of a river over ground, a river that, with the passing of the years, would become wide and broad and deep in the mind and heart of M. Vincent. The trinity of virtues — simplicity, humility, and charity — are those to which the saint most often refers in his conferences to the Daughters of Charity, while to simplicity he assigns the primacy of place in the rule for both the Daughters of Charity and the members of the Congregation of the Mission.

² *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*: Chapter II, nos. 4-5.

³ SV IX, 606, or, English edition, 9, 476.

⁴ SV XIII, 435, or, English edition, 13b, 19.

The rock from which you were hewn...

4. The young Vincent did not imbibe simplicity with his mother's milk. Indeed, being a Gascon, he would have soon learned that a goodly measure of astuteness along with a cultivated shrewdness was necessary if one was to advance one's interests in society. A later letter of M. Vincent points to this indigenous Gascon trait. When a member of his community, Firmin Get, had withheld from M. Vincent some rather important details about a financial matter, the Saint administered the following rebuke:

*I must confess, Monsieur, that this has surprised me more than anything that has happened to me for a long time. If you were a Gascon or a Norman, I would not find it strange. To think, however, that a straightforward man from Picardy, whom I consider one of the most sincere men in the Company, would have hidden that from me — how can I not be surprised at that, and just as surprised at the means used to meet those demands?*⁵

A flash of the Gascon trait surfaces again when within two weeks of the Saint's death. M. Gicquel, who kept a close eye on the Saint during the final days of his life, records in his diary that M. Vincent, when issuing instructions to M. Dehorgny on how he should communicate the news of the appointment of the Sister chosen to succeed Mademoiselle le Gras, remarked:

*M. Dehorgny, have them [the sisters] assemble and, after the conference announce to them the choice God has made of Sister [Marguerite Chétif] as Superioress. Tell them beforehand that they will all kiss her hands as a sign of acknowledgment, and she will embrace them; take a look around at the faces and expressions of the members of the Community, especially of the two or three who were officers and who perhaps had it in mind.*⁶

5. M. Vincent was not one — to quote Isaiah — *who would forget the rock from which you were hewn, and the quarry from which you were dug.*⁷ The Daughters of Charity were the beneficiaries of his reflection on the virtues that he saw in

good village girls because I know them by experience and by nature, since I'm the son of a humble tiller of the soil, and

⁵ SV V, 199.

⁶ SV XIII, 180-181, or, English edition, 13a, 196-197. See also, T. DAVITT in *Colloque* 5:16.

⁷ Isaiah 51:1.

*lived in the country until I was fifteen.... So I can tell you, dear Sisters, that the spirit of true village girls is extremely simple — no slyness, nor words of double meaning; they're not opinionated nor obstinate because in their simplicity they believe quite simply what they're told. Daughters of Charity should be like that, Sisters, and you'll know that you're really so, if you're truly simple, not attached to your own ideas but accepting those of others; if you're candid in your speech and if your hearts aren't thinking one thing while your lips say another. I can well believe that of you, dear Sisters!*⁸

The City and the Court

6. Through labyrinthine ways Vincent, the newly ordained priest, after leaving the languid lands of the *Landes*, would eventually settle down in the sophisticated world of Paris. Those first ten years of his priesthood, intent as he was on carving out a comfortable niche in the ecclesiastical world by securing a lucrative benefice or even an episcopal appointment, had ended in failure.⁹ Disillusioned, he was slowly making the discovery that would be reflected in phrases of the rule he would write some 50 years later. Purely human wisdom avails little in the domain of spiritual principles. Indeed, human prudence can prove counterproductive in harvesting that genuine fruit which the Lord of the Vineyard guaranteed would remain.¹⁰ The young priest Vincent would seem to have only made that discovery after many of those human agents upon whom he had pinned his hopes had failed to procure the ecclesiastical advancement he had dreamed about. There is a ring of deep conviction in a phrase such as this written two years before his death:

*Let each of us accept the truth of the following statement and try to make it our most fundamental principle: Christ's teaching will never let us down, while worldly wisdom always will.... And that is why the Congregation should always try to follow the teaching of Christ himself and never that of the worldly-wise....*¹¹

The principles of worldly wisdom had failed Vincent, and it would be in Paris, through his contacts with a constellation of theological and spiritual luminaries, that he would come slowly to the realisation that *Christ's teaching will never let us down*.

⁸ SV IX, 81, or, English edition, 9, 67-68.

⁹ J.M. ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A biography*, pp. 55-89, English edition.

¹⁰ Jn 15:16.

¹¹ CR II, 1.

7. The eight years that intervened between M. Vincent's first arrival in Paris and the year of the Folleville Mission had brought him into a world in which he saw *worldly wisdom* displayed in the court of Queen Marguerite. Contemporaneously he was beginning to breathe the purer air of the mountain of the Lord to which he had been led by De Bérulle and Duval. A refining and purifying of motive for action was taking place. It is the pure of heart who will see God.¹² With a growing purity of heart the vision of M. Vincent was being sharpened to see the presence of the crucified and risen Christ *in ten thousand places, lovely in eyes, lovely in limbs not his*¹³; to see Christ particularly where one would least expect to find him — in human minds and bodies that poverty and suffering had broken and distorted.

... And the Church...

8. It was while ascending the mountain of the Lord in the second decade of the 17th century that M. Vincent met a bishop whom he would recognise and acknowledge as having a profound and lasting influence on his life. One will find more than 150 references to St. Francis de Sales scattered like seed throughout M. Vincent's correspondence and conferences. To judge from the approving warmth of his references to the *dicta* of the gentle Bishop of Geneva, M. Vincent looked to him as a spiritual role model. In later years, when the memory of St. Francis de Sales crossed his mind, he liked to designate him as *Our Blessed Father*. The two celebrated works of St. Francis de Sales, *A Treatise on the Love of God* and *The Introduction to the Devout Life* would have been familiar to St. Vincent, the latter work being frequently commended by him as spiritual reading.

9. The importance of the virtue of simplicity was accepted by authorities on the spiritual life in 17th century France. St. Francis de Sales, in his correspondence, makes reference to an anonymous Flemish work entitled, *La Perle Evangelique*, which markedly influenced Benet of Canfield and Francis de Sales.¹⁴ Although not found in the Annecy edition of the works of Francis de Sales (and hence not accessible to St. Vincent) St. Francis de Sales wrote:

To understand what simplicity is, it is necessary to know that there are three virtues which are so like one another that it

¹² Mt 5:8.

¹³ G.M. HOPKINS in *As kingfishers catch fire*.

¹⁴ MICHEL DUPUY, PSS in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Volume 12, part 2, coll. 1159-1169.

*seems there is no difference between them, namely truth, purity and simplicity. Truth makes us seem exteriorly what we are interiorly... purity cannot endure any sin however slight, or any impure intention which does not tend to God's glory, but simplicity surpasses these in as much as it has only a simple regard for God.*¹⁵

10. Even though four decades had elapsed, clear echoes of these observations of *Our Blessed Father* are to be heard when, in 1659, St. Vincent was addressing his community:

*I know well that simplicity in general is taken as truth, or purity of intention: truth in so far as it makes our words and other expressions conform to our thoughts; purity of intention, because it makes all our acts tend straight to God. But, when one takes simplicity as a particular virtue and in the proper sense, it includes not just purity and truth but also the property it has of excluding from our words and actions all deceitfulness, ruses and duplicity.*¹⁶

11. As M. Vincent continued to scale ever higher the mountain of the Lord, and to breathe its pure air, his vision of *the God of gods in Sion* became more focused and penetrating. St. Thomas Aquinas predicated of the virtue of humility its power to give *unhindered access to spiritual and divine goods*.¹⁷ M. Vincent was enlightened by grace to see that through the practice of simplicity the Lord gave *unhindered access* to the hearts of little ones, while at the same time unveiling some of the deep mysteries of God. The short prayer of praise which Jesus offered to the Lord of Heaven and earth for revealing *hidden things* to little ones was often quoted by M. Vincent in his conferences and directions to individual correspondents.¹⁸

The virtue I love most...

12. The virtue of simplicity was to become, what later M. Vincent would call, *my gospel*.¹⁹

Simplicity is the virtue I love the most and to which, I think, I pay most attention in my actions; and, if it is permissible for

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Volume 14, col. 914, "Sermon pour la fête de Saint Jean porte latine," in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris 1821, t. 2, p. 181.

¹⁶ SV XII, 172.

¹⁷ II-IIae 161, 5 ad 4.

¹⁸ Mt 11:25.

¹⁹ SV IX, 606, or, English edition, 9, 476.

*me to say so, I would say that I am practicing it with some progress by the mercy of God.*²⁰

This confession from the lips of M. Vincent, who was invariably reticent about his personal spiritual experiences, must carry special weight and be valued as a special key to the interpretation of his monumental life. From later observations made by the Saint about the high place simplicity occupies in the hierarchy of virtues which he proposed to his two communities (and the references are multiple²¹), a question could be proposed. Was his strong conviction on evangelical simplicity born solely from his experience of the efficacy of the virtue in attaining practical and successful results in the ministry of evangelizing and serving the poor?

13. It must be said that M. Vincent's starting point for presenting simplicity as one of *the faculties of the soul* of the Congregation of the Mission was based not on sheer pragmatism but on theological foundations.²² Repeatedly the Saint refers to the truth that God likes to communicate with those who are simple.²³ In the conference which he gave to his own community on the virtues of Simplicity and Prudence, after citing some relevant Scriptural passages, he recalls the theological truth that God is simple.

*God is a simple Being, who receives nothing from another. He is a sovereign and infinite essence, excluding all admixture. He is a pure Being, never undergoing change. Now this quality of the Creator is to be found in some of his creatures. It is communicated to them and exists after the manner indicated in our Rules.*²⁴

14. Authentic simplicity makes for direct communication with God. It facilitates a growth in faith which is a created participation in the knowledge God has of himself. Faith gives limited vision, until the perfect is come with the direct vision of God.²⁵ Was it the practice of simplicity that enabled M. Vincent to grow stronger in faith, to see

²⁰ SV I, 284, or, English edition, 1, 265.

²¹ See, for example, ROBERT MALONEY, C.M., in *The Way of Vincent de Paul*, p. 39.

²² I am indebted to Fr. Bernard Koch, C.M., for drawing my attention to this point, and indeed for other precisions which he kindly brought to my notice. I am also indebted to my confrere Fr. Myles Rearden, who read the proofs of this piece and made a number of helpful suggestions.

²³ SV II, 341; XII, 170 and 302.

²⁴ SV XII, 172; cf. 299. See also, DODIN, *Entretiens*, p. 915 citing Abelly: "God is very simple. Rather God is simplicity itself. Where there is simplicity, there also God is to be met."

²⁵ Cf. 1 Cor 13:12.

with the eyes of Christ, to judge persons and events with the mind of Christ?²⁶ To M. Vincent was given the charism of seeing the features and the person of Jesus Christ beneath the broken bodies and the agitated minds of the poor. Purity of heart and purity of intention are constitutive parts of the virtue of simplicity. The French writer, Georges Bernanos, is credited with the observation: "Ask for the only thing you need — a star and a pure heart." The star for M. Vincent was the living person of Jesus Christ. The gaining of an ever purer heart was sought through prayer, daily examen of consciousness (as distinct from conscience) and the blood transfusions from the risen Christ in the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation.

*Each one in every single thing he does, especially in preaching or other ministries of the Congregation, should make an effort to have, to the best of his ability, as pure an intention as possible of pleasing God alone.*²⁷

As the eyes of servants... so too our eyes...

15. Simplicity presupposes an awareness of the presence of God. To be simple is to focus one's intentions *solely on God*.²⁸ A practice which M. Vincent encouraged very frequently, particularly when addressing the Daughters of Charity, was that of recalling the presence of God. In teaching the sisters how to pray he indicates that at the beginning of prayer it is important to recall the presence of God and that for some sisters that may be difficult, and may even cause headaches.²⁹ So he proposes four other means of facilitating the centring of the mind and heart on the presence of the living God. It is clear that development of an awareness of the presence of God, even outside the times of formal prayer, would make the service of the poor more easy and more single-minded. Hence the numerous references to this practice in the Conferences given to the Daughters of Charity.

*Sister is giving us an almost infallible means of loving God; she says that it's to walk always in His presence. That's very true; the more we see someone who is the epitome of good, the more we love him. Now, if we often imagine having God before our eyes, who is beauty and perfection personified, there's no doubt that the longer we look at Him, the more we'll love Him.*³⁰

²⁶ Cf. CR II, 5.

²⁷ CR XII, 2.

²⁸ CR II, 4.

²⁹ SV X, 457.

³⁰ SV IX, 471, or, English edition, 9, 370.

What image of God?...

16. It is interesting that M. Vincent here evokes the God of beauty, adding that *the more we look upon Him the more we shall love him*. If one is to live in the presence of God and refer one's activities of thought, word and action to God, what image of God is to be cultivated? A God of beauty, a loving God, is the suggestion of M. Vincent at that particular conference. The image of a God as a severe taskmaster, intent on inculcating servile fear, will not favour growth in simplicity. The renowned German-born scriptural expert, Joachim Jeremias, published in the 1960s a small work entitled *The Central Message of the New Testament* in which he highlighted the Fatherhood of God as central in the revelation of Christ. Becoming a true child of our loving Father is an indispensable condition for entering the Kingdom of Heaven.³¹ Philip the apostle — at once curious and fascinated by the frequent references our Lord made to his Father — asked that Jesus would show them the Father.³² The reply, *Philip... whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?* Only a short time before Philip would have looked at our Lord on his knees before him as he began to wash his feet. So our God is a God who puts on an apron, goes on his knees and washes feet. The God of Jesus Christ is a self-emptying God, a serving God. He is supremely the God of Vincent de Paul. Goodness for M. Vincent was not merely something to do but Someone to love. His God was a serving, loving God. And this God had emphasised that greatness comes from within, that the value of actions lies in the intention.³³

*Hence the really acceptable offering of purification of the spirit is that which is rendered not in a man-made temple but in the temple of the heart, where Christ the Lord is pleased to enter.*³⁴

Why are you fearful?

17. Fear must be considered as one of the obstacles to the growth of the virtue of simplicity. A present-day English contemplative nun has noted that *most men and women spend their lives running away from fear or, to express it dramatically but none the less really, from feeling unimportant*.³⁵ Fear that is born of human respect or from an excessive spirit of competitiveness can propel us into inauthentic

³¹ Mt 18:3.

³² Jn 14:8-9.

³³ Mt 6:4, 6, 18.

³⁴ St. Laurence Justinian as quoted in the Office of Readings of the Memorial of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

³⁵ RUTH BURROWS, O.D.C., in *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, p. 84.

ways of acting and of speaking. M. Vincent would have seen much of it in the Court circles and in the aristocratic stratum of society that he entered after his arrival in Paris.

*We hardly meet anyone at the present day who speaks as he thinks. The world overflows with duplicity.... It is essential that we be on our guard against appearing crafty, clever, wily and, above all, using double-meaning language.*³⁶

When in August 1659 M. Vincent spoke those words, one wonders if he was recalling his experience of working with Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, who were not only familiar with Machiavellian theory but practitioners of it, and would have projected themselves to M. Vincent as *crafty, clever and, wily*.³⁷

18. *The kingdom of the arrière pensée is where all human debates occur*, observed Paul Valery,³⁸ and few must have been as aware as M. Vincent of that truth. Not only in Court circles and among the politicians of his day but in the world of ecclesiastics he would have noticed the hollowness and the veneer that often masked the unspoken thought. Nor was the pulpit an artificiality-free zone. The parading of an array of classical learning was frequently substituted for the word of God and basic simple catechesis. *The hungry sheep look up and are not fed*.³⁹ M. Vincent was well aware of the artificiality of much preaching in his time. The antidote which he vigorously proposed to his missionaries was simplicity in thought and expression.

*We should be more careful to practise it (simplicity) during missions, especially when we proclaim the word of God to country people, to whom, because they are simple, God speaks through us. For this reason our style of preaching and catechising should be simple.... We should take care not to preach any far-fetched or too subtly contrived ideas or pointless distinctions from the pulpit of truth.*⁴⁰

³⁶ SV XII, 302-303.

³⁷ In a lecture delivered in Rome in November 2004, Fr. Timothy Radcliffe OP spoke of a “crisis of truthfulness” in Western society. A few weeks previously, Radcliffe said, a British study found that 67% of the public did not expect to be told the truth by members of parliament, and 70% expect to be lied to by government ministers. The only professional groups that fared worse were real estate agents and journalists. Fr. Radcliffe wryly commented “Thank God, they did not ask about the clergy....”

³⁸ Quoted by F. VARILLON in *L'Humilité de Dieu*, p. 96.

³⁹ JOHN MILTON in *Lycidas*.

⁴⁰ CR XII, 5.

Stripping one's vines...

19. Rather like the River Nile which, flowing between its banks, succeeds in irrigating hundreds of hectares of land, making them fertile, so the virtue of simplicity will flower in a variety of forms.⁴¹ More than an attitude, simplicity is a spirit that presupposes an ensemble of virtues. In authentic simplicity one will find humility, sincerity, truth, modesty. A constellation of such virtues will generate a certain spontaneity and ease of approach to others that can facilitate greater openness in them. One thinks of Blessed Pope John XIII and his disarming simplicity that put people so much at their ease in his presence. In his *Journal of a Soul* he wrote:

*The more mature I grow in years and experience the more I recognise that the surest way to make myself holy... lies in the constant effort to reduce everything, principles, aims, position, business, to the utmost simplicity and tranquillity; I must always take care to strip my vines of all useless foliage and spreading tendrils, and concentrate on what is truth, justice and charity, above all charity.*⁴²

20. In an age of consumerism a simplicity of lifestyle, motivated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, can be compelling and prophetic. The modern world, for all its complexity and technology, seems to experience a thirst for simplicity in word, in lifestyle, in action. Such simplicity of lifestyle is silently eloquent of the all-sufficiency of trust in the God who clothes with beauty the lilies of the fields, providing food for the birds of the air and counseling humans not to be anxious for the morrow.⁴³ Such simplicity when lived authentically can radiate a serenity that is a healing therapy for the poor.

The mother and mold of all moral virtues

The virtue of evangelical simplicity is indissolubly united in St. Vincent's thought with the virtue of prudence. He sees the marriage of simplicity and prudence as blessed by Jesus Christ who would have his disciples *wise as serpents and simple as doves*.⁴⁴ Were he living in today's world he would note the popularity of the present-day cult of transparency that flourishes (or often does not!) in the world of business, politics, administration, and accountability.

⁴¹ T.S. ELIOT in his poem, *Four Quartets - Little Gidding*, writes of "a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)."

⁴² *Journal of a Soul*, Retreat 1948 (53).

⁴³ Cf. Mt 6:25-27, 34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 10:16.

The cult may have arisen as a reaction to the widespread adoption of the tactics of dissemblance and cover-up in our present-day culture. M. Vincent's endorsement of such transparency would not be a full approval of what is known today in some countries as "political correctness." He would note, too, that in the Western culture there prevails at the present time a certain mercilessness in arriving at the truth through exposure that is not always consonant with the supreme rule of *speaking the truth in love*.⁴⁵ Hence the need of the virtue of prudence which, according to Aquinas, is *the mold and mother of all the moral virtues, while charity molds even prudence itself*.⁴⁶

21. That St. Vincent was familiar with the teaching of Aquinas on the virtue of prudence is evidenced by a little phrase which he cites in the paragraph devoted to prudence in the Common Rules for his missionaries.

*In actual practice — he writes — this virtue is about choosing the right way to do things.*⁴⁷

This is a clear echo of the *recta ratio agibilium* (the right reason of doing) which St. Thomas links to the virtue of prudence.⁴⁸ Immediately St. Vincent raises the question to the supernatural plane as he continues:

*We should make it a sacred principle, then..., that since we are working for God we will always choose God-related ways for carrying out our work, and see and judge things from Christ's point of view and not from a worldly-wise one; and not according to the feeble reasoning of our own mind either.*⁴⁹

22. It is clear that St. Vincent is here writing of supernatural prudence, and in this context Josef Pieper makes a profound assertion.

The highest and most fruitful achievement of Christian life depends on the felicitous collaboration of prudence and charity.... Charity, being participation by grace in the life of the Trinitarian God, is in essence a gift ultimately beyond the power of man's will or reason to bestow.... The divine love conferred by grace shapes from the ground up and throughout

⁴⁵ Eph 4:15.

⁴⁶ Quaest. Disput. 14:5 ad 11.

⁴⁷ CR II, 5.

⁴⁸ JOSEF PIEPER in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, Notre Dame Press, 1966, p. 29.

⁴⁹ CR II, 5.

the innermost core of the most commonplace moral action of a Christian, even though that action may be “outwardly” without special distinguishing characteristics.... In proportion to the growth of the theological virtue love there unfolds in the man who has received grace the sevenfold gift of the spirit; in the same proportion human prudence receives, more tangibly and more audibly, the aid of “the gift of counsel,” “donum consilii.” The gift of counsel corresponds to prudence, helping and perfecting it.⁵⁰

Two good and inseparable sisters

23. In the conference on Simplicity and Prudence given on 14 March 1659, M. Vincent treats at some length the virtue of simplicity before taking up that of prudence. When in the second half of the conference he turns to the virtue of prudence, there are clear resonances of St. Thomas Aquinas’ treatment of that virtue, but they are coloured by M. Vincent’s own convictions as well as by his sensitivity to the group of priests and brothers to whom he was speaking.⁵¹ At one point he states that there is no difference between the two virtues.

Prudence and simplicity tend to the same end, which is to speak well and act well, and one cannot exist without the other. I know, however, that a difference will be found to exist between them by a distinction of the reason; but, in reality, they have only the one and the same substance and object.... They are two good and inseparable sisters.⁵²

Throughout the conference one finds a pendulum-like swing between what natural prudence suggests and the prudence that is shot through with the *agape* of God. Our invariable rule must be *to judge all things as our Lord has judged them; and I say always and in all things, and to ask ourselves on occasions: “How did our Lord judge this? How did he act in the like case?”*⁵³ Examples are taken from the gospel to illustrate the virtue of prudence: the reply of our Lord on the question of tribute to Caesar and that given to the accusers of the woman caught in the act of adultery.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38; See also *Summa Theologica*, II-II 52, 2.

⁵¹ Simplicity, as expounded by St. Vincent, would relate to truth in St. Thomas’ treatment of the moral virtues. Simplicity is a facet of truth which in turn is related to justice. Simplicity completes truth in so far as that it connects with rightness of intention, which will exclude all duplicity.

⁵² SV XII, 176.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 178.

25. While M. Vincent considers that simplicity and prudence cannot be separated,⁵⁴ he treats simplicity more expansively in his conferences and correspondence. This is particularly so when he is addressing the Daughters of Charity. When talking to the Daughters of Charity about simplicity, he invariably states that the virtue of humility is its inseparable partner, while with the missionaries he tends to emphasise that the virtue of prudence is the complement of simplicity. In the final chapter of the Common Rules, which one could regard as a sort of Founder's spiritual testament in which the features of the Congregation of the Mission receive their definitive lines, M. Vincent returns once again to the virtue of simplicity, as if to underline once more its importance. He sets down the principle:

*As simplicity is the principal and most characteristic virtue of missionaries, we should show it at all times and in all circumstances. We should be more careful to practise it during missions, especially when we proclaim the word of God to country people, to whom, because they are simple, God speaks through us.*⁵⁵

What he enunciates in the remainder of this paragraph about clarity of exposition would be fully endorsed by any school of modern media communications or a professional in the art of public relations. Perhaps the only difference would be M. Vincent's presenting of Christ, the Lord, as the supreme model of all good communication.

Two centuries later...

26. Almost two centuries after the death of St. Vincent, the Danish Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, published a work entitled, *Purity of heart is to will one thing*.⁵⁶ The work has become a classic. Its title would have seized the imagination of M. Vincent who gave so much thought to purity of heart and of intention in all that one does and thinks and says. Furthermore the work would have greatly interested him for the reason that that a consequence to willing one thing by a heart that is pure leads infallibly to the accomplishment of the will of God. And is not the accomplishment of the will of God through Christ Jesus a cardinal feature of St. Vincent's spirituality and the summit of all holiness?

27. In his introduction to the English translation of Kierkegaard's work, Douglas Steere alluded to another brief work of Kierkegaard's

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵⁵ CR XII, 5.

⁵⁶ English translation by Douglas V. Steere, published by Harper, 1938.

entitled, *The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*. Summarising Kierkegaard's thought Douglas Steere writes:

The apostle may be a commoner, a fisherman, a one-talent man by nature, or he may have ten talents — yet all that he has is dedicated to the service of the Eternal and as such is lifted up. The genius speaks with brilliance and charm. The apostle speaks with authority. The way of the genius is a way closed to all but a few. The way of the apostle is a way open to all as individuals — even to the genius himself if he can forsake the absorbing satisfactions of a brilliant self-sufficiency and be ready to will one thing.

It has been the glorious distinction of M. Vincent that he proved himself to be both a genius and an apostle. To this genius and apostle, *Le grand saint du Grand Siècle*, let us leave the final word.

Now, if there is any community that ought to make profession of simplicity, it is ours, for, see this well, my Brothers, duplicity is the bane of a Missionary; duplicity deprives him of his spirit; not to be sincere and simple in the eyes of God and men is the venom and the poison of the Congregation of the Mission. The virtue of simplicity, then, my Brothers, simplicity, my Brothers, ah, how beautiful it is!⁵⁷

⁵⁷ SV XII, 303.