

The Practice of Love and the Vincentian Charisma

by Andrés Motto, C.M.

Province of Argentina

The first encyclical letter of Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*,¹ responds to two basic questions: 1) Can one really love God? 2) Can one authentically love the neighbor when this might appear to be foreign to us, or even more, might disturb us? In other words, in the midst of a violent era (where religious aggression is present) and at the beginning of his Pontificate, it is good that the Pope reminds us about that which is central to Christianity: love.

Faithful to the theology of holiness, the conclusion of the document makes reference to various saints who are outstanding for their practice of social charity. St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac are among those explicitly mentioned (cf. DCE 40). Since they are mentioned in this document and since the question about loving God and neighbor is raised, we believe that it is a good time to engage in a Vincentian reflection on the practical ways of love. In order to accomplish this we shall apply the thoughts of our Founder to the second part of the encyclical. The second section is very concrete and limited in its scope; that is, it points out some aspects concerning the practice of love. The central question is the following: Is charitable help that Christians undertake on behalf of those in need — is this help still valid? As we shall see, the future of our existence and ministry is in play as we attempt to respond to this question.

Models of love

Benedict XVI sees the Holy Trinity as the source of love-charity. He presents Trinitarian love not merely *ad intra* but as fundamentally *ad extra* (cf. DCE 30). His second reference is to the primitive Church. Here he makes an interesting biblical reference and then an

¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Encyclical Letter "Deus Caritas Est,"* was published on 25 January 2006. Hereafter this document will be cited as DCE.

historical reference in which he highlights the enduring concern of the primitive Church that no one should be excluded from rejoicing in the necessary material goods that enable people to live with dignity. Indeed, this form of assistance is not limited to those persons who are members of the Church, but is extended to all those who are in need (cf. DCE 20-25).

It is interesting to analyze the fact that when St. Vincent refers to the source of love, he also holds forth the Triune God and the primitive Church. Thus, when he refers to God,² he points out that God is always love and love in ever new ways. God's love is creative.³ God desires certain things of men and women but God does not ask them to do what they cannot do.⁴ Vincent compares the goodness of God to the goodness of a kind father:

*Once God conceives an affection for a soul He will bear with it, no matter what it may do. Have you ever seen a father with a little child that he loves dearly? He puts up with all that the child does to him, nay, even he sometimes says to it: "Bite me, my child?" How comes this? It is because he loves this little child. God behaves in the same way toward us.*⁵

Vincent understands that God is infinite love and this love explains the unity of God and the distinction of persons in God. Charity is present at the beginning and constitutes the divine Persons, constitutes their communion.⁶ Vincent liked to contemplate the Trinitarian mystery *ad extra* as an unfathomable mystery of love that leads to action for communion. Thus, the divine processions are an exchange of love.

Vincent also contemplated the Trinitarian mystery from the perspective of the economy of salvation. He views the Trinitarian missions as another expression of love. He also highlights the unity of the divine work as he states that the whole work *ad extra* constitutes the three persons: the three persons are agents of

² Cf. GIUSEPPE TOSCANI, "Dios," in COLLECTION, *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Vicenciana*, CEME, Salamanca 1995, pp. 119-141; MIGUEL LORET, *La comunidad vicenciana, realidad viva de fe*, in COLLECTION, *Identidad Vicenciana en un mundo de increencia*, CEME, Salamanca 1990, pp. 161-180.

³ As Vincent says good-bye to St. Louise, he expresses this conviction in his letter: *I wish you a young heart and a love in its first bloom for Him Who loves us unceasingly and as tenderly as if he were just beginning to love us. For all God's pleasures are ever new and full of variety, although he never changes* (SV I, 416-417; English edition I, 408).

⁴ *God wills only what is within your power* (SV VIII, 42; English edition VIII, 50).

⁵ SV XI, 388; Repetition of Prayer, 19 November 1656.

⁶ Cf. SV XII, 256-257.

creation, incarnation, redemption and sanctification. Love occupies a primary place in the divine missions and in the consequent Trinitarian indwelling within women and men. God comes lovingly to dwell with humankind:

... it is not only the Father who loves us but rather the three divine Persons come to us and dwell with us. Indeed, the souls that love the Lord are the dwelling places of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The souls that love the Lord are the places where the Father perpetually begets the Son and where the Holy Spirit unceasingly proceeds from the Father and the Son.⁷

The most creative aspect of Vincentian Trinitarian theology is that it moves from a metaphysical contemplation of this mystery to viewing this mystery as an inspiring model for human interaction. Vincent draws from this mystery very concrete consequences and applies these consequences to a community that commits itself to God through service of the poor. In this way Vincent follows the example of the Triune God who joins his thoughts about himself to providence for the world. We ought to be concerned about the spiritual as well as the material dimensions of life and this applies to ourselves and to others:

May it please the goodness of God that, according to your desire, they may not divert you from spiritual ones. May he share with us the eternal thoughts He has of himself while continuously giving His full attention to the direction of the world and to providing for the needs of all his creatures, even down to a tiny gnat!⁸

Since the Triune God is perfect unity, communities ought to be a reflection of this unity and love. When a community fixes its eyes on the Trinity, then unity and charity come to life in this community. St. Vincent invites the members to *trinitarianize* their community because the mystery of the Trinity is the soul of the common life. Therefore, all the members of the community are called to live in full reciprocity, sharing their lives and apostolate:

Since God is but One in Himself, and in God there are three Persons, without the Father being greater than the Son or the Son being greater than the Holy Spirit, it should be the same for the Daughters of Charity. They should be the image of the Most Holy Trinity; and even though they are several, they should form but one heart and one mind. Among the three

⁷ SV XI, 44; Conference to the Missionaries, *On the love of God* [undated].

⁸ SV I, 475; English edition I, 463.

*Persons of the Most Blessed Trinity, even though their operations are diverse and attributed to each one in particular, they are related to one another.... In like manner, among the Daughters of Charity the Sister who is with those who are poor must be in close contact with the Sister who looks after the children, and vice-versa.*⁹

A community that is inspired by the Trinity, is characterized by its kindness and by a love that wells up from the hearts of the individual members. Kindness allows for quality interactions to take place: a sharing of experiences that unlocks people's hearts.¹⁰ The community will also be a place of forgiveness and reconciliation. Indeed, the community ought to be a messenger of God's mercy that is expressed in gestures of forgiveness. St. Vincent was well aware of the difficulties involved in living together. He understood the problems that had to be confronted in order to achieve a true fraternal life. Therefore, he invites the members of the community to allow themselves to be guided by the goodness of God who is mindful of the least hints of goodness in each person. With this perspective and with infinite patience, men and women are transformed by love. This ought to be the behavior and attitude that all Christians assume toward their sisters and brothers.

Vincent asks superiors to be the first ones to practice this charity and humility. Inspired by the Triune God, he breaks the monarchical image of religious authority; he *demystifies* this image and orients authority toward service:

*And what is there in God? There is equality of persons and unity of essence. And what does that teach you, except that all of you, such as you are, must become one and equal. If there has to be a Superior — a Sister Servant — then she should be an example of virtue and humility to others: the first to ask forgiveness, the first to set aside her own opinion to follow that of another.*¹¹

This Trinitarian reflection not only leads Vincent to reestablish the internal life of the community but also leads him to place the community at the service of restoring dignity to the poor. The members of the community live together in imitation of the Trinity

⁹ SV XIII, 633; English edition XIIIb, 274-275. This Vincentian teaching inspired St. Louise who wrote: *Remember me to all our sisters and tell them always to remember the advice of Monsieur Vincent especially forbearance and cordiality so as to honor the unity and the diversity of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity (Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac, p. 289).*

¹⁰ Cf. SV XIII, 641; English edition XIIIb, 281.

¹¹ SV XIII, 634; English edition XIIIb, 275.

in order to attend to the poor. Our community is organized to serve the poor and from this community that serves the poor arises a contemplation of God's action in scripture. For St. Vincent, the God-community-of-love is unable to validate the deprivation of life that many groups of people are forced to endure. As poverty becomes more unjust, it also becomes clear that it results from the avarice of the powerful and not from a sterile earth. Therefore, the Vincentian community is not an end in itself but is a community for the mission. The community acquires its meaning in as much as it opens itself to others, especially the poor. To be together allows the members to discern, in a better way, the cries of the poor and thus come to their assistance.

Before speaking of the Trinity, one should *proclaim* this mystery by living in an environment of charity — charity within the community and charity that extends beyond the religious community. People should live together with one heart and one soul. If each community lived the divine life of perfect communion it would be a source of missionary enlightenment. That is, a community inspired by the Trinitarian model would possess an evangelizing mission and charity as essential elements. Thus as a missionary community, it would have to announce the Good News and invite all people to live the fullness of baptism that introduces them into the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As St. Vincent points out the *ad intra* and *ad extra* dimensions of the Trinity, our community ought to live this double movement: love within the Congregation and missionary love, especially love for the most destitute. Indeed, the one form of love makes the other coherent. Thus we can see that for our Founder, Trinitarian theology is the foundation of his theology of charity. This loving meditation on the Trinity will be in the forefront of his mind as he structures the vocation, mission and community life of the Congregations and Confraternities that serve the poor.

With respect to the primitive Church, our Founder is convinced that there was no one who was poor because they combated any attachment to the goods of the earth.¹² This was a vice that he saw as

¹² In this respect St. Vincent coincides with some humanists of the Renaissance who presented the primitive Church as one in which all things were shared by everyone. They also affirmed that the excessive desire to possess material goods provokes innumerable evils in men and women. Thomas More in *Utopia* states that all citizens are equal. There is no private property and differences in social status disappear. Work is performed in a balanced way so that the individual is not alienated. People work for six days so that they can dedicate themselves to other tasks (cf. MORO THOMAS, *Utopia*, Alianza, Madrid 1991). At the same time Erasmus of Rotterdam points out that the love of wealth is the greatest folly of humankind... and the Church

a reality in his own time and that seemed to become more pronounced among laity, religious and clerics:

*Fifteen conferences were held here to find out what was the cause of the wretched state of the Church and of ecclesiastics who are so attached to possessions and to the desire to amass them. It was pointed out that this has happened ever since ecclesiastical goods were divided so that each one was given his own share and portion. Because in the beginning, everything was held in common and each one was provided only with what he needed. Oh! how the Church flourished then and how virtuous and perfect were her ecclesiastics!*¹³

Vincent understands that the charity of the primitive Church was expressed through detachment. Progress in love demands giving oneself to God and being detached from material goods.¹⁴ Thus the virtuous person is concerned about spiritual goods and serving the neighbor and like Diogenes of Sinope is looking for poverty. Vincent looks at the comfortable life of his time and affirms that evangelical poverty, as practiced by the primitive Church, leads to virtue. He adds this motivation: to love the lifestyle of a friend leads one to love that friend more and so love the friends of the friend.¹⁵

Inspired by the primitive Church, Vincent points out another way of practicing charity: in community life one should not speak to a brother about his faults, but at times it will be necessary to have recourse to the superior. The confrere implicated might go to the superior or another confrere might tell the superior that an individual confrere is not doing well. Vincent believes that one has an obligation in charity to tell the superior the notable faults and temptations of the neighbor.¹⁶ Such an action is not seen as a procedure of pure discipline or some underhanded denunciation, but rather is seen as an act of charity. To act in this way opens up to us a series of reasons, but here we will point out the primary reason:¹⁷

(cf. ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM, *Elogio de la Locura*, Alianza, Madrid 1993, pp. 95-96, 115-124).

¹³ SV XII, 364; Conference to the Missionaries, "On Vows," 7 November 1659. See also, SV XII, 378-379; Conference to the Missionaries, "On Poverty," 15 November 1659.

¹⁴ Cf. SV XII, 61; Conference to the Missionaries, "On Silence," 20 September 1658.

¹⁵ Cf. SV X, 222; Conference to the Daughters of Charity, "On Poverty," 20 August 1656.

¹⁶ Cf. SV XII, 362-364; Conference to the Missionaries, "On the obligation of acquainting the Superior with the notable faults and temptations of our neighbor," 24 October 1659.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 355-363.

to disclose faults to one in a position of authority was the practice of the primitive Church and, according to St. Vincent, said custom was maintained during the first four or five hundred years of the Church's history. Indeed, various saints publicly accused themselves of their faults, for example, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Paul, and St. Augustine.

Benedict XVI provides a list of saints who distinguished themselves in the practice of charity. He begins the list with St. Martin of Tours who lived during the fourth century (DCE 40). Vincent de Paul also motivated his communities by placing before them charitable figures such as St. Martin of Tours, St. Roch, St. Lawrence, St. Louis, King of France, and St. Francis Xavier. He makes special mention of St. Genevieve. As he narrates some details of their lives, he is moved as he remembers the charitable gesture of St. Martin of Tours in sharing his cloak with a poor person:

Holy Church reverences him [Saint Martin] so that she represents Saint Martin to us on horseback, dividing his cloak to give half of it to a poor man. And Our Lord himself, to let His servant see how pleasing this act of charity was to Him, appeared to Saint Martin that night clad in half of his cloak. And that, Gentlemen and my Brethern, shows us how God and His Church, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, esteems the charity that is shown toward the poor.¹⁸

Necessary conditions so that charity does not fade

The second part of the encyclical continues to examine the complex bonds between charity and justice. It begins by affirming the fact that charitable works should never become an excuse to put aside the obligations of justice; for example, to collaborate with a home for the elderly does not excuse me from paying just salaries. In this respect we must recognize that on more than one occasion Christians have lived this mistaken and unintelligible practice of charity. Entering once again into the historical area, the encyclical points out that with the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, the struggle for justice was rightly focused on the correct ordering of capital and work. Said question was slowly perceived by the Church

¹⁸ SV XI, 367; Repetition of Prayer, 11 November 1656. Note that the Christian community so valued charity that despite the fact that St. Martin became a bishop, popular devotion still remembers him as a catechumen and Roman soldier who shared his cloak with a poor person: *The Church has such esteem and veneration for this act of charity on the part of Saint Martin that she represents him to us, not as a Bishop or an Archbishop, although they are very great and lofty dignities, but she shows him to us on horseback, dressed as a soldier, cutting his cloak in half* (SV XII, 69; Repetition of Prayer, 11 November 1658).

and, if her response was a little late, nonetheless, it was very strong. The Church placed her answer in the context of what we call the Social Doctrine of the Church (DCE 26-27). The bonds between charity and justice led her to develop the connection between the Church and the State. The document clarifies the fact that political action is fundamentally a task of the State and social action must be just — a government that separates itself from justice becomes a band of thieves. The Church respects the legitimate autonomy of the State. At the same time, as a service to society, the Church offers humankind the Christian faith which purifies reason and helps the cause of justice — the virtue of justice is developed in an area that is free from all ethical blindness. Through self-reasoning it is possible to arrive at this much desired justice. On the other hand, Benedict XVI resolutely affirms the fact that the Church ought to exercise this service of love toward those who are in need. It would be a myth to think that in a very efficient State, the assistance of a group, distinct from the State, would become unnecessary. Therefore, it is legitimate that the Church has its own proper organizations that carry forward her social charity. The State should not view this action of the Church in a negative way but should understand that it is proper to an adult State to promote subsidiarity thus fomenting that which is good, especially toward those who suffer great pain.

Clearly the era of St. Vincent was quite distinct from that of Benedict XVI. At that time people did not speak about the Social Doctrine of the Church and people lived in a ritualistic State. Even so, Vincent de Paul knew how to unite charity with justice and he was pained to see these two realities separated. Thus with pain he said: *there is a great difference between being a Catholic and being an upright man.*¹⁹ We know that for our Founder the love of neighbor was indissolubly united with love for God. The proof of one's love for God is seen in the way that one loves the neighbor. Love of neighbor ought to be concrete, constant and considerate. The charitable heart rejoices in doing good and is pained at the possibility of offending another. He remarks that for a Christian, the practice of charity is an obligation since this is a divine precept that applies to everyone. In fact those who practice charity fulfill the whole law because the laws of God point us toward charity.²⁰ Through charity all the demands of justice are fulfilled and an affective characteristic is given to this work, for it should be done in the spirit of helping a friend. Indeed, charity proposes a universal love:

¹⁹ SV II, 447; English edition II, 494.

²⁰ Cf. SV XII, 260; Conference to the Missionaries, "On Indifference," 16 May 1659.

*For charity performs such good to one's neighbor as may be fairly hoped for from a faithful friend.*²¹

When St. Vincent introduced people to charitable works in the world of the poor, he did not do this to calm their consciences, but rather to disturb their consciences. He provokes them to examine their conscience in a calm and adult manner to see if they were evangelizing in a just way. It is impossible to speak about true religion that is not interested and concerned about people or that exploits people. Indeed, the Vincentian organization of charity raises the question about God and the poor and places this question in the midst of the ongoing situation of spiritual and material misery, in the midst of the exploitation and injustice which the people experience. How can this situation be resolved? If the question comes from God and the poor, St. Vincent knew that the answer could only be given by God and the poor themselves. For Vincent, the coming of the Kingdom constitutes the center of Jesus' message (cf. Mark 1:14-15). The most surprising characteristic of this Kingdom is that the poor are destined for this Kingdom in a preferential way (cf. Luke 6:20). For Vincent de Paul to say that *the Kingdom of God is theirs* means to proclaim that Jesus defends the poor today as he did yesterday. On earth the Lord Jesus defended the poor and showered them with charity while acting justly toward them. In actuality, Jesus continues to act justly toward the poor to the degree that he finds instruments who are willing to continue his mission. The relationship between Christ and the poor and the poor with Christ takes on fundamental importance in the discovery of the dignity that the dispossessed assume within the Church. Vincentian ethics finds in the service of the poor a commitment to action that leads to the reestablishment of justice. Jesus Christ is the justice of God for the poor. In the conflicts of the 16th century, the poor, without knowing it, were the bearers of the demands of God's justice.

Another Vincentian way of living in accord with charitable justice is to put aside every partisan spirit, not to abuse power nor utilize power against those people who are under our care and not to use power to promote improperly those who share our faith. In this regard it is interesting to note the words that Vincent wrote to Fr. Gallais, the superior of Sedan who wanted to defend a Catholic who was going to be tried in a place where the majority of the judges were Huguenots:

And if it is on behalf of a Catholic against a member of that religion, how do you know if the Catholic is in the right in the

²¹ SV XII, 264; Conference to the Missionaries, "On Charity," 30 May 1659.

justice he is demanding? There is a great difference between being a Catholic and being an upright man.... "But," you may say to me, "could I watch a Catholic being oppressed by a member of the religion without doing something for him?" I reply that this oppression must have some cause and is due either to something the Catholic owes the Huguenot or some insult or injury done to him. Now, if one of these be the case, is it not fair that the Huguenot seek redress in justice? Is the Catholic less subject to the law because he is a Catholic, or do you have greater reason to get mixed up in his affair than Our Lord did in refusing to have anything to do with those of the man who complained to Him about his brother? "Yes, but the judges belong to the religion." That is true, but they are also lawyers who judge according to laws, customs and ordinances. In addition to following their conscience, they profess to be men of honor.²²

In reference to Vincentian morality, charity is constituted as primary but depends on the promotion of justice since charity is built in harmony with justice. Thus to be charitable implies that one is mindful of the obligation of justice. Only a charity that is misunderstood will be neglectful of those obligations. Placing a value on natural rights, Vincent pointed out that *the obligations of justice have priority over those of charity*.²³ Let us look at some examples: 1) Vincent asks a priest to respect the intentions of a donor of certain alms, even though there are many other needs to attend to, for *there is no act of charity that is not accompanied by justice*.²⁴ 2) Vincent speaks with a member of the Congregation of the Mission who is going to rescue captives in North Africa. He asks this person to recover the money that was sent to rescue a captive because he had used this money for another need. He points out the need to respect the obligation of justice for this is what makes us truly charitable.²⁵

In fact both virtues are radically transformative and mutually powerful. On the one hand, justice does not allow charity to be stranded in intimacy. On the other hand, charity channels justice and enables it to avoid possible and frequent deviations toward legalism or excessive law suits and even cruelty and vengeance.²⁶ Furthermore, charity marks a *plus sign* in human living. For without blemishing the rights of justice, charity can lead people to gratitude and the

²² SV II, 447-450; English edition II, 494, 496.

²³ SV VII, 620; English edition VII, 633.

²⁴ SV II, 54; English edition II, 68. Cf. SV II, 61; English edition II, 74-75.

²⁵ Cf. SV V, 395; English edition V, 398.

²⁶ Cf. SV V, 404; English edition V, 412.

renunciation of self for another. Then charity can demand legislation. Charity shows us to be guided by the love that is inscribed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

We know that the struggle for charity and justice is one of the great demands of our society. Vincentian ethics does not separate ardent charity from the struggle for justice. Service on behalf of the poor allows us to encounter the God who asks that justice be done for the poor. For St. Vincent, this means that we identify ourselves with the most intimate sentiments of God and that we imitate the behavior of the Son of God who came to evangelize the poor. This commitment to justice on behalf of the poor, which arises from charity, makes our faith real.

Continuing with the document, Benedict XVI recognizes the difficulties in proclaiming charity but continues with the positive note of his first encyclical and expresses hope about the real possibilities of practicing social charity: 1) means of communication allow us to know very quickly the needs of people; 2) there are many technical advances that have great potential in serving those in need; 3) States normally favor groups that assist others, freeing them from taxes and providing them with resources; 4) there has been an increase in the number of volunteers who have developed multiple services; 5) in many places the Church and the State collaborate in providing help to victims; 6) there is a greater cooperation between distinct Christian churches in assisting those on the margins of society (DCE 30).

The Pope offers a possible profile of those persons who work in charitable organizations: 1) they act in response to another's need; 2) they are professionally competent and they put their hearts into their work; 3) they are not connected to a political party or a specific ideology; 4) they do not act out of personal interest nor do they proselytize.

As we examine these reflections with a Vincentian perspective, there will be many themes to analyze. Because of the brevity of this article, I will refer to only one theme. Since the Pope asks that charitable work be practiced with skill and kindness, this leads us to a profound reflection on the Vincentian doctrine of effective and affective love. When we refer to the effects of God's love, we immediately become involved in this dual division of love.²⁷ Vincent

²⁷ This teaching is taken from St. Francis de Sales (cf. ST. FRANCIS DE SALES, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book IV). This teaching also inspired St. Bernard (cf. ST. BERNARD, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Sermon 50). In other words, St. Vincent continued the *affective school* (*schola affectus*) of St. Bernard which also influenced St. Francis of Assisi, St. Bonaventure, St. Theresa of Jesus, and St. Francis de Sales.

explains the content of these two loves: *Affective love is a sort of overflowing of the person who loves into the person beloved or, indeed, a feeling of complacency or tenderness for the object loved, such as a father has for his child. Effective love consists in doing those things which the person beloved commands or desires.*²⁸ Affective love enables one to be passionate and moved by the plight of the other. He compares this love to that of a child who is unable to separate from his/her mother and who cries out the moment this separation occurs.²⁹ Thus, *affective love is the tender element of love.*³⁰ On the other hand, effective love consists of the concrete practice of charitable works, especially on behalf of the poor — works that are undertaken with courage, joy fidelity and love.³¹

Vincent maintains that affective and effective love are two complementary characteristics of love. In order to develop mercy, the first step should be the compassionate assimilation of the suffering of another. The affective union with the person in need enables people to experience in their own flesh the evil that another suffers. Affective love gives a certain tenderness to the details of any assistance — sympathy and empathy become the exquisite characteristics of daily service. Remember that in 17th century France there was great poverty and ignorance and many Christians had become *accustomed* to seeing suffering. Affective love enables one to be pained by the suffering of another and thus one can no longer remain a passive spectator.

On the other hand, effective love leads one to decide to work on behalf of the poor. Effective love accomplishes what affective love discovers. Such love acts creatively to guarantee that within the Church the poor are illustrious citizens. In this way effective love leads to concrete solutions to the evils that afflict the world of the poor. Viewing these two facets of love, effective love is primary in Vincentian ethics. Though affective love might be somewhat defective, those who practice effective love live charity to a higher

²⁸ SV XI, 43; Conference to the Missionaries, “On the Love of God,” [undated]. On another occasion he describes it in this way: *Affective love proceeds from the heart. The person who loves is filled with warmth and affection, is continually aware of the presence of God, finds satisfaction in thinking about Him, and spends her life imperceptibly in such contemplation. Thanks to this love, she does, with no difficulty — and even with pleasure — the most difficult things, and is vigilant and careful concerning anything that can make her pleasing to God; lastly, she basks in his divine love and takes no pleasure in any other thoughts* (SV IX, 475; English edition IX, 373).

²⁹ Cf. SV IX, 592-593; English edition IX, 466.

³⁰ SV IX, 592; English edition IX, 466.

³¹ Cf. SV IX, 593; English edition IX, 466.

degree. One who feels much does little for others.³² In order for charity to have this seat of honor, it should be active. Vincent's teaching about effective love is in accord with his ethics that gives action a privileged position. We should point out here that he returns to the refrain of Theresa: *works are love but good reasons are not*. From this position his teaching about love becomes clear:

*Let us love God, my Brethern, but let us love Him with all our strength and with the sweat of our brow. For very often many acts of love of God, of complacency, of benevolence, and such like interior affections and practices, although very good and very desirable, are yet to be suspected if they do not reach the practice of effective love... there are many... who flatter themselves by the warmth of their imagination; they rest content with the sweet discourses they have with God in prayer; they even speak to Him as though they were angels. But apart from this, should there be question of working for God, of suffering, of self-denial, of instructing the poor, of going out to seek the lost sheep, of loving to be in want, of accepting illness or disgrace, alas! They are no longer to be found; their courage fails them.*³³

Even though there might be periods of dryness when the affective matrix of love becomes clouded, this is no reason to abandon or put aside effective service and prayer. Beyond this crisis Vincentian morality indicates that affective and effective love should be joined together and are mutually necessary and complementary. Normally affective love is the first to arise but this is benevolence that becomes beneficial when love becomes effective. Affective love accompanies the development process of action and gives it a note of tenderness and warmth. In fact, service without affection can often become resentful and humbling to the recipients of charity. Whoever unites these two faces of love will love with tenderness, consistency and resoluteness. Indeed, a sign of having grown in charity is shown in our ability to live with both languages

³² With great clarity Vincent explains: *Some poor Sisters become discouraged. They hear that a certain Sister is so fervent, makes her prayer well, and has a deep love of God. They experience none of that; they think all is lost, they don't belong in the Company because they're not doing what the others are doing, and that it's better for them to leave, since they are there without the love of God. Now that's a mistake, dear Sisters. If you're living your vocation, you can be sure that you love God and that you love Him incomparably more perfectly than those who feel this love deeply but don't do what you do* (SV IX, 477; English edition IX, 374-375).

³³ SV XI, 45; Conference to the Missionaries, "On the Love of God," [undated].

of love.³⁴ Affective and effective love are gifts of God because God changes desire into reality and service into an expression of tenderness.³⁵ In order to make these two faces of love more graphic Vincent utilizes an image that is taken from family life: a father has two sons, one older and one younger. With the younger son the father has a very tender and good relationship but he is more demanding with the elder son who does the things that the father desires. At the hour of drawing up his will, the father gave the greater part of his goods to the older son. In other words, the father loved the younger son with a sensitive and tender love but his love for his older son is more effective.³⁶

Affective and effective love express our handing over of ourselves to God and to our sisters and brothers. St. Vincent, who continually recommended that his community live this affective and effective love, wanted the confreres to avoid all harshness in their relations with one another and in their relations with people outside the community. He proposed a lively affectivity, not as a search for sensuality, nor as some compensatory necessity, but rather as a way of living life as a gift. He sets forth a life of commitment to Christ and to the most poor, fulfilling our existence as we make our lives a life of love. He invites mothers and fathers to share affective and effective love with the infirm, prisoners, abandoned children, the hungry — many of whom never had a true family experience. For St. Vincent affective love is so strong that it invites us to become fond of the poor. In this way, our Founder becomes the balanced mentor of an ethics full of goodness, tenderness, and strength. In addition, as he unites affective love with effective love, he proposes a pastoral ministry of love which was a break with the rigidity that was so prevalent in the Church of his time.

³⁴ St. Vincent writes Brother Jean Barreau, Consul in Algiers who is a prisoner at the hands of Muslims because of a debt that he contracted in an attempt to rescue others who were also prisoners. This text is an example of joining effective love with affective love: *I think I wrote to you about how deeply grieved I have been by the evils you have suffered; that feeling is renewed within me every time I reflect on them. Although you cannot imagine how much I have been moved by this, you can, nevertheless, be sure that it touches me to the quick because, bearing you in my heart as I do, your sufferings can only be mine as well. Now for some reason, I am beginning to worry about your affairs, since they are among our most important ones. I have had someone speak to M. de Brienne about them. I have discussed them several times with the Duchesse d'Aiguillon and the other Ladies of Charity because they are the only persons to whom I can turn* (SV VI, 460-461; English edition VI, 479).

³⁵ Cf. SV VI, 550; English edition VI, 464-466.

³⁶ Cf. SV IX, 475-476; English edition IX, 373-374.

Those responsible for charitable action

Benedict XVI points out that the subject of charitable action is the whole Church. In his encyclical he stresses charitable ecclesial action and places the bishop in a position of priority. He underlines the fact that bishops should be welcoming and merciful toward the poor (DCE 32). He then continues to affirm a series of qualities that should be possessed by those who collaborate in these charitable works. 1) They should be guided by a faith that acts in love. 2) They should love men and women with the love of Jesus Christ. 3) They should serve with humility. This virtue will prevent two temptations; namely, feeling superior to the one served and the presumption that single-handedly one has to better the world, which in the long terms leads to discouragement. 4) They should be people of prayer — to be holy is not opposed to committing oneself to the struggle against misery. In fact, people should achieve such confidence in prayer that they feel comfortable placing before God the question: Why does God not act more visibly in history on behalf of those who are massacred or live on the margins of society? 5) They should possess a hope that makes them patiently active (DCE 33-39).

The encyclical makes reference to the particular charity that the bishops ought to have in relation to the poor. We are able to delve more deeply into this as we look at some of the many reflections that St. Vincent made on this theme. St. Vincent has a very high opinion of the bishop. He elaborated these ideas ideologically and was guided in this reflection by his reading of the early Fathers of the Church, the teachings of the Council of Trent and the theology of the School of Bérulle, which viewed the priestly state as a most excellent way of following God. Thus he writes to his friend Louis Abelly, the Vicar-General of Bayonne and praises his bishop:

... how astonished those people are, in my opinion, to see their prelate living like a real bishop... what can we not hope for from a prelate who has so well regulated his own life and that of his servants; who has given so many corporal and spiritual alms to his diocese; who takes care of poor prisoners; who is blessed with the conversion of heretics.³⁷

He also writes to a bishop who was recently installed in a diocese that had great need of him. In his greeting he included a vade mecum of how a prelate should be virtuous:

Christ, who offered Himself as surety for the poor, has already superabundantly responded to my wishes by choosing for the episcopate a Prelate who wishes to make himself useful, knows

³⁷ SV II, 2-3; English edition II, 4.

how to govern, is remarkable for his prudence and the integrity of his character, and promises to be a worthy successor of saints. How great are my joy and happiness at seeing that God has directed so well the course of events that, having made you grow from virtue to virtue, He now leads you from honor to honor.... May He who has set you apart to instruct His people in salvation maintain your flock in doing good and preserve your Church without stain or wrinkle under your guidance.³⁸

When speaking about the attitudes of the servant, Benedict XVI emphasized humility. This virtue is highly developed in Vincentian morality and spirituality. The question is: how can we live humble lives today? Following St. Vincent, we believe that this virtue ought to be verified in daily life. To make humility real we can provide some insights that hopefully will show the reality of humility and in this way charity will not fade. One way to make all of this concrete is to avoid comparisons. Pride and selfishness make us rejoice to see the evil in others; for example, selfish people might feel satisfied because they possess many things, yet find no rest as long as they see someone else who possesses more. On the other hand, humble people are able to concentrate on the goods that others possess as well as on their own goods and are able to be grateful for both. Also humble people are able to put things aside because they truly see these things as meaningless. They do not live to be seen by others, nor are they concerned about appearances and do not need to have others speak well of them — they are not slaves of public opinion. They flee from a life of self-sufficiency and are able to accept criticism —

³⁸ When speaking about charity, St. Vincent makes a special reference to the Bishop of Geneva. He sees Francis de Sales as the best example of charity. He says: *I had the happiness of speaking with the late Bishop of Geneva several times when he was alive. He was so good that God's goodness was clearly visible in his own* (SV III, 493; English edition III, 490). He indicates that the Bishop of Geneva was characterized by a great love of God that led him to combat sin and promote the Kingdom of God. He cared for all those who drew near to him and shared his possessions with those in need. His gentle charity is worthy of imitation by those people who are dedicated to charitable action. In doing so, they will avoid losing affectivity in their work. He invites people to follow the example of St. Francis de Sales who was gentle — who avoided anger, shouting and offending others. In this context, Vincent liked to describe some of his many charitable examples: *Our Blessed Father the Bishop of Geneva, has given us a wonderful example of this virtue. One evening a high-ranking person called on him and stayed into the night. His servants forgot to bring any candles, as they should have done. What do you think he said to them? He didn't reproach them for their fault, nor did he scold them; he simply said: "Well, boys, we could have used a bit of a candle." Act like that, Sisters and don't get into the habit of snapping at one another.... And don't use unbecoming language, such as, "You're annoying and obstinate," or the like* (SV IX, 159; English edition IX, 127-128).

self-criticism as well as criticism from others. They avoid moving through life as though they have no need for repentance. Ethical blindness is often loved and self-nourishing in people who lack humility. In other words, to work humbly from the perspective of personalism is another way of accepting the truth. It means that we accept the fact that the Kingdom of Heaven is composed of sinners who have been forgiven.

With regard to the poor, humility enables us to opt with integrity on their behalf. This implies choosing services that are frequently not desired by many people: little remuneration, hidden, no recognition, in vulgar places, no shining lights. To opt for the poor is to be in those places where there is no power — to dwell on the margins of society where there is risk and conflict. Vincentian humility adds something more to our relationships with those persons who are excluded: physical closeness and a loving presence. Humility allows us to be among the poor with respect and tenderness. We are able to communicate attitudes of joy and hope to a world where there are far too many tears. To live with the poor and seek solutions to problems with them enables us to avoid the temptation of obtaining followers who can distract us from the struggle for justice in the world of those who have been excluded.

Humility ought to lead us to an honest and courageous revision of our works and foment attitudes of mobility, flexibility and sincerity. We ought to review the quality of service — indeed we ought to prefer changes in style over changes in place. All of this should be done with the calm and humble acceptance of personal, community and provincial limitations.

Humility points out to us that we not only teach others but that we ought to allow others to instruct us. The poor will preach to us in a persuasive way if we allow them to do so. Therefore it is healthy to learn from the many values of the poor — one of which is gratitude. We ought to be grateful not only for extraordinary events but, more importantly, we should be grateful for life itself. We ought to value life as a gift that leads us to a gratitude that pervades every dimension of our life. This is the basis for celebration and we see how the humble show their gratitude through celebration. Here the constant, humble gratitude of Vincent de Paul is most enlightening.³⁹

³⁹ We mention here, as an example, his gratitude to Adrien Le Bon, a member of the Congregation of St. Victor (the Regular Canons of St. Augustine) and the former prior of Saint-Lazare. He donated this magnificent house of Saint-Lazare to St. Vincent and the Congregation of the Mission. Le Bon passed the rest of his life as a guest in the house of Saint-Lazare. Vincent always treated Adrien with the greatest tenderness and deference. He not only cared for him while at Saint-Lazare, but also when he traveled to other parts of France. He was able to find lodging in any house of the Congregation.

In the missionary endeavor, humility is lived in cultural openness, respect for that which is distinct and the joyful discovery of the truths and values of others. It also means that we accept the theological contributions of emerging nations. Humility allows the missionary to evangelize and be evangelized. — it allows the missionary to preach the Word of God revealed in Scripture and not his/her own word.

Deus Caritas Est reminds us that love is possible and that the Christian is able to practice charity because men and women are created to love and because God has gifted them with his love — charity. True faith leads us to live in love (DCE 39). Therefore, we can conclude that in the midst of a culture based on exclusion, xenophobia (more or less covered over), and violence reinforced with religious motives, charity proposes a love without frontiers, a love that seeks to resolve the root causes of problems. Therefore, charity, with its own creativeness, invites our inventive abilities to include those living on the margins into our celebration of life. Such creativity will lead us to the following steps: to recreate our Vincentian tradition and to seek new entrances into the future. At a time when there is a crisis of alternatives, when old forms of domination are repeated, charity ought to impel us to a new respect for the person and the community. In an era when evil is too often imitated, love should lead us to challenge this distorted reality in a more radical way than is presently operative. Before transforming structures, we, as Vincentians, ought to first allow the pain of the suffering ones to penetrate our hearts. Thus as their path of hardship becomes our path, we can recommit ourselves to restoring their lost dignity.

(CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M., translator)

When Le Bon passed through Montmirail and Richelieu, Vincent asked the communities to provide for him: *Vincent de Paul asks Guillaume Delville to feed and lodge free of charge in his house Adrien Le Bon, former Prior of Saint-Lazare, who has to go to Montmirail, and even to treat him as if he were the master of the property and persons* (SV II, 553; English edition II, 604. Cf. SV II, 485; English edition II, 534). Furthermore, St. Vincent points out that we should not forget our benefactors even if they fall into disgrace. In those moments we ought to help them: *what a happiness to become impoverished in order to oblige someone who has been our benefactor* (SV V, 179; English edition V, 181). Vincent also congratulates a superior who returned money to a benefactor who was experiencing some difficult moments: *if we are truly grateful for the acts of charity that have been done for us, we will always be ready to return willingly the goods our benefactors have given us, if it is in our power* (SV VIII, 18-19; English edition VIII, 24).