

Saint Vincent and Saint Louise in the Encyclical Letter “Deus Caritas Est”

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Love, the essence of Christianity

Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical is devoted to the essence of Christianity, love. According to St. John (1 Jn 4:8) it is the definition of God: *Deus Caritas Est*. In the prominent sections of the encyclical, the end of the first part and the general conclusion, there is a specific reference to the saints, that they are proof of that interplay which vibrates between love of God and love of the neighbour: “The saints... constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbour from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord and, conversely, this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others” (§ 18).

The mention of the saints is not just a passing reference. As a matter of fact the Pope clearly explains that the entire Christian teaching on the first commandment of love is concretised in lived witness: “But if in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be ‘devout’ and to perform my ‘religious duties,’ then my relationship with God will also grow arid” (§ 18).

Although the encyclical does not explicitly quote it, the mind is inexorably drawn towards chapter V of the Vatican II Constitution *Lumen gentium*, on “The universal call to holiness in the Church”: “It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of love” (§ 40). “The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one — that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God's Spirit” (§ 41).

We are all supposed to be holy. St. Paul had stressed that right from the start, writing to the first Christians and calling them “saints”; as baptised persons they were “consecrated” to God, and therefore holy. But by indicating their *being* he also stressed their *should be*. Jesus had said it: “You will be witnesses to me” (Acts 1:8).

Saints who are Martyrs and Saints who are Confessors

Certain persons are referred to as "holy" in an exceptional way, men and women who distinguished themselves by the heroic level of their fidelity and their witnessing. From the very start the Church started using the word "saint" for these witnesses to the faith who knew how to remain faithful even to the shedding of their blood. "Martyr" comes from a Greek word for "witness," and was confined to those who had witnessed to their faith in Jesus to the point of dying for it. "There is no greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends" (Jn 15:13). But those Christians who give their lives day after day may also be considered martyrs, although without the shedding of their blood, because they also are witnesses. The early Christians gave these people the title of "confessors." In Latin this word corresponded to the Greek "martyrs" but by convention it came to mean that specific type of witnessing which was given, day by day right up to the moment of death, even though there was no shedding of their blood.

As has been said, down through the centuries the Church, in different ways depending on circumstances of time, has proposed certain more significant persons for the veneration of the faithful. Originally it was by the *vox populi* and the jurisdiction of the local bishops, later by a centralised procedure based in Rome, eventually codified in the famous *Caelestis Hierusalem* of Urban VIII in 1634.

Although this procedure, systematised by Cardinal Prospero Lambertini (later Benedict XIV) in 1734, was considerably simplified by Pope John Paul II in 1983 (*Divinus perfectionis magister*), it still remains a fact that only for certain persons does the Church authorise public veneration, and that only certain persons are put forward as exceptional models. The criterion is the reputation for holiness which these persons have and, therefore, the special request of the People of God.

But the list of witnesses to Faith and Charity is far longer than that. Independently of the catalogue of those who, by beatification and canonization, have been given official and liturgical veneration by the Church, the life and death of so many others provide all of us with splendid examples.

Article 37 of *Tertio millennio adveniente* tells us that in our century the martyrs have returned, especially the unknown ones, the "unknown soldiers of God's great cause. As far as possible their witness should not be lost to the Church." In his speech at the Fifth Extraordinary Consistory on 13 June 1994, Pope John Paul II hoped that on the occasion of the Jubilee a "contemporary martyrology" should be compiled, and a commission for "the new martyrs" was appointed to prepare this new contemporary martyrology, and "The

Day of Ecumenical Commemoration for the New Martyrs” was celebrated on 7 May 2000.

On 25 April 2005 Benedict XV also made this point in his homily, when he visited the basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls: “The twentieth century was a period of martyrdom. Pope John Paul II stressed this, and he asked the Church to ‘up-date the Martyrology,’ and he beatified or canonised many martyrs of recent times. So, if the blood of martyrs is the seed of new Christians it is right that at the start of the third millennium we should expect a new flowering of the Church, especially in those places where it has most suffered for the faith and for witness to the Gospel.”

In 1999 our own international periodical *Vincentiana* devoted a whole issue to “Martyrs of the Vincentian Family in the Twentieth Century.”

Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac

Agenzia Fides, part of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, published in its series *The Saints of Charity in the Encyclical “Deus Caritas Est,”* profiles of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac, with an outline of their achievements, in the issues dated 07-04-2006 and 12-04 2006.

St. Vincent de Paul was beatified on 21 August 1729 and canonized on 16 June 1737. The process for St. Louise de Marillac started more than two centuries after her death, in 1886. She was beatified on 9 May 1920 and canonized on 11 March 1934. The time lapse is explained by the opposition, which always characterised the community of the Missioners and the Daughters of Charity, to what they thought of as a glorification contrary to humility.

A statement from the General Assembly of 1835 clearly explains this point of view; in Session VIII it explicitly rejected a proposal from the Roman confreres to support the process for the beatification of Fr Francesco Folchi, who had died with the reputation of holiness in 1823: *The proposal is unanimously rejected, both because it seems to go against the humility of our institute, and because the proofs on which the cause could be based seem to be of little weight.* The only exception made, then, was in the 18th century, for the Founder, St. Vincent de Paul.

An official attempt to break new ground with respect to this understanding of humility would seem to have been made by the Superior General Fr François Verdier in his circular letter of 1 January 1931. In 1843 the process for our martyrs in China, Perboyre and Clet, had been opened. And it was to be 1900 before the beginning of the processes for the other martyrs and confessors of the Vincentian Family.

Fr Verdier, referring back to the previous stand taken by the Assembly of 1835, said: "The motive for this prohibition was based on the humility which should be characteristic of the Little Company. With the passage of time outlooks change and today, while regarding humility as one of the virtues most necessary for our Congregation, we do not think that we are failing in it by working with the Roman tribunal on the causes of several confreres."

For anyone who knows anything of Church history the outstanding example of St. Vincent and St. Louise is obvious. They are two people who enormously influenced the development of the Church in the 17th century, and their contribution was decisive in enabling it to make an adequate response in the face of the renewal which was needed, in the essential fields of clergy formation, advancement of women, bringing lay persons to the fore, and the systematization of charity. Because of this, Popes have clearly given official recognition: Pope John XXIII declared St. Louise patron of all who work in social affairs (10-02-1960). Leo XIII, on 12 May 1885, proclaimed St. Vincent de Paul patron of all works of charity.

When visitors go into St. Peter's in Rome, the largest basilica in the world, they can see the statues of the two great saints of charity. Among the thirty-nine statues of founders in the central nave the statue of St. Vincent, by Pietro Bracci, following the canonization, was installed on the first level on the right hand side of the nave, after that of St. Teresa and before that of St. Philip Neri. The statue of St. Louise de Marillac, by Antonio Berti, was installed in 1954 at the transept of Saints Simon and Jude, above the niche of St. Peter Nolasco.

The List of Saints given in the Encyclical

The criterion used by Pope Benedict XVI in drawing up the list of saints, which he has at the end of his encyclical, is quite clear; Pope John Paul II had, moreover, done the same thing in his postsynodal Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (25-03-1996), by mentioning St. Vincent de Paul in §§ 75 and 82.

At the end of *Deus Caritas Est* the Holy Father states that "the saints are the real light-bearers in the course of history, because they are men and women of faith, hope and love." In this list Mary, the mother of the Lord, excels all the rest as "the mirror of all holiness."

It is obvious that the Pope cannot mention all the saints; he mentions "just a few names." St. Martin is the first confessor; he was not a martyr, in spite of what the liturgy says: "His holy soul, though spared the sword of persecution, was not deprived of the martyr's palm" (Antiphon at the Magnificat). And in the medieval pious story his being a confessor is indicated by the incident of his giving half his

cloak to a poor man, something which the encyclical does not omit. Next come the pioneers of the monastic movement, St. Anthony the abbot, St. Francis of Assisi and the founders of the various religious orders of men and women, such as Ignatius of Loyola, John of God, Camillus de Lellis. It is in this context that we find Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Next come the saints of charity of the nineteenth century, Giuseppe Cottolengo and John Bosco. (It is interesting to recall that Giuseppe Cottolengo placed his well known work under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul). Next to be mentioned is Luigi Orione, beatified 26 October 1980, and lastly our own contemporary Teresa of Calcutta, beatified by Pope John Paul II on 19 October 2003. The last named had already been mentioned earlier in the encyclical in § 18, and it is clear that the point is being made that holiness is, and must be, a reality of our times and not just something in the past.

It is only natural that, in an encyclical deliberately focusing on charity as a central and essential aspect of Christianity, we see the saints of charity, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac listed as concrete examples of charity.

Speaking to the Daughters of Charity many times, in fact almost continually, St. Vincent referred to the definition of God, that He is love, anticipating, so to speak, by word and work, the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*.

“God is love... so it follows that being Daughters of Charity you are Daughters of God” (Conference of 28 July 1648).

“... to say Daughter of Charity is the same as saying Daughter of God” (Conference of 18 October 1655).

(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)