

# “Put on the Spirit of Jesus Christ” in the Thought of Saint Vincent

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For Saint Vincent, the Christological theme of adherence to Christ expresses the heart of the charitable and missionary vocation of priests of the mission. The meeting and the relationship with Christ is the linchpin, “the rule.”<sup>1</sup>

“The purpose of the Company is to imitate our Lord, as much as poor and weak persons can. What does it say? That it has proposed to comply with him in its actions, its jobs and its purposes. How a person can represent another, without the same traits, lineaments, proportions, ways, looks? He cannot. Therefore, if we propose to make ourselves as *similar to the divine model* and our hearts feel this desire and this holy affection, we must, I say, *try to conform our thoughts, our works and our intentions to his.*”<sup>2</sup>

The Common Rules trace the lines of an educational process that leads us to conform ourselves to the humanity of Christ and that Saint Vincent summed up in the phrase “put on Christ.” But before going into this topic, we must take a moment to dwell on the symbolic language to which the image of “putting on Jesus Christ” leads, because this expression, used by Saint Vincent little more than a dozen times, is a religious symbol of great power. He borrows it from St. Paul (Gal 3:27), but the theme is rooted in an anthropological background, which is reflected in the Bible.

## 1. The metaphor of dress in the language of scripture

Dress in our culture has two meanings: to protect oneself from the cold or as a meaningful ornament of the body. In either case, it expresses an outward appearance of self-respect. But the person is not

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<sup>1</sup> COSTE SV XII, 130.

<sup>2</sup> COSTE SV XII, 75.

his clothes. It also repeats in proverbs of popular wisdom: "Clothes do not make the man! Clothes are not the medicine!" Not so in biblical literature. Clothes are a symbol, not just an instrument. Applied to the divine, they express coming into contact with God. The principal text in this regard is from St. Paul: "All of you in fact are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, because you have been baptized into Christ, *you have put on Christ*" (Gal 3:26-27). This signifies the experience of full belonging and is wrapped in intimacy. And the power of symbol assures the expression of this experience.

This is possible because the ancient world in general, and that of the bible in particular, has attributed meaning to dress and a particularly intense lived experience. The nakedness of the body is a shame that must be covered (Gen 9:22), and God himself cares to dress his creatures after their sin, thus showing his tenderness as a mother who worries over her child: "Then the Lord God made man and woman garments and *he dressed them*" (Gen 3:21). Being naked is like being abandoned (cf. Lk 8:27). Jesus himself has this experience on the cross: covered with a royal cloak for a joke and then, his garments removed, He died stripped (cf. Mk 15:20-24). And in this nakedness is vividly expressed the experience of abandonment and loneliness. Certainly the body is more than dress (Mt 6:25), but dress is one of the vital needs of the person as are food and shelter (1 Tim 6:8). Dress expresses the person and reveals what is most at the heart of the wearer: when Samuel offers David his cloak he vows his service and gives him his spirit (1 Sam 18:4), when Elisha gives the mantle to Elijah, it is because he wants him to inherit his prophetic power (2 Re 3:12 ff.). It is always in this perspective that we must understand the miraculous power of the dress of Jesus (Mt 9:21; 14:36) or of the Apostle Paul (Acts 19:12). Clothes also recall the experience of the last times, since man will be clothed "in garments of salvation" (Is 61:10) as the prodigal son is given the "most beautiful dress" (Lk 15:22) or as a wedding dress for those who participate in the messianic wedding (Mt 22:12), or even as the robes of Jesus that blazed in the transfiguration or the white robes of the angels on Easter morning.

With all this wealth of symbols, when we speak of "putting on Christ" we are not faced with simple pictorial images for effect, but we find ourselves within a symbolic experience that expresses the religiosity of the believer who adheres closely to Christ. The relationship with him cannot remain at the level of simple approach but is part of his own person: it wraps it, gives it shape, defines it, clothes it. But not in the gnostic or docetic sense of simple "outer coating," but in the full sense of the term "clothed" in the traditional and biblical meaning of the term.

## 2. Clothed in Christ: a grand affair!

The metaphor of dress recalls, as we have seen, a statement of the intimacy with the divine. And St. Vincent notes that prior to our being “clothed in Christ,” it is He who is clothed in our humanity. He goes before us and creates a condition of reciprocity: the believer is involved in the prior history with which God binds himself in love to our humanity. And God who clothes his divinity in our humanity, lays the foundations for which we can clothe our humanity in his divinity.

When this great God created us with the plan to require of us that duty of loving Him as this honorable tribute, He willed to place in us the seed of love, which is our resemblance to Him, so that we may not excuse ourselves, saying that we do not have the means to pay it. This lover of our hearts, seeing that sin had unfortunately spoiled and obliterated this resemblance, willed to break all the laws of nature in order to repair this damage, but with such a marvellous benefit that He was not content with placing in us the resemblance and mark of His divinity, but even willed, by the same plan that we should love Him, *to clothe himself with our very humanity*.<sup>3</sup>

Since Christ is clothed in our humanity, He has given us, as a gift, to be able to enter into relationship with Him and clothed us in Him. Consequently, the experience of our Christian faith comes not from a consciousness that produces its object, but rather receives a “form,” namely the shape of the humanity of Christ. Without him the conscious believer remains naked and stripped: would face itself without adequate content. The putting on of Christ, therefore, indicates a process of assimilation and enveloping intimacy with the Lord Jesus. This is the central theme and is insistent in the thought of St. Vincent:

The rule said that... we have to take the spirit of Jesus Christ. O Savior! Oh, gentlemen! *That is a great affair to put on the spirit of Jesus Christ!* This means that for us to assist people and to serve the church, we must work to imitate the perfection of Jesus Christ and try to achieve it for by ourselves we can do nothing. *You must be filled and enlivened by this spirit of Jesus Christ.* To hear this, you must know that his spirit is within all Christians who live according to the rules of Christianity; and their actions and their works are permeated with the spirit of

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<sup>3</sup> COSTE (English) VP XI, 131.

God, so that God has raised the Company, as you well see, to act likewise. The company has always had a love for the maxims of Christianity and desired to put the spirit of the Gospel, to live and to operate as well as our Lord lived and to put this spirit in all the company and in each missionary, in all his works in general, and each in particular.<sup>4</sup>

The missionary, just as all Christians, reaches the completion of himself depending on whether he remains in relationship to Jesus Christ, since man is not explained by himself and needs to receive the human characteristics of Jesus in order to become himself. The missionary, the man, must put on Christ “voilà a grand affair.” But how?

The world influences the heart of man and is marked by sin and therefore does not have Christ as its proper reference, does not lead to truth: “The doctrine of the world is always flawed;” — St. Vincent repeats with conviction — “The doctrine of the world never gives what it promises.”<sup>5</sup> The possibility for man for self-actualization then consists in making its “contours” set in the humanity of Jesus. This possibility, however, is neither cosmetic nor in the hands of man himself. To put on the spirit of Christ it is not enough to want to or to copy the traits of His human person. It is rather a work from above, St. Vincent teaches. The Holy Spirit creates the link between us and Christ, between our humanity and his, realizing a common objective with him, or as the Pauline image, “writing Christ in our hearts” (cf. 2 Cor 3:3).

But what is this spirit that is widespread? — St. Vincent asks — When one says: The spirit of our Lord is in such person or in such actions, what does this mean? Does the Holy Spirit even give it to them? Yes, the Holy Spirit, as a person, is living in the just and lives in them personally. *When we say that the Holy Spirit works to someone, it means that the Spirit residing in that person, give him the same inclinations and provisions that Jesus Christ had on earth, and they act together; I am not an equal perfection, but dependent upon the divine gifts of the Spirit.*<sup>6</sup>

When a missionary acts in communion with Christ, animated by his Spirit, then it is not just him who acts. He draws energy from grace, without which evangelization and charitable activities would

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<sup>4</sup> COSTE SV XII, 107-108.

<sup>5</sup> COSTE SV XII, 115

<sup>6</sup> COSTE SV XII, 108

be simple activities of man, not supernatural and divine actions. And then the true spiritual commitment of the missionary allows himself to be filled by Christ, allowing the Holy Spirit to transcribe in his freedom the human contours traced in the evangelical maxims. This is the way of becoming according to the truth that is Christ. Similar realization of the supernatural in us needs to be revived if the Company is to come to life again. The risk of being uncritically invaded by a culture of hermeneutics that slips into a docetic or gnostic mentality is not only at the entrance but, in my opinion, widely penetrates the fabric of daily life. This produces a decline of apostolic zeal that is reduced to activism and moralism without soul. Saint Vincent, however, as it appears from the texts, is firmly anchored in a vision of life in which the divine and the supernatural are not vague spiritual thoughts or intentions, but the environment created by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

### 3. A significant text

The most significant text in this regard is the recommendation made by Saint Vincent to Antonio Durand, a young missionary only twenty-seven years old, recently designated as the superior of the Seminary of Agde.

There is certainly nothing human in that, Monsieur; it is not the work of man, it is the work of God, *grande opus*. It is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ; consequently, all human diligence can do here is to spoil everything, if God does not take a hand in it. No, Monsieur, neither philosophy, nor theology, nor discourses can act in souls; *Jesus Christ must be involved in this with us, or we with Him, so that we may speak as He did and in his Spirit, as He himself was in His Father, and preached the doctrine He had taught Him; those are the words of Holy Scripture.*<sup>7</sup>

The missionary and his ministries continue their work of Christ to form apostles and disciples, and therefore must assume the same energy as Jesus. It must be an assimilation into him, so that Jesus is to act in his words and his actions. This realism, typical of the faith operating in the thought of Saint Vincent, is the polar opposite of rationalism, even theological, which burdens our age. For the latter kind of thought, the relationship to Christ is *mediated* by thought

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<sup>7</sup> COSTE (English) VP XI, 310-311.

rather than from conformation to his spirit in life. Not so in Saint Vincent. He describes the task of putting on the spirit of Christ as stripping ourselves, thus making room for our Lord, which is to take the place left free by our ego. This is a profound reformulation of personal conscience, whose self-consciousness is shaped by the presence of Christ in us.

So, Monsieur, you must empty yourself in order to clothe yourself with Jesus Christ. You know that ordinary causes produce the effects of their nature: a sheep produces a sheep etc., and a human another human; likewise, if the man who directs and forms others and speaks to them is animated with only a human spirit, those who see him, listen to him and strive to imitate him will become totally human: no matter what he says and does. He will appear with only the appearance of virtue, and not the substance; he will communicate to them the spirit with which he himself is animated, as we see that masters impress their maxims and ways of acting firmly on the minds of their disciples. On the contrary, if a superior is filled with God and with the maxims of Our Lord, all his words will be efficacious; virtue will go out of him that will edify others, and all his actions will be so many beneficial instructions that will bring about good in those who are aware of them.<sup>8</sup>

In order for this configuration to Christ, involving the human reality of the missionary, to shine out from his being and his doing, he must live in a state of “great communication” with Our Lord, or through that fine-tuning that the Holy Spirit produces in him and that is obtained through prayer.

To reach that point, Monsieur, *Our Lord himself has to imprint firmly on you His stamp and His character.* For, just as we see wild stock, on which a seedling has been grafted, bear the fruits of the nature of this same seedling, we, too, wretched creatures, even though we are only flesh, hay, and thorns, yet if Our Lord imprints His Spirit and grace, *uniting us to Him like the vine branches to the vine stock, we do the same as He did on earth* — I mean we carry out divine actions, and like Saint Paul, filled with this Spirit, birthed children to Our Lord. Something important to which you must faithfully devote yourself is to be *closely united with Our Lord in meditation*; that is the reservoir where you will find the instructions you need to carry out the ministry you are going to have. When you have a doubt, turn to

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 311.

God and say to Him, 'Lord who are the Father of Lights, teach me what I must do on this occasion.'<sup>9</sup>

The insistence of St. Vincent on the type of relationship to have with Christ is in the *order of personalized spirituality with Him* rather than in imitation of Him, interpreted as meaning a weak copy of a model. And even if, in the language of the time the term "imitation of Christ" was widely used, Vincent prefers the term "follow Christ"<sup>10</sup> and, when using the term "imitation," intends it in the strong sense of unity with Christ and not simply copying or repetition of his way of doing. It is no coincidence in the language of Saint Vincent and is significant that the act of leaving penetrates the "spirit of our Lord," as when, for example, he invites Saint Louise to go to visit the Charity or Father Portail in his preaching, to be in unity of spirit with the Lord:

Go to Communion — he told Saint Louise — the day of your departure to honor the charity of Our Lord, and the same journeys that He undertook with this same charity, and the difficulties, contradictions, weariness, and labours that He endured in them. May He be pleased to bless your journey, giving you His spirit and the grace to act in this same spirit, and to bear your troubles in the way He bore His.<sup>11</sup> I pray Our Lord — he said to Father Portail — to grant you a generous share in His spirit and guidance for that purpose. Courage, just undertake this holy work in that spirit, Monsieur. To that end, honor the prudence, foresight, meekness, and exactitude of Our Lord.<sup>12</sup>

The reference to the spirit of our Lord places the thought of Saint Vincent outside of a moralistic orientation because his spirituality is not focused on repetition of what Jesus was and did, but on entering

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 311-312.

<sup>10</sup> Lacking more complete research, the term, *suite de Notre Seigneur o de Jesus Christ oppure suivre Notre Seigneur or Jesus Charist o ses maximes*, in the letters of Saint Vincent, is found a number of times, (54 volte) with respect to *imiter* or *ressembler Jesus Christ* (45 volte): COSTE I, 388; II, 781; III, 526, 629; VI 224; V, 615, 633; VII, 38, 112, 169, 317, 573; IX, 88, 171, 177, 213, 314, 345, 436, 440, 485; X, 141, 146-148, 153-155; X, 218, 221, 224, 276, 291, 199, 365, 411; XI, 1, 137, 278; XII, 19, 83, 88, 127, 157, 164, 177, 213, 215-216, 223, 227, 299, 416, 427, 443; XIII, 75. While the term *suivre* refers only to Jesus, the term *imitare* refers to saints, to blood, to examples of nature and of brothers and sisters. (The research has been made on French text. Nota from translator).

<sup>11</sup> COSTE (English) VP I, 65.

<sup>12</sup> COSTE (English) VP I, 178.

into relationship with him in the present and acting in communion with him. The mere repetition would be an abstraction contrary to the spirit of Christ who is Risen, that animates history. Here are some examples:

Who will be able to imitate you (Jesus)? But who could only talk about this virtue (humility)? Lord, *give us the grace to talk about you yourself; words of men strike the ear and cannot penetrate inside*, but one of yours said to the ear of our hearts will make us forgo the empty reputation by which the world loses most of the credit for its actions. The result is many are good in appearance, but they are filled with the smoke of self-esteem, because they have neither weight nor consistency, but dissipate as a vapor.<sup>13</sup> When you see a Sister practicing some virtue and doing it with reference to Our Lord, we say of her that she is living by the Spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>

The emphasis on the relationship with Christ avoids therefore, the moralistic reduction (or Pelagian, to use the language of Augustine) in the understanding of the relationship with Jesus Christ, as warned H.U. Von Balthassar: “*We must raise a dam against the tendency to slide into an unrestrainable trend at the idea of following as imitation of a religious moral model.*”<sup>15</sup> It would be insufficient to speak of the imitation of Jesus without first making the spiritual assimilation to his way of being. For Saint Vincent Jesus is not a model, but a living Presence, a person with whom to enter into this relationship in the present. So the relationship with Christ, — and for Saint Vincent is always an emotional relationship — is a personal one, so that “he (Jesus) gives us his character and... infuses the vigor of his spirit.”

#### **4. Entering into relationship with Christ through prayer, the source of the mission**

In the assimilation of the spirit of Christ we find the essential call of prayer. In prayer, in fact, the missionary, bringing the attention of the heart to the mysteries of Jesus’ life, remains moved by the benevolence of God to free the creature and becomes receptive of his grace. When the prayer is done well — not so much in search of beautiful thoughts or reasoning, but in establishing an emotional

<sup>13</sup> COSTE SC XII, 201.

<sup>14</sup> COSTE (English) VP X, 434.

<sup>15</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASSAR, *Gloria*, VII, *Nuovo Patto*, p. 175.



relationship with the Lord's presence<sup>16</sup> — the missionary is led to transform his own attitudes and works, because human nature is brought to imitate what it sees and admires. Thus the exchange between us and Jesus, grace with which we are clothed in Him, leaving him penetrates us. Our thoughts are *His* thoughts. Our activities and our affections are illuminated by Him and transfigured in Him. In fact what we think or say or do, is nothing but a "little fire." Where there is the spirit of our Lord everything becomes bright as the sunlight, which not only illuminates but is also fruitful and transforming.

Notice the difference there is between the light of the fire and that of the sun: during the night our fire gives us light, and by means of its glow we see things, but only dimly, perceiving only the surface, and this glow goes no further. The sun, however, fills and vivifies everything by his light; it does not reveal only the exterior of things but, by some secret power, penetrates within, causing them to act, even making them fruitful and fertile, according to the characteristics of their nature. Now, the thoughts and reflections that come from our understanding are only sparks that show just a little of the outside of objects and produce nothing more; but the light of grace, which the Sun of Justice spreads in our souls, reveals and penetrates to the very depths and most intimate part of our heart, which they stir up and prompt to produce marvellous things. So then we have to ask God to be Himself the one to enlighten and inspire us with what is pleasing to Him. All those lofty, much sought-after considerations are not meditation; rather they are sometimes offshoots of pride; and it is the same for those who dwell on them and take pleasure in them, like a preacher who shows off in his fine discourses and becomes self-satisfied in seeing his audience pleased with what he churns out for them. In that, it would be obvious that it is not the Holy Spirit but rather the spirit of arrogance enlightening his understanding and producing all those beautiful thoughts, or to put in better, it would be the devil exciting him and causing him to speak like that.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "My brothers, I remark that, in all prayers which you make, each tries hard to bring a quantity of reasons and reasons on reasons, it attracts attention. But you do not have affections. Reasoning is something, but it is still not enough; something else is needed: the will has to act, and not only understanding, because all our reasons are without fruit if we do not have affections": COSTE (English) VP I, 183-184; cf. COSTE (English) VP I, 92.

<sup>17</sup> COSTE (English) VP XI, 77.

The commitment to assimilation in Christ in prayer reaches its full results in the new self-awareness of the missionary who learns to *live in relationship with Christ* according to the expression of Gal 2:20, which is particularly dear to the heart of Saint Vincent: “*It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.*”<sup>18</sup>

We are your children, who throw ourselves into your arms to emulate your practices; give us your grace. As we cannot do it of ourselves, it is you that we ask, it is from you that we hope for it, but with confidence, and a great desire to follow you. O Lord, please give this spirit to the company that works to be still more pleasing to your eyes, you fill it to become more like you, and this affection already makes it live your life, so that everyone can say with Saint Paul: *I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me* (Gal 2:20). O blessed Company! O bless us all! If we strive for it it will inevitably occur. Oh! What a delight to verify in us these words: *I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me!* We no longer live a human life, we live a divine life, and we will live, my brothers, if our hearts and our actions are filled with the intention to do the will of God. But if there are those who can say that they are already there, as it is true, others may say, like me: “Am I not unhappy to see my brothers live the life of Jesus Christ, and be pleasing to the eyes of his eternal Father, and I live in a sensual and animal life, and deserve to be dismissed from their conversation as the object of the displeasure of God.” May it please His goodness that this feeling enters into the soul, as ashamed of our cowardice, we redouble our steps to reach the most advanced way of perfection! God we do this through your grace!<sup>19</sup>

From the existential reference to Christ, life draws its proper contours. The criteria of thought and action, sensitivity, and opinion about behavior, receive the imprint of communion with Christ. This is a global relationship, inclusive, able to interpret all aspects of existence. Starting from this spiritual shrine of human interiority the mission is born and renewed.

It should be noted that our time no longer agrees with the Christian event on the grounds of the faith tradition because it has lost the sense of history, having cut bridges with the past. Nor is it any longer cause for adherence to Christianity, theory or a detailed and complete concept of life. What still affects humans of our time is

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<sup>18</sup> COSTE (English) VP X, 274; XII, 165, 225.

<sup>19</sup> COSTE SV XII, 164-165.

the encounter with a certain type of human presence, full of message and meaning: a person who has become fully “human” thanks to the mysterious reality of the Lord in his conscience. These are the people “clothed in Christ,” the true source of evangelization.

## 5. The love of the Father: contained in the spirit of Christ

The figure of the missionary then assumes the role of disciple of Christ, whose identity consists in being *connected* to Christ in an existential way. The formula of Vincentian thought is simple: we can act like Jesus if we enter into His spirit.

*Let us enter His spirit (Our Lord's) to come into its operations.*

This is not just to do good, it must be done according to the example of Our Lord.... This is not to fast, to make the rules, to care for God; it is necessary to do it according to his spirit, ie with perfection, and with the purpose and circumstances that he himself has made. Prudence consists in judging and acting as the eternal Wisdom judged and acted.<sup>20</sup>

But having said that, everything has not been said, as we need to understand in what the spirit of Christ consists. Here Saint Vincent points out that Jesus has transferred his obedient humanity and transcended the divine condition of “being the Son of the Father.” So Jesus during his earthly life, shows again that the human is fulfilled in developing a relationship of dependency with the free fatherhood of God. It must be said that in his preaching, Jesus is very intent on showing how man fulfils himself through a relationship with the source of being; a relationship that cannot be of fear, but of love, of belonging that is not oppressive but free. Love binds Jesus to the Father and we are pulled into this love of God the Father who as Saint Vincent says, does not neglect even a microscopic animal (“*a ciron*”)<sup>21</sup> so concerned is he about all his creation, and us in the first place. This is the heart of the humanity of Christ, the point of reference on which we try to conduct our lives.

But what is the spirit of our Lord? It is a spirit of perfect charity, filled with a wonderful esteem of divinity and with an infinite desire to honor it with dignity, knowledge of the Father, to admire and exalt him continuously.... Is there a more highly regarded one than the Son, who is equal to the Father and yet

<sup>20</sup> COSTE SV XII, 179.

<sup>21</sup> COSTE SV XII, 111.

recognizes the Father as the author and sole principle of all the good that is in him? And his love, what was it? Oh! What love! O my Savior, what love have you not brought to your Father! Could it have been greater, my brothers, than to be shattered for him? For St. Paul, speaking of the birth of the Son of God on earth, said he was devastated. In truth, what could be greater than dying for love in the manner he died?... His humiliation was for love, his work was for love, his sufferings were for love, his prayers were for love, and all his internal and external works were only repeated acts of his love. His love gave him a great contempt for the world, disregard for the spirit of the world, contempt of property, contempt and disregard for pleasures and honours. *This is a description of the spirit of our Lord, which we must bear, which is, in a word, always to have a great esteem and a great love for God.*<sup>22</sup>

To “put on Jesus then” means to make our humanity similar to his humanity, living in accordance with the Father in loving dependence. In his passionate belonging to the Father, in fact, Jesus also shows intimate human dignity. If human beings are cared for in a relationship of love with which the Father loves him, then his person is founded on and will live in an attitude of deep and deep-felt gratitude. He will recognize all the things that happen as a sign of God’s love and, above all, will show it to the poor in his ministry.

## 6. Assimilation of the spirit of Jesus in the practice of virtue

The assimilation of the humanity of Christ which is fully conformed to the Father, comes not only through contemplation and prayer but also through the practice of the virtues that Jesus showed in his humanity.

... the esteem and love of God, conformity to his holy will, and contempt of the world and ourselves, that we must imitate in Jesus Christ to have his spirit could not be better shown than by the practice of virtues that have shown out in particular in our Lord living on earth, namely those included in its maxims, in its poverty, chastity and obedience, in its charity to the sick, and so on. so that if we are to imitate our Lord in the practice of all this, whether other rules cover it, we must hope *that we will bear his spirit.*<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> COSTE SV XII, 109.

<sup>23</sup> COSTE SV XII, 112.

This is a defining feature of the concrete guidance of the doctrine of Saint Vincent. The gospel virtues are the works that Jesus fulfilled and that the missionary is called to do, for by unity *with* Christ he acts *as* Christ. The imitation is a consequence of having personalized his interior life with Jesus. So that the missionary lives in remembrance of and in company with Christ, it is necessary, first of all, that he strip himself. This thought of Saint Vincent is mandatory. Unless there is an emptiness in oneself, God cannot enter in: "As soon as we empty ourselves, God will fill us with Himself, for he cannot endure emptiness."<sup>24</sup>

The reason for the emptiness is not in itself ascetic in nature, but Christological<sup>25</sup> in nature, namely it draws its reason from the fact that His Son, coming into the world has entered a condition of *kenosis*, self-renunciation of His divine condition. This is the way of being that man is called to model himself on. The entry of the eternal Word of God into human frailty, temporality, decline and death leads the believer to understand that the first step to take is to imitate the Lord in this descent. If he does not enter into this situation, this man has the illusion of being able to stand before God on an equal footing, in a pharisaical manner while he is indebted to Him for everything. It was not necessary that Jesus choose the human form in order to come into the world; the choice and the practice is to trace out for man the path to enter into the relationship with God. That comes not by the efforts of an ascetic commitment that deceives one so that one can put himself before God with the accounts equal, but in the condition of those offered by poverty to the love of the Father who gave His Son for us. Hence the importance in the thought of Saint Vincent to participate in humility in the action of the Spirit, that is to be clothed in Christ through the virtue of humility, which Saint Vincent considered the cornerstone of all virtues.<sup>26</sup>

He gives us the grace to participate in his humility and to come to the practice of it, like him, which was by continually exercising it. Happy would we be if we could each say what St. Paul said of Our Lord humiliated: *Humiliavit semetipsum, formam servi accipiens!* (LAN 2, 8) Eternal Father, who wanted your son to be clothed in our flesh, to be like us *in similitudi-*

<sup>24</sup> COSTE (English) VP XI, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. COSTE SV XII, 199-201.

<sup>26</sup> "... humility. Eh! My God! my brothers, why shall we not put it first, but always first, in our heart and in our examens, knowing *that it is the foundation of all other virtues?*" COSTE SV XII, 205.

*nem hominum factus and habitu inventus ut homo (LAN 2, 7) clothe us in his humility, so that we are like him.*<sup>27</sup>

The serene awareness of our poverty and the courage to imitate Jesus in the humiliations of life attract the grace of God, as the valleys “which attracts to them all the essence of the mountains.”<sup>28</sup> We must be aware of this condition: “We are beggars; let us become such towards God. We are poor and weak, we need God everywhere.”<sup>29</sup> “We must stand before God as a poor man who discovers his ulcer, and who, by this means entices the passerby more powerfully to be good to him than if he argued with him of his necessity.”<sup>30</sup> The awareness of their poverty is the key that opens the heart of God. The evangelical condition to which Jesus refers adults who want to enter the Kingdom: in their calls “to assume — as notes H.U. Von Balthassar — improbable readiness to receive their children, whose state lies with those who give themselves for love.”<sup>31</sup>

Humility is a state that predisposes one to the achievement of union with Christ. However, its implementation asks one to be a little rough with oneself. And here Saint Vincent notes that it is necessary to pass through the acceptance of humiliation. And so we must combine humility with mortification. Man carries within himself the passions that lead him to put himself at the center of his feelings, his thinking and his action. To achieve this it is necessary to give oneself over to the virtues which bring about that lowering: mortification, abasement, humiliation. St. Vincent refers to this several times, but expresses it in a particularly effective way in a conference on mortification:

Saint Paul said that through baptism we are clothed in Jesus Christ: You who are baptized in Jesus Christ, you are bearing Jesus Christ; *quicumque in Christo baptizati estis, Christum induistis* (Gal 3:26). What do we do when we create in us mortification, patience, humility, and so on? We will establish Jesus Christ in us, and those who work in all the Christian virtues can say, as St. Paul: *Vivo ego, not jam ego, vivit vero in me Christus* (Gal 2:20), which is no longer I who live but Jesus Christ is living in me.

Please God give us the grace to make us like a good winegrower who carries a knife with which he cuts everything he finds

<sup>27</sup> COSTE SV XII, 200-201.

<sup>28</sup> COSTE (English) VP XI, 2.

<sup>29</sup> COSTE SV XII, 145.

<sup>30</sup> COSTE (English) VP IV, 390.

<sup>31</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASSAR, *Gloria*, VII *Nuovo Patto*, p. 471.

detrimental to his vineyard! And because the vine buds more than he wants and it buds uselessly, he always has the knife ready at hand to remove all these superfluities as soon as they are seen, so that the strong sap of the vine climbs to all the branches which bear the fruit. So we must immediately *cut with the knife of mortification bad products of a spoiled nature*, which never tires of pushing branches of its corruption; so it is with Jesus Christ, who is compared to the vine and we are compared to the branches, we grow extensively in the practice of holy virtues.

This man is a good winegrower, because he always works on his grapevines; and we will be as good disciples, if we mortify our senses continually, if we work to suppress our passions, to submit our judgement, to regulate our will and all this in ways that we have said. *We will then have the consolation to say: I remain of the old Adam but I do my best to make myself something new.*<sup>32</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

The great number of texts cited shows that the metaphor of “putting on Christ” refers to a *singular Christological concentration* in the thought and in the spiritual practice of Saint Vincent. And this brings up, in a proper hermeneutics of his thought, the need for faith in Christ as energy that moves the missionary in the mission and in charity.

The reference to faith compels a renunciation of a weak interpretation of the relationship with Christ, as if it were simply reproducing a copy. For Saint Vincent, however, the relationship to Christ is the principle of *personalization of the human missionary* in the supernatural through the action of the Spirit. This reference inclines us to look at the interpretation in ontological order as foundation where the moral order of the subject must obey.

This introduces a critical thinking of our time posited on the idea that the subject bears in itself a guarantee of the truth of its effectiveness. With neither faith nor charity he would conform himself to the source: the charity in fact if not gushing out by a reference to Christ would remain a good, a commendable action, the object of admiration, but it would hardly have the strength to be a *principle of life*. It cannot invoke the formula that had much favor

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<sup>32</sup> COSTE SV XII, 224-225; cf. COSTE SV XI, 94-95.

in the Christian sphere: “Love alone is credible.”<sup>33</sup> It is not decisive. It is just introductory. It expresses the ineffectiveness of all that remains outside of love, but cannot guarantee the effectiveness of love. Charity to the brothers must be married to the love of Christ, otherwise it dries up. And also it is necessary to draw on faith in Christ in order to reproduce his love in the evangelization of the poor.

Translation: Sister MARY HALE, D.C.

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<sup>33</sup> Title of the volume: *Love Alone is Credible*; by H.U. VON BALTHASSAR, Ed. Seuil, 1965.