

Matters Concerning the Sick

Chapter VI of the Common Rules

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Is what Chapter VI of the Common Rules says about the sick still valid today? And the attention given to the sick (numbers 1 and 2) and their participation in the mission (number 3)? Of course it is still valid. The advances in medical science and health care ministry have developed so much in recent times that our saints Vincent and Louise, so fond of medical advice and of prescriptions, would be astounded, wherever they may be. But what our saint says in chapter VI belongs, in essence, to every age: that we must care for the sick and that the sick should take advantage of this opportunity for the evangelization of the poor.

I

The care of the sick. This was one of St. Vincent's most explicit obsessions: concern for the health of the missionaries, of the Daughters of Charity, and of the poor who were assisted by both communities. He was also concerned about the health of St. Louise, as was she about his health. This theme has been amply developed by various Vincentian authors. For example, in Vincentian Week VI in Salamanca in 1977, there are two studies which have yet to be surpassed: one by André Dodin, C.M., "Vincent de Paul and the Sick," and the other by Margaret Flynn, D.C., "Louise de Marillac and the Sick." At any rate, it is still legitimate for us to continue reading and admiring the work of our saint and to highlight his most important thoughts on the matter.

Among *the Conferences* of St. Vincent there is only one dedicated to "the good use of sickness" (conference 107 in the Spanish edition: Vol. XI-3, p. 344). There is also a rather extensive extract of a conference on "the usefulness and the good use of illness" (conference 203: Vol. XI-4, p. 760). And two other conferences also

reference the theme: “Care of the Sick” (p. 848) and “Illness and Convalescence” (p. 860). There is not much here and almost all has to do with the “good use” of sickness, both for the sanctification of the sick confrere as well as for evangelization. *The Letters* are much more effusive and numerous in both aspects: the care of the sick and the good use of illness.

As we read these letters we can ask ourselves if there was any other matter that concerned our saint more than the health of his missionaries. Of course, in St. Vincent, the starting point of everything was the evangelization of the poor. Let us look at some of Vincent’s most urgent and moving thoughts on the topic (only a few of them):

He asks Father Pierre du Chesne to care for Father Dufestel, a sick member of his community: *“I am writing to him and asking him to do all he can and to spare nothing for his medical care. I entreat you, Monsieur, to be sure that he does so and, for that purpose, see that the doctor visits him every day and that he lacks no remedy or nourishment. Oh! how I hope the Company will provide for his needs with a holy extravagance! I would be delighted if word were sent to me from somewhere that someone in the Company had sold chalices for that purpose”* (Letter 366 English edition). He writes to Father Blatiron: *“In the name of God, Monsieur, take care of your poor life. Be content with consuming it little by little for Divine Love. It is not your own; it belongs to the Author of life, for love of whom you must preserve it until He asks it of you, unless an opportunity arises to offer it...”* (Letter 538). To a Priest of the Mission he writes: *“Have no fear that you are in any way a burden on the Company because of your infirmities. Rest assured that you will never be so for that reason because, by the grace of God, the Company does not find those who are ill a burden; on the contrary, it is a blessing for it to have them”* (Letter 2394). To Sister Francoise Menage, D.C.: *“The practice of charity, when necessary, such as assisting the suffering members of O[ur] L[ord], is to be preferred to all other exercises”*; and to Sister Nicole Haran: *“You are right in having no scruple about missing Mass to assist the poor, for God prefers mercy to sacrifice”* (Letters 2397, 2512 and 2788). I have selected these four texts of St. Vincent with ideas which he reiterates in his correspondence: the idea of selling the chalices, the concept of health which comes from God, the idea of illness as a blessing for the community, and that of charity toward the sick which is the most eminent and important virtue.

Sometimes in that era of war and plagues, illness was widespread in the community: *“[there are so many sick] the fact is that we are*

at the end of our tether” (Letter 1565). And here he goes into details: “We still have more than twenty sick and convalescent men here. These illnesses bring people to death’s door, and recovery is very slow and difficult. Besides that, almost all those who were working in Étampes fell sick there. We had to send three or four replacements for them and two men to have them taken to a nearby castle and look after them. In addition, we have six or seven other workers scattered here and there in that diocese, seeking out parishes without priests to prepare the sick poor in them for death or to live a good life” (Letter 1559).

This “end of the tether” that our saint refers to, was especially true of the house in Genoa. The plague was present in many cities. Where there were missionaries, they did not hesitate to give themselves to the service of those who were affected. Or else the missionaries were willing to serve, as in Rome, where there was only a slight outbreak of the plague (Letters 2099 and 2087). Genoa was where the plague attacked with all its fury. It was said that each week four to five thousand people died. The missionaries’ service to that community was generous, but it also proved fatal. Of the nine priests in the community, only two survived. St. Vincent’s reaction was so admirable that even now it moves us to hear what he said in St. Lazare during a repetition of prayer: *“Oh Savior, Jesus, what a great loss and affliction! Now is when we have to resign ourselves to the will of God. Or if not, what else could we do but mourn and be sad uselessly for the loss of these persons so zealous for the glory of God? With this resignation, after having given way to some tears for the depth of feeling at this separation, let us lift ourselves up to God, praise Him and bless Him for all of these losses that have occurred because His most holy will has so disposed it. But, fathers and brothers, can we say that we have lost those whom God has taken to Himself? No, we have not lost them. We must believe that the ashes of these good missionaries will serve as seed to produce others. Be assured that God will not withdraw from this company the graces that He has given it, but rather He will give them to those who have sufficient zeal to go and take their place”* (Spanish edition, Vol. XI-3, pp. 304-305, in the note). His letters to Jean Martin, and Blatiron, or to Father Almerás, or to the missionaries in Poland are especially expressive of his concern for the sick.

And since we are dealing with the sick poor, we must above all look to the Rules of the Confraternity of Charity of the women of Chatillon-les-Dombes (November of 1617, Spanish edition, Vol. X, p. 578).

II

Illness as “a pulpit”. This comparison is made by St. Vincent himself in the Common Rules (VI, 3) and, although the pulpits in use in Vincent’s day survive only as relics of past times, the sense of the pulpit has survived in this case with all its meaning. The Common Rules say that the sick:

- are not there only “to be cured”;
- but rather to “preach, at least with their example, as if in a pulpit, the Christian virtues... to grow in virtue”;
- and “to be, to those who assist them and visit them, like the sweet aroma of Christ...”

The expression is rather short, but it tells the sick that they have a spiritual task with regard to themselves as well as the task of edifying others.

Let us look at the only **Conference** of St. Vincent that has been preserved on the theme of “the good use of illness” (June 26, 1658). It is a conference which is simple and familiar. He arrived late for it, but when he begins to speak he details his thoughts quite well:

- all that happens comes from God: death, life, health, illness, and is always for our good and our salvation;
- I repeat once again that the sick are a blessing for the house and for the Company, which is certain by the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ willed this state of affliction, and that he accepted it for Himself...;
- and here St. Vincent lashes out against those “fickle spirits” who want to change houses, go from one place to another (damsels and misses he calls them) under whatever pretext, for example, that of a better climate, at times, “*only because they have had a slight illness!...*” “*To take such exaggerated care of ourselves, to be crushed by the slightest pain that we have to suffer, Oh Savior, this is what we must avoid*”;
- as a contrast to this he mentions Father Pille, Father Senaux, and Brother Anthony as examples of the good use of illness, and he does it with patience and affection;
- “*we can and must use the temporal remedies that are prescribed to us to alleviate and cure our sickness; to do this is also to honor God, who has created the plants and has given to each one its virtue*”;

- and, according to custom, the saint could not finish without asking forgiveness for the scandal that he has caused “*by the bad use of his small aches.*”

The **extract** of a conference (203) revolves around the conviction that it is in illness “*where one discovers what one has and what one is; illness is the probe with which we can penetrate and measure with great surety the depths of each one’s virtue....*”

The references in **the Letters** are quite plentiful. It is not difficult to find them, but it is difficult to put them in order. In the previous section we have spoken of the Christian vision of illness (sent by God, a divine state, a blessing for others). The sick person must be conscious of all this during his illness, and above all as death approaches. An example of this is St. Vincent himself: “*I fell seriously ill two or three days ago, which has made me think about death. By the grace of God, I adore His Will and acquiesce in it with all my heart*” (Letter 195). But, as on so many other occasions, the saint also desires common sense. To a person who thought too much about death, he says that “*the thought of death is good and our Lord has counseled and recommended it; but it must be moderated and it is neither necessary nor convenient that that person have it always in his spirit; it is enough to think about it two or three times a day, but without spending much time on it, and if he feels upset and worried, then he should not even think of it, but rather should go about his business in peace*” (Spanish edition, Vol. VIII, Letter 3282. Mission et Charite, Letter 143). He writes that Father John de la Salle “*had always feared death, but as he saw from the start that he was contemplating it with delight, he told me that he was going to die with pleasure because, he said, he had heard me say that at the end God takes away the fear of death from those who have feared it during their life and who have practiced charity towards the poor*” (Letter 405). In another letter he writes to St. Louise: “*I am also very worried about your sick Sisters and earnestly ask God to sanctify and glorify them. Moreover, the death of so many martyrs was the seed of Christianity; I hope it will be the same with regard to your Sisters. God has instituted and guided this Little Company; let us allow Him to act and let us adore His divine and loving guidance*” (Letter 1405). The second biographer of the saint (PIERRE COLLET, *La Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*, 1748, II, p. 173 [169]) tells us that St. Vincent, speaking about a priest, once told two clerics that “*he had always had a great fear of death, but, as he saw it approach, without any fear, and even with joy, he told me that he was sure that he was going to die because he had heard me say that God takes away the fear of death in their last hour,*

for those who have loved and served the poor and who in life were tormented by the thought of death". Surely the saint was thinking of Father John de la Salle.

III

There are many Vincentian accents on the topic of illness that we have not considered. An idea that St. Vincent developed several times rather extensively was this: "... *When one has experienced in oneself weaknesses and tribulations, one is more sensitive to those of others. Those who have suffered the loss of their possessions, their health and their honor, are much better disposed to console people who are experiencing the same afflictions and pains, than those who have no knowledge of what this is.... You know now that our Lord desired to experience in Himself all manner of suffering...*" (Spanish edition, Vol. XI-4, pp. 716-717). This gives us reason to think that he and St. Louise, both chronically ill, were especially gifted with sensitivity to console the sick.

But, let us first enter a little into the world of the poor who were assisted by them as well as by their disciples. We know, for example, how they dedicated the missionaries and the Daughters of Charity to the help of the poor who were victims of war in Lorraine, in Champagne and in Picardy, as well as in Paris: "*With the help of Our Lord, we have undertaken the assistance of the poor people in Lorraine and have sent Messieurs Bécu and Rondet, and Brothers Guillard, Aulent, Baptiste, and Bourdet there, two to each town: Toul, Metz, Verdun, and Nancy. I hope to provide them with two thousand livres a month*" (Letter 376). Later on Vincent enumerates the good works that are being done in Paris: "*(1) the daily distribution of soup to nearly fifteen thousand poor persons, both the bashful poor and the refugees; (2) about eight hundred refugee girls have been placed in private houses, where they are taken care of and instructed. You can imagine how much harm would have been done if they had been left wandering around. We have a hundred of them in one house in the Faubourg Saint-Denis; (3) we are going to rescue from the same danger the nuns from the country, whom the armies have thrown into Paris.... Lastly, people are sending here to us poor pastors, curates, and other priests from rural areas who have left their parishes to flee to this city.... The poor Daughters of Charity are more involved than we in the corporal assistance of the poor*" (Letters 1511 and 1512).

To conclude let us fix our gaze on the two founders, Vincent and Louise, who lived to contemplate the poor, especially the sick. If, as the saint says, experiencing illness sensitizes one to be able to

connect with the sick, then they, who were quite sick themselves, were certainly able to connect with them. Of course it is clear that this was not the only motive, nor even the primary one. The principal motive was the identification of Christ with the poor, of which they never lost sight, the reality of the Mystical Body of Christ. And so Louise asks Vincent's forgiveness: *"Please pardon the liberty I have taken, Most Honored Father, in sending you this Jesus crowned with thorns. The very thought that you were suffering so much gave me the idea that nothing could be of greater comfort to you than this example"* (Letter 3060). We all know to some degree how both saints were adorned with the sufferings of illness, and so we will continue by being brief.

With regard to St. Vincent, there was a marked contrast between his robust constitution and his countless physical problems. Beginning with the arrow wound he received at twenty-five (Letter 1), and continuing with fevers of all types, and falling off horses or from the carriage which he called his "shame", swollen and ulcerated legs, kidney stones and urinary retention, purges and blood-letting, the use of a walking stick and crutches, he eventually became a shut-in in his room where to move about he had to use a rope tied to a beam: *"My legs are getting worse every day and refuse to support me any longer"* (Letter 3154). *"As for myself, I am quite well, except for my legs, which no longer allow me to say Holy Mass and oblige me to remain seated all day long"* (Letter 3091).

With regard to St. Louise, St. Vincent himself gives us details in his letter to Father Blatiron: *"[I] think that in this you are almost like Mademoiselle Le Gras, whom I consider as dead, according to nature, for ten years now. To see her, one would say she has just stepped out of the tomb because her body is so frail and her face so pale. However, God knows the strength of spirit she possesses"* (Letter 1002).

Both saints possessed an abundance of strength of spirit. And so it was that both gave up their souls to the Lord in 1660, Louise six months before Vincent. In care of the sick, one of the most obvious activities is seeking the proper remedies. And in this regard, the mutual concern of Louise and Vincent still moves us, although, centuries later, it also makes us smile. They offered their prescriptions and remedies to all, but especially to each other. Their correspondence reads like a prescription manual, that above all, shows that they were up to date. The remedies that Louise proposes to Vincent are more numerous than those which he offers to her, and she explains them like an expert nurse. Here is one example: *"I think the pain in your leg will subside when you have been purged. Let me tell you about a method I was taught, which produces no upset. Take some*

senna, the weight of an écu, infused for about an hour in a pint of ordinary bouillon, the first from the pot, drawn when it is at a full boil. Drink it at the beginning of the meal, or eat some soup after taking this small dose, good and hot, by itself. Repeated for two or three days, this will have the same effect as a strong purgative but will not leave you feeling washed out. If you find it does you some good, continuing it once or twice a week will bring some relief to those poor legs of yours. I almost forgot to mention that this does not interfere with taking bouillon in the morning or having dinner at the first table” (Letter 2754).

Vincent answers her in the next letter and tells her of the results of taking her remedy (Letter 2755). He writes Louise about another of her prescriptions: *“My little cold is better, thank God, and I am taking good care of myself. I do not leave my room, I take extra rest every morning, I eat whatever is given me, and every night I have taken a kind of julep that Brother Alexandre gives me. As for my cold, it is only half as bad as what I was suffering and is gradually disappearing, so there is no need to think about the tea. If, by chance, my slight illness should get worse, I would use it. I ask Mademoiselle in her charity to be at peace in this regard, and I thank her for this” (Letter 2173).* Vincent also liked to offer remedies like the one he recommended to Monsieur de Comet in his first letter: the means of curing kidney stones that his owner, the Spagirite physician, had given to him, and with which Vincent *“saw him work miracles everyday.”* Vincent prefers easy homemade remedies. Nonetheless in 1648, he refused to have a young pigeon killed so that its hot blood might be applied to one of his eyes in order to heal it. That does not mean that St. Vincent was a vegetarian, for he ordered Brother Aubin, the cook in Turin, to: *“Continue to prepare chicken broth to nourish and sustain him [Father Martin] in his exhaustion” (Letter 2912).* Likewise he asked the Duchess of Aiguillon for *“a deer’s foot, which has the power to cure epilepsy” (cf. DODIN, op. cit., p. 49).*

Many prescriptions, and many of the remedies, make us smile. We are far removed from that world, but we are also overwhelmed with abusive commercials for medicines in all the mass media. We see that man, knowing that he cannot escape death, does all in his power to postpone it. He also tries, thanks be to God, to instill both life and death with meaning and, God willing, with faith. Here is where Chapter VI of the Common Rules remains valid. It begins with Christ, who heals and is incarnated in the sick; and so we must look at them as we would look at Christ himself. It calls for the Congregation to take special care in visiting and assisting the sick, both corporally and spiritually, those in the house as well as others,

especially on the missions and with the Confraternity of Charity. And it asks that the sick not only be cured, but that they also preach with their example from the pulpit of their sickbed, to evangelize and to grow strong in virtue. All this remains valid. Then it was called Charity toward the Sick. Today it is called Health Care Ministry.

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