

Vincent de Paul and the Court

Responding to the Politics of Power

by Daniel Franklin Pilario Estepa, C.M.*

1. Introduction

When I joined the community in the early 1980s, the Philippines found itself in a crucial political turmoil. The dictator Marcos was asserting his military power and resistance to his Martial rule was growing among the citizenry. People were divided. So was the Vincentian community. On the one hand, many confreres were allies of the Marcoses and their cronies. Some were even present at many palace functions. On the other hand, there were many confreres who found themselves in street demonstrations or worked behind the scenes to help topple down the repressive regime. What amazed me was that both sides used St. Vincent to support their stand. One side rhetorically asks: Was Vincent not friends of those in power? Did he not bridge the gap between the rich and the poor? The rich also are persons. They are also poor — emotionally, morally, and spiritually. Did St. Vincent not call us to serve them too, as he himself did? Those on the other side ask: When we dine with them, ask them to donate to our projects or celebrate Mass in their gatherings, are we not condoning their injustices? Each side was not convinced of the response of the other.

Today, even as we find ourselves in a different context, the substance of the questions remains. How should Vincentians deal with the politics of power? This paper intends to do three things: (1) to investigate the contemporary theories and discourses on power especially in socio-political contexts; (2) to inquire how Vincent de Paul dealt with the politics of power in his own context; (3) to explore its implications to contemporary Vincentian life and the formation process.

* Dr. Daniel Franklin Pilario Estepa, C.M., is currently the dean of St. Vincent School of Theology, Philippines. He earned his doctorate degree in systematic theology at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. He is co-chairman of the Commission on Charism and Culture (CCC) — an arm of the Asia-Pacific Visitors' Conference.

In order to situate our discussion, it is our methodological option to start with contemporary issues and questions. How does contemporary social science see political ‘power’? It is through this lens that we intend to read Vincent’s politics in the hope that we begin to discern for our own times how to concretely negotiate with power and do ‘charity’ in political contexts.¹

2. Theorizing Power: Contemporary Theories

How crucial is the question of power to the contemporary mind? Just to get a sense of it, I tried to do a google search on the term ‘power’ and I got 785M hits in 0.17 seconds; in the yahoo search engine, it was higher. I got 1.24B in 0.31 seconds.² Since this might include electric or mechanical power and the like, I narrowed my search down to the term ‘political power’ and I got 228M hits in 0.07 seconds for google and 116M in 0.28 seconds in yahoo. Considering this data, the question of power must be a relevant concern in today’s society.

Contemporary social science discourses provide us a wide range with which the notion of power is understood. Let me go through some of these uses: (a) power as domination; (b) power as empowerment and resistance; and (c) power as solidarity.

2.1. *Domination: Power Over*

In a classic study in political theory, Steven Lukes points to the three ways in which power as domination is theorized in political contexts.³ The ‘one-dimensional view’ takes the individualist perspective. Domination is “power of A over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.” In other

¹ For this methodology, see my articles: “Inculturating Congregational Charisms: A Methodological Proposal for the Vincentian Family,” *Hapag: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research* 2 (2005): 169-207; “Inculturating Vincentian Charism and Ministry in the Asia-Pacific Contexts: A Methodological Proposal,” in *Formation for Mission: In Search of Contextualization of Vincentian Formation and Charism in Asia Pacific*, ed. Armada Riyanto (Malang, Indonesia: Widya Sasana Publication, 2005), 139-173; reprinted in *Vincentiana* 51, No. 4 (July-August 2007): 287-315.

² Just for the sake of curiosity, I compared it to the word ‘sex’. ‘Sex’ sites were very much lower — 397M/.07 seconds in google and 554M/.10 seconds in yahoo. Can we say that contemporary minds are more concerned with ‘power’ than with ‘sex’?

³ For this, see STEVEN LUKES, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Palgrave, 1974). This work was revised and expanded in 2005.

words, power is seen to reside in the actor(s) who can exercise overt and visible dominance in situations where there is conflict of interests. In the 'two-dimensional view', the conflict need not necessarily be overt; it can also be covert and concealed. It is not necessary that the dominant group make open decisions against the minority. It is enough that they keep quiet on certain issues, thus, in effect preventing that specific issue to surface in open discussion. This view thinks that dominance can be exercised over others by one's capacity to control the political agenda. Beyond the first two types, there is a 'three-dimensional view' or radical view to which Lukes subscribes. For Lukes, the previous two conceptions are too individualistic, i.e., too faithful to the tradition started by Max Weber who viewed power as residing in individuals realizing their wills despite the resistance of others. The two views are also conflict-centered — be it overt or covert conflicts. Beyond individual action (i.e., power of A over B), Lukes contends that power also includes "socially structured and culturally patterned behavior of groups and practices of institutions."⁴ Beyond actual observable conflict, power is also present in manipulated social consensus. In other words, the dominant system can in fact influence, shape and determine — through media, schools, churches — what its people should like and want. And through everyday formation processes — or what sociology also calls 'socialization' — the hegemonic agenda begins to be accepted as legitimate, normal and natural. There is no observable conflict since the interests of the dominant order have been imposed on and seemingly consented to by those it tries to exclude. Social consensus, thus, is both voluntarily concurred but also subconsciously imposed.⁵

The radical view of power in Lukes is influenced by the notion of 'hegemony' by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). For Gramsci, political legitimacy is gained in two ways: force and consent. The first approach is through the use of coercion and force (e.g., police, courts, prisons, etc.). But since this is not always effective as it creates widespread protests, the dominant power also uses persuasion (others also call this 'brainwashing') through media, educational system, churches and other institutions in order to convince the people of its own legitimacy. In other words, the

⁴ STEVEN LUKES, *Power*, 22.

⁵ The radical view of power in Lukes is influenced by the notion of 'hegemony' by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). For Gramsci's discussion on hegemony, see JOSEPH FEMIA, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

dominant goes about ‘manufacturing consent’, to use a phrase of a famous philosopher and political activist, Noam Chomsky. In both cases, the dominant order exercises power over the dominated. However, the dominated also participates in such a construction — as they no longer voice their dissent. On the surface, hegemony, therefore, is the ‘whole lived social reality’ which is artificial as it is manufactured but which people also take for granted as natural and legitimate.

In recent times, however, there is one view of power which goes beyond the radical view of Lukes and Gramsci. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) — a French philosopher famous among the postmodern writers — conceives of power as ‘governmentality’. First, against the previous three views, power is neither a possession of individuals nor of institutions; sovereignty does not reside in the monarch nor in the people; it is all over. “Power must be analyzed as something that circulates,” he states. “It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as commodity or piece of wealth.”⁶ Second, power is not only repressive; it is also productive and reproductive. It is a set of practices, technology or strategy dispersed throughout the whole system so that bodies of subjects are rendered docile to its logic and functioning. In effect, bodies can be effectively ‘governed’, thus also acquiring the capacity to reproduce themselves and the whole system. This is what he calls the ‘micro-physics of power’.

What is the bottom-line assertion in the above theoretical discussion? Regardless of their differences, the theories of power from Lukes to Gramsci to Foucault agree on one thing. Power is “power over”. It consists of individual acts, everyday practices, institutions, technology, strategies or embodied micro-practices of domination over known or unknown others.

2.2. Empowerment and Resistance: Power To

Beyond domination, however, there is another tradition of conceiving power in terms of positive capacity. Power is not just ‘power over’; it is also ‘power to’. As the Latin *posse* suggests, power is ability, capacity, strength actually put forth, effectiveness. Beyond domination, power is a transformative capacity, an act of empowerment. In the context of a powerful dominant power at the center, what capacity do the margins possess? True, the hegemonic

⁶ MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 98.

power is all-pervasive. But there can never be a “dominant social order, and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy and human intention.”⁷ There is always a dimension of our human and social existence, which the dominant social order “neglects, excludes, represses, or simply fails to recognize.”⁸ It is this dimension which puts into question, threatens or exerts pressure on the hegemonic. Raymond Williams, a British neo-Marxist philosopher, identifies this sphere as the locus of alternative, oppositional and emergent voices of the excluded, the locus of resistance among those marginalized by the system. Michel de Certeau, another contemporary French philosopher, calls this the ‘tactics of the weak’. While *strategy* refers to calculated action of powerful institutions whose possession of a ‘territory’ needed to regroup or recharge for the next moves places it in an advantageous position, *tactic* is the scheme of resistance available to the weak. Bereft of place, the ‘weak’ can only play within the terrain of the ‘strong’. It has no time to strategize and its attacks depend only on the possibilities afforded by cracks and fissures along the structure of its powerful adversary. “It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse.”⁹ It thus turns its own smallness into gain and cunningly transforms the enemy’s size and visibility into utter disadvantage.¹⁰

2.3. *Solidarity: Power With*

For some contemporary feminists, however, the military metaphors of tactics and strategies, of dominance (power over) and resistance (power to) are all masculine notions. They argue that the

⁷ RAYMOND WILLIAMS, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 125.

⁸ RAYMOND WILLIAMS, *Marxism and Literature*, 126.

⁹ MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

¹⁰ This reminds us of the Greek *metis* — a sense of cunning intelligence valuable to the Pre-Socratics but came to be suppressed by the dominant Greek narrative from Plato onwards. In certain activities like navigation, medicine or hunting, the Greeks value a type of intelligence which combines “flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills and experiences acquired over the years” as they are made to bear upon the “transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous situations.” In front of such an overwhelming power, this type of oblique resistance is the only way to survive. See DANIEL FRANKLIN PILARIO, *Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis: Exploring Theological Method with Pierre Bourdieu* (Leuven: Leuven University Press / Peeters, 2005), 21-25, 249-250, 534-535.

experience of women ushers in a totally new conception of power: “power with”. Virginia Held, a feminist author, suggests that “the capacity to give birth, and to nurture and empower could be the basis for new and more humanly promising conceptions than the ones that now prevail of power, empowerment and growth.”¹¹ Another feminist, Jean Baker Miller says: “There is enormous validity in women’s not wanting to use power as it is presently conceived and used. Rather, women may want to be powerful in ways that simultaneously enhance, rather than, diminish, the power of others.”¹² Yet as early as the 1920s, Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933) already advanced the notion of ‘power with’. “Genuine power can only be grown,” she argues, “it will slip from every arbitrary hand that grasps it; for genuine power is not coercive control, but coactive control.... ‘Power-with’ is what democracy should mean in politics or industry.”¹³ But this is not a monopoly of feminists alone. The notion of power as solidarity already finds its echo in the writings of the political philosopher, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) who argues that “power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert.”¹⁴ What is envisioned by these different discourses is a nurturing, affective power, not controlling power; power of creative solidarity not of aggressive domination; power that gives of itself not one that oppresses.

3. Reading Vincent’s Responses to the Politics of Power

From the lens of the above theoretical discourse on power, we now ask how did St. Vincent deal with political power in his own context? Some might ask if this method is not anachronistic. Are we not asking questions which Vincent himself had not asked? Are we not projecting our prejudices and biases into Vincent’s world? The answer to all of these questions is probably yes. And we should not be guilty of doing so! For as Hans-Georg Gadamer also says: “Prejudices are the biases of our openness to the world. They are simply the conditions whereby we experience something — whereby what we encounter says something

¹¹ VIRGINIA HELD, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society and Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 137.

¹² Jean Baker Miller (1992) as quoted in “Feminist Perspectives on Power,” in <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/> (accessed 06.24.2007).

¹³ MARY PARKER FOLLETT, *Creative Experience* (New York: Longmans Green and Co., 1924), xiii, 187.

¹⁴ HANNAH ARENDT, *On Violence* (London: Penguin, 1970), 44.

to us.¹⁵ In other words, thanks to our questions, prejudices and biases, Vincent de Paul comes alive for us. It is only through them that we can read him.

3.1. *“A true servant of God and of the Prince”: Was Vincent Co-opted?*

How did Vincent deal with elite political power? One way of looking at it is that he was co-opted by it. In this view, Vincent was a willing collaborator of the absolutist *Ancien Régime*. He served as the monarch’s spiritual director, adviser, companion, friend. From the Marxist perspective, he provided a theological and ecclesiastical legitimization to the oppressive regime. Read from the prism of Gramsci, he had unwittingly made the Congregation and the church as a whole to be institutions at the service of monarchial hegemonic dominance.

This is the way the famous contemporary philosopher, Michel Foucault, read Vincent de Paul in a classic philosophical and sociological study of mendicancy and madness in 17th century France. According to Foucault, the Church played a great part in the “great confinement”, the royal edict of 1656. This decree establishes the General Hospital to house all the beggars, the poor, the sick, the insane all together. Foucault contends that the program to control and contain the misfits of society — those who did not fit the new standards of the Age of Reason — was even started earlier as signaled by Vincent’s taking over of St. Lazare. Foucault writes: “Vincent de Paul reorganized Saint-Lazare, the most important of the former lazar houses of Paris; on January 7, 1632, he signed a contract in the name of the Congregationists of the Mission with the ‘Priory’ of Saint-Lazare, which was now to receive ‘persons detained by the order of His Majesty’.”¹⁶ Foucault, therefore, insinuates that Vincent unwittingly placed himself at the disposal of a system that reproduces itself by violently rounding up and incarcerating the poor.¹⁷

¹⁵ H.-G. GADAMER, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977), 9. See also *Truth and Method* 2nd revised edition, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998), 269-277.

¹⁶ MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. R. Howard (New Pantheon, 1965), 42.

¹⁷ This generalized allegation by Foucault needs to be nuanced. The everyday life details in Saint-Lazare give us another impression. Saint-Lazare was a big institution of all sorts — from halfway house for the poor to temporary lodging of bishops, lay people and religious. It served as the mother house of the missionaries (that is why we came to be called ‘Lazarists’). But it was also a training institution for seminarians and priests.

But how far did Vincent really collaborate with monarchical political powers? Quite much, that is, if we also listen to some of his contemporaries! This is how Louis Abelly described Vincent in a section of his now famous biography: “Monsieur Vincent preserved always an inviolable fidelity to the king and a constant devotion to his service even during the most perilous and difficult times” (Chapter 13, Section 10).¹⁸ In this section, Abelly points out that Vincent de Paul risked his personal life, material welfare, and that of his Congregation in order to be of service to the King since, for Vincent, “the measure of the affection and fidelity to one’s prince is found in one’s attachment to God.”¹⁹ Vincent was a man of his times. Like his contemporaries, he also believed that to be faithful to the will of the king is also to obey the will of God. Vincent’s close and personal dealings with the palace are well known. To be called to the deathbed of Louis XIII is a sign of a trustful relationship. At one point in those deathbed conversations, the king said: “M. Vincent, if I recover my health, I will see that all the bishops spend three years in your house.”²⁰ But Vincent was much closer to the Queen. She is a key person in Vincent’s works of charity. There was even a plan to found a Confraternity of Charity in the court and the head of which is “the sacred person of the Queen”.²¹ This is how Vincent regarded

The Tuesday conferences were done here and Vincent was a regular attendee. There was also a church where liturgy was celebrated daily and a place where soup and bread were served for those who cared to come. So, it was not just some sort of prison — an impression which Foucault wanted to give. It is true that there were inmates with mental handicaps and young persons who were voluntarily sent there by their parents (with the permission of the magistrates) for purposes of reform. But this arrangement is no different from what we now call institution of ‘rehabilitation’, and in their case, with the confreres as equivalent to present-day spiritual directors, counselors or psychiatrists. Vincent insisted that these ‘inmates’ be called ‘boarders’. They were not prisoners of His Majesty as Foucault insinuated. They were in fact ‘paying boarders’, thus, they are served exactly the same food — if not better — as the community had. Those who recovered went home, got decent positions in society, lived normal — if not — exemplary lives. Abelly had this to say: “It is extraordinary that several had almost a complete change of heart when they were sent to Saint Lazare. The charitable care they experienced enabled them to leave in an entirely different frame of mind, as good as new.” LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, Book II, 265.

¹⁸ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, Book II (New York: New City Press, 1993), 395.

¹⁹ L. ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, Book II, 396.

²⁰ JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, trans. Joyce Howard (London: Melisende, 1999), 531.

²¹ JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, 529.

her to which the Queen also returned the same, if not more, esteem and admiration. One day, a nobleman commented to Queen Anne of Austria: "There are few persons, like Monsieur Vincent, attached to the service of the King and state with such a sincere, constant and disinterested fidelity." "You are right," the Queen replied, "Monsieur Vincent is a true servant of God and of the Prince."²² She chose him to be a member of the Council of Conscience — the present counterpart of which is the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs. Though it was Mazarin who acted as the President of the Council, he admits that Vincent had more influence with the Queen than he had. "Even I who know more about her Majesty's intentions than anyone, dare not intervene until M. Vincent has studied the matter as much as he wishes," Mazarin confessed.²³ Vincent was not only known by Cardinal Mazarin but also by Cardinal Richelieu before him. One incident can tell us how concerned Vincent can be with his image among those who hold power. He once heard of being accused of acting against Richelieu's interests. He wasted no time to clear his name. "My Lord," he explained, "here is the miscreant that people are accusing of acting against Your Eminence's interests. I have come here in person so that you may dispose of me and all the congregation in what way you please."²⁴

These and many other stories, of which we have no space to mention here, tells us that Vincent was frequently walking in the corridors of power and hob-knobbing with those who wield it — Kings and Queens, Ministers and the nobility, their wives and children.

3.2. "Throw yourself to the sea": Humble Pleas and Open Defiance

Despite his close affinity with the authorities, Vincent did deliberately oppose government policies and articulated them. One of these incidents happened in the disaster wrought by the protracted war in Lorraine (1635-1643). Famine and disease abound. The

²² ABBÉ MAYNARD, *Virtues and Spiritual Doctrine of St. Vincent de Paul* (Niagara: Niagara Index Publishing House, 1877), 216.

²³ JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, 543. The French minister and a friend of Mazarin, Le Tellier knows that as in the case of French benefices, the Queen only relies on the opinion of Monsieur Vincent: "As for M. Vincent, she feels obliged to follow his advice that if the cardinal nominated as bishop somebody that M. Vincent thought was unsuitable, then she would accept the latter's decision and neither the recommendation of His Eminence nor of anybody else would prevail over M. Vincent's decision." *Ibid.*

²⁴ JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, 526.

reports spoke of men competing with animals to eat grass. In the midst of this unimaginable suffering, Vincent easily identified the root cause: Cardinal Richelieu's foreign policy. Together with the extensive fund-raising, the heroic work of the missionaries on the ground and the acts of penance done in the communities, Vincent never wasted time and confronted the dominant powers. He thought it helpful to visit Richelieu. He knelt down on his knees to plead: "My Lord, give us peace. Have pity on us. Give peace to France!" After giving him a sigh, the Cardinal Minister replied: "Ah! Monsieur Vincent, I desire peace just as much as you; but peace does not depend on me alone."²⁵ Was Richelieu sincere? Or was it mere rhetoric? Shrewd politician that he is, did he say this just to placate his sincere guest? For, in reality, was he not bent to pursue his political plans of French political expansion regardless of the collateral damage? On second thought, maybe Richelieu's reply was a keener assessment of the situation. Vincent's 'one-dimensional view' of power tells him that Richelieu is the single root cause. He might have thought that the Prime Minister's unilateral decision is powerful enough to let the troubles come to an end. But Richelieu is a more perceptive politician. He knew that power is not a game of an individual alone. Once the hegemonic political machinery has been set in motion (through its policies, functionaries, systems of execution, penal processes, etc.), there is no way for it to stop. The powerful system of the absolutist regime has gained a life of its own — and not even its very creators have the power of control.

A parallel event happened in the War of the Fronde (1648-1653) — a civil war between the old aristocratic nobility, the Parlement, and an absolutist monarchy. During these troubles, the poor are the unwilling victims. As the popular saying goes, "When the elephants play, the grass dies." Out of concern for the victims, Vincent placed his life on the line once more. He knew the root of the problem: the person of Mazarin, the Queen's Prime Minister. At the early dawn of January 14, 1649, Vincent set out early in the morning accompanied by Brother Docournau to Saint-Germain where the royal household moved to escape from the people's ire. The trip proved to be full of dangers but he suffered it all. He was also apprehensive that the Queen might not be receptive to his pleadings as she is heard to send away people who criticized her Prime Minister. When admitted to her presence, Vincent told the Queen that Mazarin should go. "Peace! Peace! Give us peace. Your Majesty, pray send him away for a while."

²⁵ *Ibid*, 369-370. There is no specific date for this incident. Coste calculated it happened sometime between 1639 and 1642.

While the Queen listened, she also did not like to confront Mazarin. So she instructed him to talk to Mazarin himself. “Your Eminence,” Vincent told the Cardinal, “sacrifice yourself, withdraw from the country to save France.”²⁶ “Submit to the present state of affairs. Throw yourself into the sea to appease the storm.”²⁷ Vincent did not succeed. Mazarin became more influential on the Queen who also needed him more than ever. But Vincent pursued his efforts for peace. He continued to dialogue with both sides — the royal power and the nobles. When the negotiations broke down, he even wrote the Pope to intercede. And in one daring political move, on September 11, 1652, he wrote the Cardinal to refrain from going together with the young King and the Queen mother as they enter Paris in order to talk with the people. He did this for, in his mind, Mazarin is the real problem. This did not please Mazarin. As a consequence, Vincent was dismissed from the Council of Conscience.²⁸ It was the price he paid for his act of open defiance to dominant power.

3.3. “If we use force we could be going against God’s will”: *Oblique Resistance*

Let me go back to the project of the General Hospital. The royal edict of April 27, 1656 seeks to prohibit begging and idleness which pose as social ills of the city. Around ten buildings all over Paris were allotted for this: *La Salpêtrière*, *La Pitié*, *Le Refuge*, *La Scipion*, *La Savonnerie*, *Bicêtre*, etc. The ‘archers of the hospital’ — some sort of ‘policemen of the poor’ — were also organized to round up beggars and bring them to any of these institutions. Edicts of the subsequent years prohibited begging all throughout the city “under the pain of being whipped for the first offense, and for the second, condemned to the galleys if men and boys, and banished if women and girls.”²⁹ This is what Foucault calls the “Great Confinement”. The General Hospital was not a medical but a ‘police’ institution. It is a semijudicial

²⁶ PIERRE COSTE, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. 3, trans. Joseph Leonard (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1952), 92.

²⁷ PIERRE COSTE, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. 2, 448.

²⁸ Roman says that we do not know the specific date of Vincent’s dismissal from the Council. But when Alain de Solminihac — the bishop of Cahors — wrote him on October 2, 1652, he congratulated him for having been relieved of the job though it was also a great loss of the Church. Thus, the retirement document must have been issued before October 1652, that is, right after the September 11 letter.

²⁹ M. FOUCAULT, *Madness and Civilization*, 49.

structure with “quasi-absolute sovereignty, jurisdiction without appeal, a writ of execution against which nothing can prevail — the *Hôpital Général* is a strange power that the King establishes between the police and the courts, at the limits of the law: a third order of repression.”³⁰ The directors for life possess administrative, police, corrective and penal powers over all of the poor in Paris — both inside and outside the General Hospital. They have access to “stakes, irons, prisons, and dungeons” inside the hospital in order to execute their mission. It was noted that within a few years after the edict was issued, the General Hospital already housed 6000 persons, a good 1% of the total population.

What is Vincent’s involvement in this project? Years before the royal edict, in 1653, the Ladies of Charity, all aristocratic influential women, already presented to Vincent the idea of organizing all the beggars of the city. They wanted Vincent to undertake the work since he was well known for institutions of this type. They assured him of sufficient money allotted for the project. Even *La Salpêtrière* was given by the Queen for their use. But Vincent tempered their haste. He wanted them to discern more. “The works of God,” he counsels, “come into being little by little, by degrees, and progressively.”³¹ The Ladies were quite annoyed by his slowness. But this may be his way of circumventing something he did not like in the whole idea: the use of coercion and force. The Ladies wanted it on a big scale; thus, the need to forcefully compel the beggars. Vincent wanted to accept only those who came voluntarily. Force should not be used to bring them in. “If we use force,” he says, “we could be going against God’s will.”³² As the Ladies were waiting in discernment, the Royal Edict came out and was promulgated. The work went to the men assigned by the Parlement following the conditions that Foucault described above. It was to Vincent’s great relief that the work was not given to him and his community. In a way, his discerning slowness prevented him from undertaking a work which he thinks is repressive. It is this discerning slowness that also served as a skillful dilatory tactic. But also, the same ‘slowness’ averted a possible clash with his long time generous collaborators, the Ladies of Charity, especially the Duchesse d’Aiguillon who was hell bent to pursue the project. As we say today, he had hit two birds with one stone. Within the Vincentian spiritual tradition, Vincent’s slowness has always been interpreted as a sign of his sensitivity to the voice of Providence. In this specific context, it

³⁰ M. FOUCAULT, *Madness and Civilization*, 40.

³¹ PIERRE COSTE, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. 3, 302.

³² JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, 637.

also proves to be a ingenious and cunning tactic of oblique resistance to overarching dominant power.

But Vincent's problems were not yet over. Not long after the 'Great Confinement' had taken off, he came to know that it was stipulated in the royal decree that the priests of the mission serve as chaplains. Around 20 of them were requested. How could Vincent defy the King? He met with his community and denied the request on the pretext of "its many community commitments."³³ That sounds to be a lame excuse. If Vincent were convinced, he could have re-channeled personnel as he did with his other projects like, for instance, his strong resolve on the Madagascar mission. But even as Vincent refused the King's wishes, he instituted some ways which, on the surface, appear to conform to the Royal program. This was done maybe in order not to appear openly defiant against so great a power. First, he also endorsed other priests who might be available for the work — one of them, Louis Abelly, who served there for only five months. Second, he suspended the soup kitchen at Saint-Lazare in deference to the program. One day, a beggar confronted Vincent at the door of Saint-Lazare: "Father, did not God command that alms be given to the poor?" "That's quite true, my friend," he replied, "but he also commanded us to obey the magistrates."³⁴ Traditional interpretation sees in this event an example of Vincent's unconditional obedience to authority. But given the context, I could see the sarcasm in his face or a wink in his eyes as he said these words. For, right after, Saint-Lazare also resumed the distribution of soup and bread! Vincent was totally unconvinced that the poor be incarcerated; neither should begging, a work of mercy dear to the heart of the Christian tradition, be totally abolished. One day, a beggar told Vincent: "Father, everyone in Paris is abusing you because they think you are the cause of the poor people being shut up in the big hospital." "Oh, very well," Vincent replied, "I will pray for them."³⁵

While official propaganda praised the "Great Confinement" as the 'greatest charitable enterprise of the century', Vincent consciously

³³ JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, 638. At around March 1657, Vincent wrote to one of his friends about the Chaplaincy of the General Hospital: "They [the King and the Parlement] have appointed the priests of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity to serve the poor under the authority of the archbishop of Paris. *We have not yet undertaken the actual work for we do not yet know for sure if it is the will of God for us. If we do begin this work it will at first be an experiment to see how it goes.*" LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God*, Book I, 229.

³⁴ PIERRE COSTE, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Book II, 302.

³⁵ PIERRE COSTE, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Book II, 301.

distanced from it not in open defiance but through what I call ‘oblique resistance’, a tactic available to the weak in the face of so great a power. As the court wanted to eliminate its social eyesores through superficial window-dressing in confinement, Vincent did all he could to respond to the deeper causes of people’s misery as he also tried to mitigate its impact in their lives. Foucault’s structural analysis of history might be helpful to see the greater dynamics at work in hegemonic politics, but it is unable to perceive the oblique resistances present in the everyday life and decisions of actual persons on the ground, in this case, Vincent de Paul. A late 19th century author described Vincent this way: “We may compare him to that remarkable mechanical invention known as the screw. It works its way through without fret or noise; it does not split or spoil the material, but slowly, peacefully, progressively and steadily bores through wood, stone or even steel, for nothing can hinder its progress.”³⁶

3.4. “Look at how M. Vincent comes dressed to court”: Embodied Dissent

In the now classic study on French aristocratic life, *The Court Society*, Norbert Elias (1897-1990) argues that cultivation of outward appearances is crucial to the reproduction of court life.³⁷ Etiquette, for instance, is not just a matter of ceremonial; it is symbol and instrument of power. “If power exists but is not visible in the appearance of the ruler, the people will not believe. They must see in order to believe.”³⁸ Rank existed in its everyday outward representation; specific etiquette marks the status and position of an individual courtier. This position granted by the monarch had to be defended on two fronts. One needs to demonstrate subservience to those higher in the monarchial ladder and a sense of superiority to those below him. Those above need to be appeased in order to be always showered with their graces; and those below should be kept in their proper places so as not to disrupt the structure’s functioning. This status needs to be defended at all times by the careful cultivation of one’s etiquette: manner of dressing, speaking, walking,

³⁶ ABBÉ BOUDIGNON, *Saint Vincent de Paul. Modèle des hommes d'action et d'œuvres* (Paris, 1886), 75, quoted in *Ibid.*, 335.

³⁷ “An elaborate cultivation of outward appearances as an instrument of social differentiation, the display of rank through outward form, is characteristic not only of the houses but of the whole shaping of court life.” NORBERT ELIAS, *The Court Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 62-63.

³⁸ NORBERT ELIAS, *The Court Society*, 128.

etc. “To exist in luster of aloofness and prestige, that is, to exist as a court person, is, for a court person, an end in itself.”³⁹

Vincent de Paul finds himself in this Court often. Was this courtly status his major concern? Not at all! A very famous encounter with Mazarin illustrates my point. Cardinal Mazarin has considered Monsieur Vincent as a threat to his political ambitions.⁴⁰ Thus, to put him down in matters of courtly etiquette might temporarily placate the Cardinal’s political insecurities. With Vincent’s simplicity of life, he is content to come to court in clean but simple attire — or, to use the words of Abelly, in “his good manners which were both simple and humble.”⁴¹ But one day, Vincent came with a raveled girdle. Mazarin seized this opportunity to mock him: “Look how Monsieur Vincent comes dressed to Court and what a beautiful girdle he wears.”⁴² Vincent was quiet and did not respond to his tirades. Traditional interpretation reads in this incident a sign of Vincent’s humility and detachment.⁴³ I propose to see this event from the perspective of systemic power analysis. Beyond an act of individual virtue (like humility), Vincent’s non-conventional ‘courtly’ etiquette was an act of resistance to the seemingly formidable dominant power that reproduces itself even in courtly bodies. In other words, Vincent’s embodied ‘habitus’ (to use Bourdieu’s famous sociological category)⁴⁴ does not at all share in the ‘aristocratic habitus’ nor intends to entrench itself there. Thus, unlike Mazarin’s, it is not preoccupied to conform to the discipline of courtly bodies. In effect, its self-assured presence unwittingly poses itself as a threat to others who compete for this highly contested space, in particular, the court of *Le Roi Soleil*.⁴⁵ Vincent’s presence becomes an embodied dissent to

³⁹ NORBERT ELIAS, *The Court Society*, 156.

⁴⁰ For a balanced interpretation of the relationship between Mazarin and Vincent de Paul, see JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, 538-540.

⁴¹ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God*, Book III, Chapter 13, Section I, 210.

⁴² LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God*, Book III, Chapter 18, 274.

⁴³ For instance, after quoting this, Pierre Coste remarks: “He was indifferent to the marks of deference shown him. A man’s character is often changed when he attains a prominent position, but his remained the same. ‘M. Vincent is always M. Vincent’, a bishop remarked, and nothing was truer.” PIERRE COSTE, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. 3, 88.

⁴⁴ See PIERRE BOURDIEU, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52-79.

⁴⁵ There are also incidents of other nobles making fun of Vincent. While he was riding on his horse from Saint Denis, a group of noblemen pursued him and fired their guns in his direction saying that when the danger is gone, he

the highly charged contest of power. If you prefer a more religious language, his simplicity poses itself as a prophetic challenge to the power-hungry and position-conscious environment around him.

3.5. “*These are my burden and my sorrow*”: *Solidarity*

Vincent did a thousand and one things: kneel down at the feet of Cardinal Ministers or Queens, risk his good name or the resources of his community, etc. What motivated Vincent to place his life on the line in danger of being crushed by dominant political power? There is no other reason, but the passion of his life: solidarity with the person of the poor. He played with dominant power (power over) and mobilized all sources of resistance to it (power to) — all in the name of solidarity with those who are marginalized by the system (power with). The whole political machinery works against their favor, from fiscal policy to international relations (Alsace and Lorraine), the fight among nobles and royalty (the Fronde) to courtly extravagance. Vincent stood up against this powerful machine because he knows the poor are helpless. They have nowhere else to go. “The poor people who do not know where to go and what to do, they are suffering and their numbers increase every day — these are my burden and my sorrow.”⁴⁶ For the system to which they were told to belong has outrightly excluded them.

Of course, Vincent was not a naïve romantic. He does not idealize the poor. Sensitive as he is to power dynamics among the ruling élite, he is not also a stranger to power games among the poor and others whom he serves. In one of the scenes in the movie *Monsieur Vincent*, there was a beggar who created trouble because he was not given help during the distribution. Vincent took him aside and told him to stop begging and that he needed to work. In another instance, Vincent was happy that one ungrateful poor person would not come back to see him again.⁴⁷

will first go to a church to thank God for the protection against the robbers. Vincent actually did, as they guessed. PIERRE COSTE, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. 3, 88-89.

⁴⁶ JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, 559.

⁴⁷ He wrote to the community of the Daughters of Charity in Valpuiseaux: “That poor man came yesterday morning to collect his things at the door without either coming in or speaking to anyone except the porter. You can rest assured, Sisters, that you will never see him down there again with my consent; and if he is so unthinking as to go back, I ask you to let me know immediately so that I can see to his removal. I do not think he will ever come to see me again, for which I will be very grateful.” PIERRE COSTE (ed.), *Saint Vincent de Paul: Conférences, Entretiens, Documents*, Vol. V (Paris: 1920-1926),

Thanks to this down-to-earth appraisal of the poor, we are sure that his concern for them is grounded and realistic. Despite all their failings, his heart still goes out to them. When he talks about them, he speaks with the language of his heart — in all care, love and tenderness. “God loves the poor, and thus surely he must love those who love and serve them. When we also love someone, we love his friends and servants. The little Company of the Mission strives to serve the poor tenderly. God loves them so much, and so we have reason to hope that because of them God will love us as well. We then have, my brothers, a new reason to serve them. We should seek out the poorest and most abandoned. We must recognize before God that they are our lords and masters, and that we are unworthy to render them our small favors.”⁴⁸ What comes to mind is the third notion of power as solidarity. Beyond ‘power over’ which Vincent acutely analyzed and responded to, or ‘power to’ whose sources of resistance he powerfully deployed, the feminist sensibility of a ‘power with’ — one that nurtures and cares, one that empowers and connects — is quite alive in Vincent. “When we go to the poor,” he tells the missionaries, “we should so identify with them that we share their sufferings.... We must open our hearts so that they become responsive to the sufferings and miseries of the neighbor.”⁴⁹ Such a spirit of compassion has to fill our hearts, our attitudes, our language, and lastly, our actions: “We must help them as much as we can to bring about a partial or complete end to their sufferings, for the hand must be directed as much as possible by the heart.”⁵⁰ Such a solidarity is not only ‘affective’ but also ‘effective’, to use one of Vincent’s famous distinctions.

4. Repercussions to Vincentian Mission and Formation

What follows are my initial attempts to enumerate some repercussions of the above reflections in contemporary Vincentian mission and formation. Far from being exhaustive, these reflections are provisional.

594 quoted in THOMAS DAVITT, “Less Publicised Facets of Saint Vincent,” *Colloque* 17. Henceforth, SV.

⁴⁸ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God*, Book III, 117.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

4.1. *The Need for an Analytic of Power*

If charity is to be effective in socio-economic and political contexts as the theme of this whole Conference wants us to consider,⁵¹ then, it is in need of a viable analytic of power. Socio-political contexts are so charged with power that, without a practicable framework to analyze these dynamics, we will end up with ‘pious’ works without real impact in society or ideologically motivated programs that ironically end up oppressing the poor whom we intend to help in the first place. A well-grounded and, hopefully, effective response can only come from a realistic assessment of the situation. In his work for the poor, Vincent did not have just the bible in hand and a good heart. He had all the analytical resources that came from his experience and his knowledge of human nature but also advice coming from all persons whom he thinks can be of help. Furthermore, society has quite changed from the reign of Louis XIII to the present reign of global capitalism. If there is anything significant, the mechanisms of oppression and exclusion have become more systematic and flexible. All the more should the analytic of power becomes necessary.

What are the characteristics of such an analytic? (1) First, it needs to be responsive to the sensibilities of the poor. It should bear out an analysis from the perspective of the victims of the system. Those holding political and economic power have their own analysis; the IMF-World Bank also presents another; as well as those who make ‘culture’ their main business (media moguls, lifestyle gurus, fashion designers, etc.). Our analysis should have a specific bias — not the bias of the powerful but of those excluded from power. The bottom-line question is: “What do the poor say when we analyze society this way? Is this their perspective as well?” (2) Second, the analytical framework needs to be critical. Since we intend to unmask the complex mechanisms of power, the analytic must be judicious and critical. (3) Third, it must be scientific. We need all the resources that the present human and social sciences can give us in order to understand poverty, the systemic mechanism of exclusion that causes it, uncover its hidden dynamics, and search for more effective ways towards helping the victims. (4) It must also be effective and practicable. Our analytic of power should not stop on the level of analysis (and paralysis). It should also provide a way to think of practical actions in order to alleviate the suffering of the victims. The poor are not so much interested in our theoretical discourses. They always ask the practical question: “So, what shall we do now?”

⁵¹ See Call for Papers to the Indonesian Joint Meeting.

What consequences have this practical analytic to our way of dealing with those in power? For one, it is about time to do away with a simplistic reply common among Vincentians: that we should make the poor and the rich come together — so that the rich may share their abundance with the poor and the poor become rich in the eyes of God! As we have seen, it is not that simple. On the one hand, sharing out of one's abundance can sometimes be a legitimization of a mechanism that keeps the poor at their places and poses permanent hindrance for their liberation. It can serve as an act of 'sprinkling holy water' on their injustices, to use a phrase from Marx. On the other hand, we have also seen that the poor are not 'saints'. Critical analysis of power makes us see where in society God already works and where the Good News still needs to be preached.

4.2. Openness to Multiple Responses

As we have seen, Vincent was open to multiple and flexible responses. He can talk with the King or prostrate in front of the Queen or her Ministers. If these do not work, he can tell them directly to resign since they are the root of the problem or write them letters suggesting courses of action that can pacify or mitigate the impact of their presence. In all these multiple lines of actions, there was just one guiding principle: the response should be able to help alleviate the suffering of the poor.

This tells us that it is salutary to integrate helpful aspects from different, even opposite perspectives. One does not have to rely on one direction alone. The Spirit of God blows where S/he wills. Some recent frameworks of social analysis — either from the left or the right — have become quite dogmatic and doctrinaire. When theories and systems become fixed, they will become idols. Idols demand unquestioning obedience and wholehearted worship. Such uncritical stance has produced the Gulag or Auschwitz, Cambodian killing fields and Philippine Martial Law, the 9/11 event and 'axis of evil' discourse. 'Flexibility' has always been a crucial political virtue — and a Vincentian virtue as well.

4.3. The Centrality of the Concrete Person

Beyond all efforts to come to a practical and strategic analysis, what still proves crucial to Vincent is the concrete human person in front of him — his/her actual needs, his/her specific concerns. All theories must be able to advance the well-being of the concrete person. This is the lacuna of Foucault's analysis. Even as he is

sensitive to macro-micro dynamics of the hegemonic system, he also neglects the fact that there are relatively free agents — concrete persons — who can exert some acts of resistance. This point challenges us to put a concrete face to our analysis. A concrete name, a concrete need, a concrete face is always a reliable check on the effectiveness of our analysis.

For all his many works — from the world of the court to ecclesiastical circles, from visiting his foundations in far-flung places to taking care of the Daughters or the confreres — Vincent never failed to do one crucial thing. He made it a point to personally serve or have some time to listen to the raw complaints or actual stories of poor persons in the gates of Saint Lazare every time he comes home from a trip. For him, the concrete person is the endpoint of all our strivings. There is one side-note that catches my attention in Roman's biography of St. Vincent. After having convinced the Ladies of Charity that the work of the Foundlings had to continue, the Daughters had to distribute them to the houses of different foster mothers all over Paris since they could not be accommodated in one house. Louise de Marillac, who was directly in-charge, kept a register of the different placements of children. And Roman wrote: "Vincent checked this register and (a touching detail) signed it with his own hand."⁵² This means that Vincent did know where each individual child went, who the foster mothers were, and their concrete whereabouts. It was a 'detail' but it was crucial for him. Vincent did not serve the 'universal poor' or an 'abstract humanity'. Each concrete child, each concrete beggar, the concrete sick person — was the reason to all his numerous undertakings.

4.4. The Reality of Power and the Formation of our Candidates

There are two things I want to stress with regard to the issue of power in the formation of our candidates. First, our students need to be acquainted with recent trends in social analysis and apply them to their contexts. They need to be critical to the social, economic, political and cultural movements of our times and how these impact on their lives and those of the poor. They need to be taught how to read newspapers or listen to TV news critically. We should not only train seminarians to faithfully read their breviaries and pray their rosaries. For, as we have seen, even religion and spirituality can become institutions of hegemonic oppression. The dominant power is so inventive that it penetrates all aspects of contemporary life. And

⁵² JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, 489.

if we listen to St. Vincent, charity (that is, political charity) — if it is to counter such a flexible oppressive machine — it also needs to be inventive unto infinity.

Beyond critical social analysis, however, there is also a need to learn how to discern power at work in our own lives. It is only when one is self-reflective that s/he can critically discern the power dynamics at work outside, i.e., in the socio-political spheres. A famous psychologist, Rollo May,⁵³ outlines five levels of power at work in the life of a person: (1) 'exploitative power': a type of power as force which is resorted to in extreme inequality between two peoples or groups; (2) manipulative power: a desire to control beyond brute force and is done through manipulation, exploitation or trickery; (3) competitive power: impulse to either crush the opponent or excel in one's potential, thus, it is ambivalent; (4) nutrient power: power used for the benefit of the other though not to one's equal; (5) integrative power: a power with the other person as equal, one which is characterized by mutuality and respect. Formators shall help the students to discern their location in the above continuum of power leading them out of their experience of exploitative compulsions towards nurturing and integrative power or, to go back to our framework, from the ambivalent fields of 'power over' to the empowering horizons of 'power with'.

⁵³ ROLLO MAY, *Power and Innocence* (New York: Norton, 1972).