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Saint Vincent de Paul: Windows on His Vision

Jack Melito, C.M.

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Saint
Vincent
de Paul
✠
*Windows
on
His Vision*



Rev. Jack Melito, C.M.

Saint
Vincent
de Paul



Windows
on
His Vision

Rev. Jack Melito, C.M.

Nathaniel Michaud and Rev. Edward Udovic, C.M., manuscript editors.

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My Muse

Across the room, an empty chair I spy,
But with an unseen presence filled. It seems
A stranger, yet reveals an ancient friend.

I'd recognize those features any time:
The massive Gascon head, encased by ears
As spacious as his heart; a nose as bold
As faith; and eyes whose eighty years
Had not yet banked their fires. Indeed, it is
A visage beaming out the strength and force
Within.

No stranger, he. In fact,
He is The Host — my muse and mentor — I the guest.
“You sit,” he welcomes me and bids me share
A sip of vintage wine and chew once more
A bite of wholesome, peasant bread, the same
That fed his frame its zeal for spending self
Those many years.

“You see me now,” he mused,
A vision, Jesus’ ancient servant, blessed
With years aplenty. Blessing, true, but length
Of days, I’ve found, holds small importance; less
Indeed than any shorter span if lived
Devoid of loving, deep intent. For me
The course of years was ample, daily touched
By grace and steered through paths surprising, marked
With Jesus’ steps in which to trod and which
I followed, steadied in the Father’s will.

“So. See me wrinkled, shy of strength, but soul
Unwilted, heart afire. The heart’s the last
To go, I’ve heard it said. Let all come near,
Then, catch the burn, to warm anew a world
Grown cool to love and numb to Jesus’ word.”

The voice subsides, the presence melts away.
The musing silenced, now the charge goes out
To friends to voice anew on his behalf
The words and music lodged within his soul.



Introduction



This collection is a series of informal essays about Saint Vincent de Paul, his life and his spirituality, that I started writing over nine years ago when I became editor of *Midwest*, the Vincentian Provincial Newsletter. The title of the columns was *Vincent's Corner*.

They were not planned as a series but as random pieces that the moment inspired. However, a misperception of my intention turned them into a regular series. I wrote the first essay with the intention of doing others from time to time, and for that reason I borrowed the rubric that the editors of the *New York Times* use for certain pieces, "An occasional column." For some reason this direction got lost in the transition to the published copy, and after the first appearance, some readers got the impression that this would be a regular feature. Fortunately, they encouraged its continuance out of appreciation. In recent years that encouragement has extended to inviting me to collect them into a single volume for publication.

Other than for topics suggested by a season, or a special occasion associated with Vincent's life, the essays were not composed in any logical sequence, but only as a subject suggested itself. For the present purposes, however, they are classified in some loosely thematic order. In addition to the grouping of occasional pieces, one series deals with the qualities or the achievements that defined the saint's life and person; another with his relationships with contemporary persons whose lives touched his; and finally, with elaborations on the virtues that Vincent practiced and promoted as significant for his followers. All of the essays are rooted in the saint's words and life.

My aim in composing these pieces was to extract some essential themes, thoughts, and insights from the voluminous collection of Vincent's utterances — from the more than 2,500 letters (the remnant of an estimated 25,000) and the abundant number of conferences, never written personally, but transcribed by his auditors.

What I have done in composing each piece was to take related passages plucked from different locations among these utterances, stitch them together into some pattern, and inject some leavening where called for. Vincent himself might ask of one or another passage, "Did I say that? I didn't write any books, you know, and so others have preserved my letters and other words. I trust that my scribes accurately reported me." As my own reassurance to the saint, I would say that I have treated his recorded words kindly. My chosen method gave me latitude in ranging among his many utterances, but fairness held me to using them honestly, that is, without falsifying his thought, distorting it, or treating the words out of context.

My audience is anyone interested in the Vincentian vision of things, whether members of Vincent's religious communities or others doing works in his spirit — in other words, anyone within the Vincentian Family, as the group has come to be called. After the example of Jesus, who, Vincent always noted, "began by doing...[and integrating] fully into his life every kind of virtue," most of Vincent's disciples are already engaged in doing the works of charity. The saint's words here, then, are not a call to action. Rather, they are offered as reflections for deepening one's personal understanding of the saint's charism.

Except for obvious, needed corrections, or for other adjustments adapted to this context, the essays stand without any revisions. They are *Vincent's Corner*. To make any substantive additions or subtractions would be to offer something different. Although each essay was conceived as a self-contained piece about some facet of Vincent's life and thought, there will inevitably be some overlapping. I trust that these echoes would serve to reinforce the impressions made.

Thanks to Ms. Betty Tutor, who worked with me throughout the years of composition and publication of the Newsletter, and who was a great help in establishing its high quality during that time. My thanks, too, to Ms. Ann George, who was an invaluable aide in preparing the text for the printer. As I found out, it is not enough to have worthwhile things to say: the format and the presentation are also important factors. Finally, my thanks go to my confreres and to other readers who encouraged the permanent preservation of these essays. If there is anything I would hope from the publication of these essays, it is that Vincent de Paul's service to the poor become even better known and more widely imitated.

Jack Melito, C.M.

25 January 1998

Foundational Feast of the Congregation of the Mission



Traits



Vincent, *The Country Boy*



I

Vincent de Paul was rooted in the country, and early in life he had every intention of staying fixed there. If he ventured beyond that setting after ordination it was to find clerical advancement, so he could return home more securely rooted. His hopes were not for himself alone, but for his family as well. In a letter to his mother about his search (in 1610) he apologized for his present inability to help her and the family, but he expressed confidence that God “will bless my efforts and will soon give me the means of an honorable retirement, so that I may spend the rest of my days near you.”

That intention would not hold but would undergo some shifting to change the face of this simple ambition. In time Vincent’s talents would gain him admittance into the highest civil and ecclesiastical councils of France, and into the company of people of social standing far above his own. His love for the country folk never diminished, but, in this upscale milieu, how did he maintain his perspective as one of them?

There were times when Vincent’s background was indeed an embarrassment to him. One incident occurred during his adolescent days at the friars’ school in Dax. It was an early event, to be sure, antedating his priestly ministry, but it exposed his vulnerability. In later years he recalled the incident, with deep regret, in a public confession to his confreres about his shame at being seen with his father in the town: “I was ashamed to walk with him and to acknowledge him as my father because he was badly dressed and a little lame.” He had also shared this same regret with Madame de Lamoignon. A reoccurrence of this feeling threatened Vincent on the occasion of a visit by his nephew from Dax. “When the uncle reflected that the nephew was probably a badly dressed peasant,” says Coste, “he experienced a momentary weakness and gave orders to have the youth taken secretly

to his room.” Vincent, however, resisted the passing impulse and welcomed the youth and introduced him to many of the residents and visitors at the *College-des-Bons-Enfants*.

It is not known how isolated these reactions were or how prolonged — his father died in 1598 — but eventually Vincent would shed this ambivalence and be open about his country origins. He could, for instance, talk easily about the simple, frugal meals that the peasants, himself included, usually ate. When people would make him more than he was, he would correct them as he did the poor old woman who asked for an alms on the score that she had been a servant of “Madame your mother.” He told her, “You are making a mistake, my good woman...My mother never had a servant, and she did all the work herself because she was the wife, just I am the son, of a poor peasant.”

If, in the future, Vincent distanced himself from family, he did so for reasons other than embarrassment. Like Abraham, he said in a conference on mortification, the missionaries must be ready to leave everything to answer the call to the service of God: “Country and kindred are obstacles to...perfection.” To illustrate, he recalled his pain and the turmoil following a visit that he made to his family in 1622, experiencing “so much grief at leaving my poor relatives, that I did nothing but weep all along the road; to these tears succeeded the thought of giving them assistance...”

He carried this burden for three months, praying all the time for deliverance from this “temptation,” as he called it. At the end he was indeed freed from “these soft affections for my relatives; and though they have been depending on alms, and are so still, God has given me the grace to leave them to his providence, and to consider them more happy than if they had been in easy circumstances.” Missionaries, he believed, can become so engrossed in their families’ affairs that they “are caught up in them like flies that have fallen into a spider’s web from which they cannot extricate themselves.”

The “softness” whereby he defined undue attachment to his family did not mean repudiation, for during the rest of his life he often expressed affection for them, but also an enduring, stern detachment. When once he was urged to do something for them, he replied: “Do you think I do not love them? I have all the affection for them that any man can have for his own. If I allowed myself to follow the natural course of my feelings, I would hasten to assist them, but I am bound to follow the movements of grace and not those of nature.”

In 1626, Vincent took a definitive — and symbolic — step that divested him of any further financial responsibility toward his family. Within the agreement signed by Vincent and his early companions to labor together for the service of the poor country people, he turned over to his relatives whatever monies or property he then possessed, declaring these goods irrevocably “given, ceded, quitted, conveyed, abandoned.”

Throughout many of Vincent's letters to bishops and nobles there runs a refrain that countered the widespread acclaim that he received. The saint once responded to a request to dedicate a book to him by saying: "I am utterly unworthy of praise. If you are to speak of me truly, you should say that I am the son of a husbandman, that I tended cattle and swine, and also add that this is nothing in comparison with my ignorance and malice." For an explanation of this attitude we might say that it could have served to keep his accomplishments and his associations with the rich and the prominent in perspective by holding pride at bay. Or perhaps to maintain credibility. "Everybody loves those who are simple and sincere...who go straight on and speak without dissimulation, so that whatever they say they (do so) from the heart," Vincent told his confreres, almost as if describing himself. "They are esteemed at Court (when such persons happen to be found there) with universal esteem. In good society, everyone shows them extraordinary affection. For, though all do not act simple, yet those who have no candor themselves, do not fail to love it in others."

Again, it could be said that he used the device to counteract his early ambitions for himself and his family and to reinforce his regret for his past embarrassment on their account. It might simply be that, because his whole life was oriented toward serving the poor country folk, he wished to give witness to a lasting solidarity with them from birth, whatever other changes had occurred in his life. In any case, each utterance gave evidence of an abiding humility.

Vincent sought to communicate this personal perspective as the corporate identity, too, for each of his communities and for much the same reasons. He always rebuked any confrere who would praise the Company, by reminding the member of its humble origins. Following Jesus, who chose as his apostles "poor, sinful men, workmen of humble origins," Vincent urged his sons to acknowledge themselves as "only wretched folk, poor peasants and husbandmen." It is no coincidence that he chose as the distinguishing marks of the Company a group of virtues he called "little" — simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal — to serve as a hedge against pride and pretense that could easily overtake his confreres as well as himself.

The countryside was indeed Vincent's spiritual home. It was the ground of his identity, the source of his strength, a refuge from acclaim, and a defense against pride. Moreover, it gave vigor to his style. It nurtured his common sense and practicality, as well as his shrewdness, in judging people and in dealing with them.

From the countryside, too, he derived forthright, pointed expression, using homely realistic imagery. He would speak of the apple, beautiful to behold, but meant to be enjoyed by eating; of the shell of the snail to suggest narrowness of vision; of the immobility of the ass or the donkey, now to mean stubbornness, now

indifference; of the unchanging instincts of bees and pigeons to illustrate uniformity.

Vincent reversed the process of the vain person who never lets the world forget their exalted pedigree. He stressed his lowly origins in order to shed the pride that would obscure his true self and to remove the barriers that would prevent him from reaching others' hearts. Such a stance of humility disposed him for drawing God's grace on his work, very much like — in an image he used elsewhere — the valley that draws its fertility from the mountains above. God indeed did rain his blessings on the work of Vincent to make those lowlands bloom.

October-November, 1992

Vincent the Traveler



“I have traveled much in Concord,” wrote Henry David Thoreau, who in his life scarcely ventured from the vicinity of Walden Pond. The inner journeys among ideas and imagination that this stay-at-home person undertook served him as a metaphor of far-ranging cosmic travel. This is an equally apt image through which to view the realities and the symbols of Vincent’s activities and accomplishments.

Vincent did indeed travel much in his early life, setting forth to pursue education, ordination and ecclesiastical advancement in such places as Toulouse, perhaps Zaragossa, Bordeaux, Paris and Rome. After some years, he settled in Paris and its environs, which were eventually to become the center of his world.

Once thus established, his body stayed at home, but his interests and his zeal roamed the universal Church. Content at first with foundations in France and Italy, his missionary vision, in its last two decades, followed the trade routes around the world — to Poland, to England, Scotland and Ireland, to the Barbary Coast, to Madagascar. He included other fields in that vision. Given the opportunities, he would have sent missionaries to the Scandinavian countries, to Greece, Egypt, and Syria, and even to China and Australia and the New World.

The man who never moved without signs from providence found solid reasons for what was to become his missionary outreach. He was approached by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome and by missionary bishops to share the services of his Congregation. An equally profound impulse came from within. In addition to a natural zeal for spreading the gospel as extensively as he could, he harbored a curious notion that encouraged him to seek alternate apostolates. In a letter to Jean Dehorgny he confessed: “I have...a great affection for the propagation of the Church in infidel lands, which arises from the fear I entertain that God may gradually bring her to naught in Europe and that little or nothing may remain of her here in a hundred years’ time, on account of the corruption of our morals, the new opinions which are spreading more and more, and the general state of public affairs.”

Lay much of the blame for this condition, Vincent said, at the feet of the dishonorable clergy. Nevertheless, he had no intention of abandoning Europe: its evangelization was as important as the missions *ad gentes*. He compared the home missions to a holding action, after the manner of “conquerors [who] leave some of their troops behind to guard what they already hold while they send on others to conquer new districts and extend their empire.”

Vincent’s voyages of the mind were not fantasy, however. Rather, they bonded him to the apostolic realities of the mission. As the missionaries traveled the world over, Vincent’s spirit accompanied them, giving encouragement and direction, mediating disputes, sharing their joys and sorrows. In turn, their superior’s interest kept them fraternally bonded with those at home, whom Vincent also kept current with accounts of the trials and the triumphs of those on the missions.

In offering these reports Vincent’s words are often tinged with envy and regret that he himself could not be at their side. To the bishop of Limerick he lamented, “And would to God, my Lord, I was worthy to be one of the band! God knows that I would go with my whole heart.” And to Charles Nacquart, preparing to depart for Madagascar, he wrote, “I now give myself absolutely, if not actually, to follow you, as indeed I am not worthy to do....”

Vincent’s zeal made him a restless spirit, anxious to follow wherever the call to evangelization beckoned. Confined to Saint-Lazare, he nevertheless ranged vicariously over a worldwide course, tramping in the footsteps of his missionaries. Their labors were as much a part of him, and he of them, as those taking place in the next parish. Through his missionary vision he was able to project his presence, his charisma, and his words to wherever his priests and brothers ventured.

“Success” did not always attend these journeys. Plague, shipwreck, and persecution were frequent companions. This mattered not to Vincent. To him the deaths of his sons were “the seed of a great number of good missionaries.” His words about the ultimate victory of his deceased missionaries are a key to the hope that he held for all those who labored in the Congregation, both at home and abroad. All the scattered missionary paths, his own included, led to a common destination, where all journeys come to rest. To use a favorite expression of his, that destination was “the mission of heaven.”

September, 1991

Patron of Refugees



The image that would best dramatize Vincent de Paul as the patron of charity would be to show him at the center of a whirlwind, its inner circle ringed with persons who defined his life: his missionaries and Daughters, his lay collaborators and benefactors, their energies spinning out into the multitudes of the poor, the sick and the abandoned, the beneficiaries of mercy.

This image best portrays Vincent the spontaneous benefactor in times of crisis. The poor were always with him, true, and he served them in orderly ways through established institutions and ministries of his missionaries and the sisters. In disasters that came without warning, though, he was at his most characteristic, responding instinctively, improvising, attending to thousands of details and adapting his strategy to them, and exhausting himself in personally working side by side with co-workers.

One such crisis that comes easily to mind was his response to the floods of refugees that streamed into Paris as a result of the mid-century civil wars of the Fronde. Springing into action he dunned the queen and her Court for aid to fill the endless needs. He served on committees of nobles, and other public officials, to work for peace and to dispense public aid to address the effects of wars, religious and political. He interceded with the queen for protection for the poor against pillaging soldiers, both friendly and hostile. Closer to home, he comforted his missionaries and sisters — and found relief or replacements for them — as they were beaten down by stress, disease and death in spending themselves in their missions.

Amidst all these events he was able to talk about these conditions, which he revealed as news items reported in letters to confreres who were far away from Paris and Saint-Lazare. Two correspondents in particular were Jean Dehorgny, superior at Rome, and Lambert aux Cousteaux, superior in Warsaw. The reports, one would think, were more than news items. They seemed to be outlets for him to vent his anguish over all that was happening to the poor, and over the struggles of his communities to keep up with the desolation.

“Our little news is always the same,” he sighed to Lambert aux Couteaux. The poor people from the country have been scattered, some of them driven from their homes by fear of being mistreated by the soldiers and have taken refuge in Paris. There is hope that the prayers and good works of many have alleviated some of the suffering, and that some measures have been taken to bring about peace. He then recounts “the good works” that have been 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.... (3) We are going to rescue from the same danger the nuns from the country, whom the armies have thrown into Paris. Some are on the streets, some are living in questionable places, and others are staying with relatives. Since, however, they are all in a state of dissipation and danger, it was felt that enclosing them in a monastery, under the care of the Daughters of Sainte-Marie [the Visitation Nuns], would be most pleasing to God.”

He extended a hand even to “poor pastors, curates, and other priests from rural areas who have left their parishes to flee to this city. We are getting some every day; they will be fed and will be trained in the things they should know and practice.”

Vincent pays special tribute to the Daughters of Charity in these “many holy projects.” The sisters are “more involved than we in the corporal assistance of the poor. They prepare and distribute the soup daily for thirteen hundred bashful poor, at the home of Mademoiselle Le Gras and for eight hundred refugees in the faubourg Saint-Denis. In Saint-Paul parish alone four or five sisters make the distribution to five thousand poor persons, in addition to the sixty to eighty patients they have on their hands.”

Throughout the massive program, Vincent is attentive not only to corporal assistance, but to spiritual needs as well, even though his action might seem to conflict with his established policy. As he tells Jean Dehorgny, “I have volunteered to have missions given to [the refugees], in line with the maxim which states that we should take our good wherever we find it. We are obliged to go and serve them in the rural areas, when they are there. They are our portion, and now that they are coming to us, driven out by the hardships of war, which is emptying the countryside, it seems that we are more obliged to work for their salvation in their present affliction in the place where they are now, subject, of course to the good pleasure of the archbishop.”

Some persons, Vincent was sure, would object that it was not the Congregation’s policy to give missions in episcopal cities. In the saint’s view, both obligations could still be honored in the present situation: “I have replied that the

submission we owe to the bishops does not allow us to dispense from such missions, when they instruct us to do so, and that you yourself have just finished one in Terni, where [the cardinal] had ordered you to work. Consequently, we could do the same here on the orders of the archbishop of Paris, especially since it will be only for these poor afflicted refugees here.”

“We should take our good wherever we find it.” Such is the instinct of the patron of charity — spontaneous, inclusive, selfless. Whatever the occasion demanded, Vincent would respond appropriately. “The prayers and good works of many” were always at hand as resources, but his zeal and his practical sense supplied the drive and the direction that effected the marvels of charity for which Vincent de Paul has become famous.

May, 1993

Saint-Lazare: The Theater of God's Mercies



As the headquarters of the Congregation in Vincent's lifetime, the house of Saint-Lazare in Paris served many clients — clerics and laity, saints and sinners, rich and poor, the sick and the healthy. There were some activities, though, that were close to the saint's heart: those were the retreats held for all kinds of groups. Because the action of God's grace during these events seemed so tangible, Vincent viewed Saint-Lazare as "the theater of his mercies...a house in which a place is prepared for the king of kings that he may dwell in those well-disposed souls who come here to make a retreat." In this setting, he claimed, the Holy Spirit "makes a continual descent...on the souls of men."

The ordinands there for retreats, and the ecclesiastics for conferences, were the best known groups in attendance at Saint-Lazare, but there were other segments of the clergy that used the house. These might be the priests who came "from all parts" and for a variety of reasons, some for personal renewal, for instance, "to reflect on the manner in which they are exercising the duties of their sacred profession and to advance in the spiritual life"; others perhaps to discern the direction they might wish to take with their lives. These clergy were an important clientele. The Congregation's work, the saint declared, is "not only to help to raise up fallen and profligate ecclesiastics but also to perfect the good [ones], which we see is done here."

There was variety among the lay guests as well. One retreatant that Vincent singled out as an example of visitors was a man newly converted from Protestantism, who was "working and writing just now in defense of the truth which he has embraced [so that] he may by this means gain many others to God." Interestingly, many were military men: one, for instance, an army captain who desired to become a Carthusian and was there for discernment; others were soldiers on their way to the front, one of whom told the saint, "I have come to dispose myself for whatever may be God's will in my regard."

Nevertheless, the one group especially dear to Vincent were the ordinands who came there for their ordination retreats. "In our own day [1655]," he was confident, "we see the ecclesiastical state on the way to recovery." For this reason he felt that, unworthy of this mission though he considered himself and his Congregation, he must welcome those whom "providence has deigned to send us." This being so, "it behooves us...to devote all our care and attention to bring to a successful issue this apostolic design which tends to dispose ecclesiastics for major orders and to acquit themselves worthily of their functions, for some of them will be parish priests, some canons...others abbots and bishops. Yes! bishops."

Vincent considered that an important factor in achieving success was the attitude of the members of the house as perceived by the guests. "Above all, let...us strive to edify them by humility and modesty. They will not be won over by science or the beautiful things that will be said to them; they are more learned than we are; many of them are bachelors in theology...licentiates...doctors of canon law...They themselves tell us that [learning] is not what moves them but that they are affected by the virtues which are practiced here." Indeed, Vincent tells his confreres, "How happy are you, seeing that by your devotion, meekness, affability, modesty and humility you spread the spirit of God in these souls [and that you] give them good example at conferences, ceremonies, in choir, in the refectory, in fact, everywhere." Only an attitude of what he calls "laxity and laziness" by the residents will negate this positive impression.

Vincent's attitude toward guests was reflected in the hospitality he offered. Visitors are to be served "not merely as men but as men sent to us by God." Nor is there room for exceptions: "Let the poor man be as dear to us as the rich, and even dearer as being in closer conformity with the state of life which Jesus Christ led on earth." Thus the priests and other ecclesiastics who came "from all over," knew the welcome they could expect. "They [the priests] all come to us and do not trouble to bring money with them, for they know they will be heartily welcomed without it; in this connection a person said to me recently that it was a great consolation for those who have none to know that there is a house in Paris always ready to receive them out of charity, when they present themselves with a real desire to set themselves right with God."

In praising the work at Saint-Lazare, Vincent created a mystique about the house, which is reflected in the images that he reached for to describe it, as, for instance, "the throne of [God's] mercies." "This house of the Mission," he further declared, "is a fountain of salvation to which so many persons come to be bathed." Saint-Lazare was both a symbol to him and, in practice, a workshop for hands-on opportunities to affect immediately the formation of priests, and through them, the Church. "...If a good priest can do great good, Ah! What harm does not a bad one effect! O God, how difficult it is to bring him back to a proper state...How earnestly

should not poor missionaries give themselves to you that they may contribute to the formation of good ecclesiastics, seeing that it is the most difficult, the most exalted and the most important work for the salvation of souls and the advancement of Christianity!”

Few people would disagree with Vincent that “the well-being of Christendom depends on its priests,” for good priests nurture the life of the faithful. This conviction explains why the saint spent himself for so many years in fostering that good health. In this desire to revitalize the clergy, Vincent was aware of the important role that the activities of Saint-Lazare played. He connected the house’s patronal name with its mission to the retreatants. They are “dead men who come to life again. What happiness that the house of Saint Lazarus is a house of resurrection...Our Lord, who raised him from the dead, now bestows a similar grace on many who having remained here for a few days, as in the tomb of Lazarus, leave it with new life.”

September, 1993

Tuesdays at Saint-Lazare



I

*I*n the account of the final illness of Louis XIII in 1643, during many moments of which Vincent was present, Louis Abelly quoted the dying king's words to the saint: "Monsieur Vincent, if I recover, bishops will spend three days with you." Abelly put this gloss on the king's words, that the monarch wished "to convey the thought that he [Louis] would require those named to the episcopal office be properly disposed and adequately prepared. He showed by this wish high regard for that office and the appreciation he had for Monsieur Vincent's projects for the training of the clergy, hinting they would be equally useful for the preparation of those called to the high dignity of bishop in the Church."

That bouquet tossed at Vincent fairly well reflected the esteem in which French society, from the king on down, had developed for the saint within the previous ten years for restoring faith in the clergy of all ranks. Abelly analyzed Vincent's contribution to the reform of the clergy with a holistic spin of cause-and-effect. Just as virtues are interconnected and lead one to another, and as the graces of God are similarly intertwined, he observed, so did Vincent's works have an inner connectedness. As Vincent began his successful work with the missions and with them the ordination retreats, so the goodness of providence, said Abelly, "moved Vincent to begin another service to the Church. This not only preserved and confirmed the grace received in ordination, but helped priests to exercise all the functions of their sacred ministry with dignity and fruit."

Vincent happily witnessed the good effects of the ordination retreats, but he was anxious about any adverse after-effects in the ordinands, such as a return to their "worldly ways," a loss of fervor, or a weakening of resolve for a zealous ministry. What might be done, Vincent must have wondered, to forestall these dangers and to confirm the clerics in their salutary resolutions? Because he never pushed ahead of

providence, he held back on any immediate action. Then in 1633, as if on cue from providence, one priest who had made his ordination retreat at Saint-Lazare proposed the formation of some sort of group for “alumni” clerics, “with the purpose of meeting there periodically to discuss among themselves matters that pertained to their ministry.”

Other such alumni wished to show their appreciation to Vincent for the renewal of their priesthood he had effected. For this reason they offered themselves for whatever ecclesiastical function Vincent would put them to. What he did was ask them to organize a mission to the workers, masons, carpenters and others who were building the chapel of the Visitation convent, whose superior and spiritual director he was. Without interfering with the construction, the priests gave lessons, prepared the workers to make a general confession and for leading good Christian lives.

Vincent further capitalized on that good will he found. He approached the clerics with his notion of bringing them together for mutual support. As a start, he invited them to come to Saint-Lazare for a meeting, where he outlined in more detail what he had in mind, which they received favorably. “He spoke,” said Abelly, “of the need of persevering and cultivating the holy dispositions God had inspired in them and the graces they had received in their ordination...[and of the need] to give themselves entirely to the service of God.” They would achieve this not by separating themselves from the world nor by living in the same house, but in their own settings, to serve in the Church, as Abelly put it, “as so many brilliant stars spreading the light of their good example in their families.”

The next step was a formal meeting to organize, to choose their officers, and to set the Tuesday of each week as the most convenient day to assemble to discuss the virtues and functions of their ministry. Vincent chose the topic of the first conference on 19 July as the spirit of the ecclesiastical state. Subsequent meetings continued each week on topics suggested by Vincent, similar to the first, and of a practical sort like the virtues or the functions proper to their calling. Abelly noted Vincent’s characteristic style in conducting the meeting: “He had a special grace which was effective and grace-filled when speaking...His language was simple and without display, but vigorous and from the heart.”

A salutary byproduct of this for the participants was having the saint model a simple style for communicating. They were encouraged “to speak the same way as himself, with humility, simplicity, and sincerity...No one strove to present learned discourses, or to be admired for his erudition...He advised the clerics to prepare themselves for their talks, but by way of prayer rather than study, if the subject did not demand a more detailed treatment or...the reading of some good book....” In actuality, said Abelly, the sole motives of the speakers were to be “the honor and

glory of God, the spiritual welfare of the audience, and their own humiliation [i.e. the self-minimized].”

II

The auspicious beginnings of the Tuesday Conferences delighted Vincent. He shared his elation in a letter to a confrere in Rome: “...A very special and unimaginable blessing [is granted] to our ordinands’ retreat...Almost all who have made the retreat are leading lives such as ought to be led by good and perfect ecclesiastics...[Back home, some] live by a schedule, make mental prayer, celebrate holy mass, and make their examens every day as we do. They work hard visiting the hospitals and the prisons, where they teach catechism, preach, and hear confessions....”

Nor did Vincent forget to acknowledge and thank the priest who initially proposed the idea: “Oh, how well the idea you so kindly shared with me some days past was received by the ecclesiastics, by all those we mentioned and in general and by each one in particular! ...O Monsieur, what reason there is to hope for much good from this group! You are its promoter and it is to your interest that it succeed for the glory of God.”

Vincent indeed fulfilled King Louis’ hope that bishops would come under the saint’s tutelage. The program, of course, was aimed mainly at the priests, deacons, and subdeacons, but as the program developed, many bishops, future bishops, and “notable persons, distinguished by their birth or their learning,” came to join. Abelly reported that in Vincent’s lifetime about 250 clerics had participated in the program. However, the attraction of “notables” to the group made Vincent uneasy, for he didn’t want the conference to become an elite company and negate a basic purpose “to honor the hidden life of our Lord.” However, his fears were unfounded, for no elitist tendencies ever materialized. Rather, Abelly reported, “they sought to remain unknown as much as possible. They worked humbly in the least esteemed positions, yet in those most useful and advantageous to the salvation of souls, particularly among the poor, catechizing and hearing confessions in the hospitals, prisons, and villages.” They even went out to join the missionaries in giving missions in the country or working in the large cities which the company avoided as a matter of policy.

From the first, Vincent engaged the members of his Congregation in the work and gave them a sense of pride in it. The superior general of the Company was always to be the director of the Conferences, and through him to form the bond between the priests of the Congregation and the Conferences. Vincent reminded his confreres that it was from the Congregation that came the method of discussing “virtues suitable to the ecclesiastical state and on how to lead a truly ecclesiastical life.” The conduct of these

conferences was a way “not only to serve as an antidote for good priests, who, while serving souls remain exposed to the corrupt atmosphere of the world, but also to help them to become perfect in their profession.” It was a divine inspiration, Vincent concluded, that the Congregation “love and promote in the way we do the practice of those virtues by means of these conferences.” He concluded, “What would become of us if we were the first to neglect these conferences? What an account should we not have to render to God if we were ever to despise [this method of ecclesiastical formation].”

Like charity, that tends to diffuse itself, Abelly noted, the ecclesiastics of the Conferences were eager “to extend to others the same sentiments God had inspired in them through Monsieur Vincent.” For this reason they lost no opportunities to propose the concept of the Conferences wherever they found themselves, and the idea found its way even into dioceses beyond France. (This growth was a separate story in itself.) Moreover, another by-product of the Conferences were the mutual, supportive bonds established among the “alumni.” That a zealous clergy was a godsend to a bishop is attested to by the example of Antoine Godeau, bishop of Grasse, who addressed his priests as he moved on to a new diocese. With regrets that he was unable “to say adieu” in person, he felt it as “a singular blessing to have been received among you. The memory of the good example I saw, and the excellent things I heard, will rekindle my zeal when it shall fade, and you shall be the model upon which I shall strive to form good priests. Continue, then, your activities in this same spirit, and respond faithfully to the designs of Jesus Christ upon you. He surely wills to renew the grace of the priesthood in his Church through you.”

Saint Vincent could wish no finer tribute to his ministry to the clergy.

April-May, 1996

Vincent's Shades of Tolerance



Vincent's traditional position as the "father of charity" would depict him in art with a benign visage that reflects compassion and understanding. This would suggest that he smiled graciously upon everything. True, but how did he face people or events that were hard to take or that grated against his sensibilities or violated his principles?

Vincent was indeed a man of principle and opposed anything that was evil or that violated God's honor or that of his people. Nevertheless, the saint showed a tolerance for coexistence with whatever unpleasantness he had to deal with. We might say that it was only in cases of "pure evil" that he was intolerant. Thus, he says, it might be necessary to adjust to others' opinions "in things good and indifferent, ...but we should be on our guard against exercising condescension in things that are evil because this would not be virtue, but a serious fault, proceeding either from a latitudinarian spirit or from cowardice." For Vincent adjustment of this kind meant following the proverbial course, "Do in Rome as the Romans do — conform to the customs of places [or to people's ideas, he might add], provided they are not vicious."

In cases other than these, Vincent's tolerance had many shades. He did not advocate indifference, of course. "It is not proper," he said, "that evil should be ignored by a lax and excessive tolerance, but an effort should be made to remedy it, with all meekness." A key factor is the "meekness." It minimizes wrangling or confrontation, for instance, as Vincent confesses, "Experience has taught me that minds are more surely gained by a process of simple proposals and persuasion than by urging them to adopt our views and by desiring to get the better of them." Or it inclines one to allow concessions in favor of a greater good (or a lesser evil) but without compromise of principle: "I beg you to condescend as far as possible to the weakness of human nature. You should by no means show anger against abuses, when you have reason to believe that such a procedure would result in a greater evil."

Tolerant stances like these reflect Vincent's pastoral approach toward handling differences and making judgments. "Certain evils must be endured," he said, "especially if an attempted remedy would serve only to make them worse." Indeed, he inherited from his mentor, Saint Francis de Sales, an attitude "to judge the best of things and persons at all times and under all circumstances." Said Francis, "If an action has a hundred faces, look at the best." Thus tolerance is linked with charity, which, Vincent knew from his own experience, could have a "softening" effect: "One of the acts of charity is to compassionate with the sufferings of our neighbor and to weep with him, because love gains for us an entrance into the hearts of others." Superiors, too, he suggests, could profit from this approach: "Treat with gentleness those under your authority, ...continue to govern them with your customary wisdom and mildness."

There was a peace-making slant to Vincent's admiration for the tolerance that he promoted both in the field and at home. "Settling quarrels and disputes" was a regular activity of the parish mission regimen prescribed in the community's *Common Rules*. In community he discouraged being "stubborn or argumentative in conversation, even if only in fun." In ordinary disagreement he recommended ceding to another's opinion "where freedom of opinion is allowed." However, if one values the worth of his own opinion enough to insist on it, "he can put forward his point of view calmly and with humility."

It was a personal dimension that affected his attitude toward tolerance and understanding: God's own patience with Vincent, the sinner. The saint never considered himself in a position to cast the first stone. "As I am a great sinner," he confessed, "I cannot reject those who are great sinners, provided they have good will." For this reason he recommends a similar mindfulness in his disciples, that they "imitate the goodness of God, who never reproaches us with the faults he has forgiven us."

The paths of Vincent's ministry led him into the underworld of human poverty, degradation, and perversity. He had encounters there sufficient to cause in anyone disgust, revulsion, or even flight. But Vincent's store of love and compassion for the person in need, poor or otherwise, held him to the task. His patience and forbearance restrained him from rash condemnation or judgment. In the end these qualities translated into a tolerance in the saint that gave him perspective in taking human weakness into consideration and in "judging the best of things and persons" — an attitude for ministry that gained for him "an entrance into the hearts of others."

October, 1993

Vincent as a Countercultural Symbol



In an unsettled political climate the word “countercultural” tends to make some people nervous. To the timid imagination it suggests the radical, who is at best an agitator, at worst a terrorist. But the notion does not have to frighten. It means at bottom taking an active, conscious stance that is opposed to prevailing values and the wisdom underlying them.

To speak of Vincent as being countercultural is no more than to identify him with the mind and the practice of Jesus Christ himself. From the beginning, Simeon in the Temple pointed out Jesus as a sign of contradiction. Jesus himself later declared that his message would bring “not peace but the sword...[it would] set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother” and occasion other such conflicts. Jesus stood for things that the world found astonishing: “Love your enemies...Turn the other cheek...Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself.” What the world considered the foolishness of God, the apostle Paul would later declare, came through as his wisdom; what it viewed as weakness was his power. “God chose the lowly and the despised of the world,” Paul added, “those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something...”

The path of Vincent’s life and ministry ran along those lines in following a “subversive” course. He moved familiarly within a world that cherished power and ambition, whose riches fueled self-indulgence, and whose consequent social inequities bred injustice and widespread suffering. Given his credibility with the establishment and his acceptance by them, Vincent nevertheless identified himself with the victims of these social ills — the poor, the sick, the marginalized and the neglected — and directed his labors toward their physical relief, while working on their behalf for justice against the forces that produced these conditions. He did not act alone, but invited collaborators into his enterprises as advocates for the poor and as co-workers, both those formally committed within his communities and those associated with him in other degrees of discipleship.

Vincent's living the Christian life in the midst of this disordered environment was itself a countercultural activity. It entailed embracing the values of Jesus and conforming himself to his example — “to clothe [oneself] with the spirit of Jesus Christ,” as Vincent put it — and thereby standing in witness against many of the values that seventeenth century French society represented. This direction that the saint took for his own life was also his legacy to his disciples. Thus, in the *Common Rules* that he provided for the missionaries, Vincent cited “a most fundamental principle” that the Congregation should make its own: “Christ's teaching will never let us down, while worldly wisdom always will.” The wisdom of Jesus, Vincent declared, has the solidity of a structure built on rock. Consequently, “the Congregation should always try to follow the teaching of Christ himself and never that of the worldly-wise.”

Vincent depicted this opposition in terms of the “the maxims of Jesus Christ” and “the maxims of the world.” These “maxims” are not necessarily explicit statements, as one might think, but values that might or might not be formulated. In a conference touching on the passage above from the *Common Rules*, Vincent took time to describe those of “the world” by way of contrasting them with the attitudes of Jesus Christ. Thus, using the beatitudes as an anchor he observed: “The maxims of our Lord say, ‘Blessed are the poor’; and those of the world, ‘Blessed are the rich.’ The former tell us to be meek and gentle; the latter that we must stand fast and make ourselves feared... ‘Blessed are they that hunger and thirst, that are greedy for justice.’ The world laughs at that. ‘Blessed,’ says the world, ‘are they that are on the lookout for their temporal advancement, to make themselves great.’ ‘Blessed are they that curse you,’ says the savior. And the world says that an insult must not be tolerated. ‘Who makes himself a sheep is eaten by the wolf’; that one's reputation must be maintained at no matter what cost, and that it is better to lose life than honor...”

“The mind of Jesus Christ” was an important notion by which Vincent lived. He judged his own behavior and the worth of all the daily practices of the Congregation according to this test. “It is not enough,” for instance, “to fast, to observe the rules, to fulfill our duties in the house. These must be done with the mind of Jesus Christ...” On another occasion, “It is not enough for us merely to celebrate mass...we should offer this sacrifice with as much devotion as possible for us. With the help of his grace, we must conform ourselves as much as possible to Jesus Christ.” Thus as Jesus, while on earth, “offered himself in sacrifice to his eternal father, [so] we must do our best...to offer our sacrifice to God in the same spirit that our Lord offered himself.”

Accordingly, a perspective that is weak in faith and unable to associate itself with the mind of Jesus courts disappointment and failure. Vincent once declared, “O God, how beautiful are the poor if we see them in God, and in light of the

esteem Jesus Christ had for them. If we see them only according to the flesh and with a worldly spirit, they truly seem miserable.” Indeed, Vincent said to his missionaries, there are many occasions when the members did not adhere to the perspective of Jesus’s wisdom. “The truth is we are not convinced and quickly turn to human prudence as our guide. Do you not see that we are to blame if we trust in human reasoning rather than the promises of eternal wisdom, to the deceitful disappointments of the world rather than the love of our savior, who came down from heaven to show us the right path?”

A countercultural stance will often attract unfriendly, even hostile, responses. As a sign of contradiction Jesus and his message certainly drew reactions of this kind. Vincent, too, experienced opposition, but the ultimate judgment on the saint from his contemporaries was admiration and reverence, even though his life was a standing rebuke to many of the values of his time. Thus, he stood a champion of the poor and an advocate for justice against the inequities and the excesses of the age. Conscious of the Church’s disorders and its agony of self-reformation, he became an example of fidelity to the institution and to his priesthood. Surrounded by a self-serving and self-aggrandizing society, he remained an example of humility and selflessness. Vincent moved in a world of political and ecclesiastical intrigue, but he retained his simplicity and transparency.

Vincent’s stance did not elicit disturbing effects, but his presence to his contemporaries was effective nonetheless. By his life and his values so contrary to what his society held dear, he bore quiet witness to the power of the gospel to effect good.

February, 1994

Vincent the Missionary



The traditional image of Vincent de Paul busily at work directing his collaborators and their activities sometimes obscures the personal, missionary dimension of his life. Indeed his introduction to the work of the parish missions was an important moment in his life and brought to an end his early search for a satisfying priestly ministry. It was only after, and because of, the success of this phase in life that the other apostolates associated with his name emerged.

The famous, providential moment that began it all crystallized in the event at Folleville in 1617, when Vincent gave the sermon on general confession, which followed upon his experience with the penitent on his deathbed. The saint called this moment “the first sermon of the Congregation of the Mission,” adding that “[God] blessed my discourse, and all those good people were so touched by God that all came to make a general confession.” The numbers were such that he had to call in additional priest-confessors.

The golden age for Vincent’s missionary activity would have been at this time of his career — say, from 1617 to 1625 — before he got involved in the mundane business of administering the multiple activities that followed the success of the missions. After Folleville, and because of it, the mission activities began in earnest, when Madame de Gondi commissioned Vincent to give the exercises on her considerable estates. For residence and home base, she gave to the saint and his associates, Monsieur Portail and another priest, the *College-des-Bons-Enfants*, whose key they left with a neighbor during their absences.

The saint’s biographer, Louis Abelly, calculated that Vincent gave at least forty missions during these years, considering that he visited each of the villages and towns of the Gondis’ holdings. From 1625 until the move to Saint-Lazare in 1632, Abelly contends, either Vincent or his confreres gave more than 140 missions, and from 1632 until his death there must have been at least 700 that missionaries from Saint-Lazare conducted, not counting all the others given by confreres from other

houses and in other dioceses.

Memories of his mission experiences were never to leave the saint, who constantly returned to the recollections of them. As late as 1658, two years before his death, on the occasion of his distributing the *Common Rules*, he fondly recalled the beginnings of the Congregation's early days: "We went plainly and simply, sent by their lordships the bishops, to evangelize the poor, just as our Lord did. That is all we did...[God] so blessed our work that other clerics joined us, asking to be received into our Company, not all at once, but from time to time."

In 1639, when the mission apostolate was flourishing, he wrote to his friend Jane Frances de Chantal, who requested an account of "our humble way of life," and gave a concise summary that reflected the practices on a typical mission: "...Our Little Company is established to go from village to village at its own expense, preaching, catechizing, and having the poor people make general confessions of their entire past life. We try to settle the disagreements we find among them and do all we can to see that the sick poor are assisted corporally and spiritually by the Confraternity of the Charity, composed of women, which we set up in the places where we give the mission and which desire it."

When Vincent's current responsibilities did not allow him to participate personally in conducting missions, or when he was incapacitated by age or sickness, he enjoyed vicariously the success stories of those returning from the field. Likewise, he enjoyed letters from grateful bishops telling of the blessings that his confreres' missions brought to their dioceses. In hearing these stories or on the occasion of sending missionaries to places like Ireland, Madagascar or the Barbary Coast, the saint was envious that he could not go, as they did, to preach the gospel and even possibly to give his life for the faith. "Ah, miserable man that I am," he lamented, "My sins have made me unworthy to preach the word of God to people who do not know him."

Even as he reflected at the end of his life, Vincent himself stood in amazement at the way that events happened. Very little was planned. As he reminisced with Monsieur Portail, "Did we ever think of the employments in which the Company is now engaged, for instance, the ordinands, who are the richest and most precious deposit the Church could ever entrust to our hands? ...Did we ever think of the Confraternity of Charity? How did it come about that we undertook to rescue poor foundlings?" It was the theme of wonder that he constantly played, "I do not know how all this came about..."

The missions occasioned many of Vincent's other works, but the missions would never have had lasting effects unless his other apostolates were there to support the success. One work seemed to have followed upon another. The confraternities, for instance, began as a response to a family laid low by sickness, and in time they became a permanent apostolate, usually established in the course of a

mission. The Daughters of Charity, in their turn, had their origins in association with the confraternities. Similarly, the formation of the clergy emerged as a priority for Vincent in order to ensure the lasting good effects of the missions, considering the wretched spiritual condition of so many parish priests.

With his repeated return to thoughts of the missions even after he was unable to participate, Vincent revealed the place they held in his heart. “Nothing is more Christian,” he claimed, “than to go from village to village, helping poor people in working out their salvation, even at the cost of fatigue and inconvenience.”

In recalling that at Folleville “God blessed my discourse,” the saint also recognized the source of the power that gave him success. With a heart thus filled with an assurance of the rightness of the missions and of the promise of God’s blessings on the work, Vincent could feel only hope that the work he handed on to his missionaries would flourish.

June, 1994

Vincent the Alchemist



I

Vincent had one excursion incomplete, if indeed it was real, into the pseudo-science of alchemy. In the first of his two letters to Monsieur de Comet he recounted descriptions of his activities with his first Barbary slave master, himself an unsuccessful alchemist. The historicity of the experience is beside the point here, but it might stand as an image of the apostolic career of Vincent. Paradoxically, while his experience in alchemy was inconclusive, even a failure, there was alchemy of another sort at work that caused many of the successes of his subsequent life.

Alchemy is a pseudo-science that until the eighteenth century had its zealous adherents. It was a body of lore driving the search for a mysterious element that would transmute base metals into gold. For the materialist, the end-product was literally the actual metal. For those with a more mystical bent the element pursued was a marvelous substance, whether solid, like “the philosopher’s stone,” or an elixir. Either of these could bring such intangible boons as success, wealth, and the like.

Vincent’s secretary, Brother Bertrand Ducournau, first hit upon the analogy in commenting to Canon Saint-Martin, the discoverer of the long hidden Comet letters. Adverting to the alchemy references in the letter, the brother indicated that Vincent’s Tunisian experience as described indeed transformed the saint’s surroundings, within which he “turned evil into good, the sinner into the just man, slavery into freedom, hell into paradise...He discovered the philosopher’s stone....”

The application is too narrow, for the metaphor has broader possibilities relative to the whole of Vincent’s activities. The saint did indeed have a lifelong magical touch that transformed many of the works he directed. Take the transformation of Saint-Lazare, for instance. At the time, this was an ancient priory, an almost abandoned edifice that presented “an aspect of lamentable decay” and

housed a community of only eleven residents. Its prior, Adrian Le Bon, offered it to Vincent, but the saint repeatedly refused it because its size exceeded the needs of his Congregation and, more so, it was inappropriate to its lifestyle. However, after his friends prevailed on him with the right reasons to accept the offer in 1632, he undertook to make the best use of it as the headquarters of his subsequent ministry, despite the high costs of physical renovation and maintenance.

In a short time it became a veritable "Noah's Ark," as he called it, for all the guests who would benefit from its hospitality. As Coste noted, Vincent was "the life and soul of the house," and the force of his personality made it "the center of intense religious life whose influence was to make itself felt over the whole of France and even other countries."

Saint-Lazare indeed might be considered the "laboratory" where the alchemist partially plied his trade, where he manipulated the "common elements" to transform them into something precious. Thus, as a center of education it was the matrix out of which came his labors to educate and to reform the clergy of France. Vincent was convinced that reform of the Church would not happen unless there was renewal among the clergy. The good effects of the missions among the people would not last, he knew, if there were no zealous parish priests left behind to nurture the benefits. For this reason he devoted enormous energy to modes of formation suitable for his time. In addition to the formation of his own missionaries, whom he moved from the *College-des-Bons-Enfants* with the acquisition of Saint-Lazare, he opened the residence as a place where diocesan clerics, before and after ordination, could come for retreats and renewal, and where ordinands, in preparation for orders, received instruction in ecclesiastical and spiritual subjects.

Saint-Lazare was the site of another agency of renewal, the Tuesday Conferences. They were the response to requests by worthy priests who were looking for some nourishment of their priesthood. Accordingly, Vincent admitted to the Conferences only the cleric who lived an exemplary life and committed himself to continue that example back at his parish. The ideal proposed to the member was "to honor the life our Lord Jesus Christ, his eternal priesthood, his holy family by procuring the glory of God in the ecclesiastical state, in their own families, in the poor, and even in poor country folk." Whatever precedents of this custom there were in other times and places, Vincent recognized the present as the providential moment: "It was to this poor little Congregation," he told his missionaries, "that God was pleased to turn, in this century, to establish and extend the practice [of conferences to clerics on the virtues of their state] not only as an excellent remedy for good priests, exposed in the service of souls to the corrupt atmosphere of the world, but also to assist them to perfect themselves in their own profession."

And out of his personal experience of the effects on the clergy, Vincent

declared that “there is nothing so touching, nothing that moves me so deeply, nothing of all that I hear, read or see that goes to my heart like these conferences.” So remarkable were the effects of the Conferences on the clergy that Vincent was often asked by authorities to recommend participants who would be worthy candidates for bishops.

Another dimension of Vincent’s labors on behalf of the clergy was the reformation of preaching. The style of much contemporary preaching had become secularized, bombastic, and artificial. Allusions to classical authors and the use of Greek and Roman fables were a vain parade of learning and a far cry from simple proclamation of the Word of God. Even when the scriptures were used, the interpretations were often capricious, esoteric or far-fetched. Vincent asked his missionaries, “How many do we see converted by all those methods...that are now popular and fashionable? They always pass over men’s heads...simply raise a ripple...touch only the surface. A little noise, and that is all.”

Vincent joined his voice to others in calling for a return to simplicity in preaching. He began at home with his own confreres, in promoting what he called his “little method,” simplicity and directness in form, in language, in attention to the audience. Coste’s assessment of Vincent’s contribution was that “by his teaching, advice and example [he] succeeded in inspiring all those who were brought into contact with him and with his own love for ‘the little method.’” If to this direct influence be added that which he exercised indirectly by his own priests in missions and seminaries, and the members of the Tuesday Conferences, of whom Bossuet was one, there need be no hesitation in counting him among the chief reformers of preaching in the seventeenth century.”

II

Although Saint-Lazare indeed was a fruitful matrix of reformation of the clergy, Vincent’s touch was not limited to the mother house, but extended beyond its walls. These works reflected his gift for enlisting collaborators to address the religious and social ills of his age.

First of all, the wretched spiritual conditions of the poor country people touched Vincent’s heart. The major religious orders and other clergy cared for city dwellers, but the peasants suffered serious neglect. Thus, on his part, the saint from the beginning settled on evangelizing the poor country people as the focus for his new community of men. It was a special calling, he reminded his missionaries: “Our Lord asks us to preach the gospel to the poor...There is no Company in the Church of God whose inheritance is the poor, and which devotes itself so wholly to the poor as never to preach in large cities. That is what missionaries profess to do; it is their special mark to be, like Jesus Christ, devoted to the poor.” Accordingly, the

Congregation faithfully pursued that missionary calling. The blessings drawn down on clergy and people were of the kind that one bishop typically and gratefully expressed, whereby the missionaries “are presently doing in my diocese more than if I were given a hundred kingdoms.”

At the same time, the saint utilized the zeal of the Tuesday Conference members by offering them opportunities to give missions, working either with each other or with members of the Congregation. They used many of the practices in vogue with the Congregation — sermons, general confessions, reconciliations, catechizing — and followed the same simple style of “the little method” as prescribed by Vincent for his own confreres. The missions of the Tuesday Conference members differed in that many of them took place in the cities, at Court or in other such places rather than in the country. For this reason, Coste observes, they were useful in that they “happily complemented the work of the Congregation of the Mission.” With the help of these two societies, Saint Vincent was enabled to realize in all their fullness the words of Jesus Christ, *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me* [He has sent me to preach the Good News to the poor], which he adopted as the motto of his Company. “The poor are not only to be found in country places, but also in cities, and Jesus Christ preached to both townspeople and villagers.”

In the world of the laity, Vincent transformed the landscape of charity by his practice of engaging and managing numerous collaborators who could address the physical needs of the poor. The Confraternities of Charity were a good example. The story of their beginnings is well known. As parish priest at Chatillon he learned while vesting for mass about the plight of a certain poor, sick family that was in immediate danger. He touched on it in his sermon, with the result that after mass there was an overwhelming response by the parishioners, who went out to the house with food and medicines to minister to the family.

Vincent recognized in this reaction the latent desire in people to reach out in charity to others in need, but that if efficiently managed, resources could be better used. “I suggested to all these dear, good people,” he told his Daughters of Charity later, “whose charity had induced them to visit the family that they should take it in turn, day by day, to cook for them, and not only for these but also for other cases that might arise.” Almost immediately after the event, a number of women who were interested in continuing the work met with the saint to inquire about the best way to help the poor and the sick of the parish. And within three months of activity, they found organized ways of helping, whereby Vincent could draw up a detailed set of rules for the group that he would call the Confraternity of Charity. The growth of the confraternities was facilitated by the priests of the mission, part of whose directions for each mission in a parish was to establish a confraternity.

As the priests of the Tuesday Conferences came to complement, in the city, the missionary work of Vincent’s confreres in the country, so the confraternities, to which the cities did not seem congenial, eventually moved into the city and attracted

women of the upper classes. Although not Vincent's direct idea, the confraternities owed their urban beginnings to his zeal.

Suggested by a zealous widow, Madame Goussault, as a service to the poorly served sick of the Paris hospital, the Hôtel Dieu, Vincent was at first slow to respond, particularly on the score that he was reluctant to interfere with the current management of the institution ("not to use his scythe in another man's field," as Abelly put it). However, once the archbishop of Paris, at Madame Goussault's behest, urged him on, Vincent saw the proposal as the will of God and was immediately responsive to cooperating with finding a way to serve the sick poor of the Hôtel Dieu.

He soon consulted the first volunteers to plan the management of their good works. A second meeting attracted a few others. And soon after, there was a large multitude, as Abelly describes their immediate growth and the quality of their membership: "The virtues and example of these first women attracted several others, so that soon more than two hundred women had enrolled, even some from the nobility, such as presidents' wives, countesses, marchionesses, duchesses and princesses, and all considered it an honor to offer themselves to God to serve the poor, recognizing them as the living members of his son, Jesus Christ."

Out of the work of these Ladies of Charity, Vincent, along with Louise de Marillac, fashioned another mode of charitable service for the good of the church and the benefit of the poor — the Daughters of Charity. In Louise, the saint had a partner compatible in service and like-minded in her vision of the poor. Thus, when they saw that some aristocratic Ladies of Charity could not perform certain unpleasant tasks of serving the poor and often delegated these duties to their servants, who were sometimes abusive, Vincent suggested offering these opportunities of service to some kind hearted girls who would not be put off by the coarseness of the poor. As this plan prospered and other women offered themselves for this kind of service, Vincent and Louise in time recognized the hand of providence leading them into a new avenue of service. They worked to give the girls some stability and supervision, and some religious and moral instruction. Out of a small core group of three or four young women came the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Although the list of Vincent's enterprises is remarkable, he was not always successful in his engagements. For instance, consider Madagascar. Although Vincent was convinced that this mission was right, he did not transform it into the success that he experienced in other enterprises. Forces were against him, what with shipwrecks, disease, and an environment that was sometimes religiously or politically hostile. The mission was not able to take hold until centuries after his death.

And not all of his enterprises took off dramatically. Vincent's working style fit the image of the scientist in his laboratory — patiently at work, experimenting,

discarding, or confirming his “findings.” There were probably few “Eureka!” moments. He was known for his care, indeed slowness, in coming to decisions, and he sometimes exasperated his associates by not acting as quickly as they would wish. But his reason offered was always a desire to authenticate his decision as being in conformity with divine providence.

Slow or fast in executing, dramatic or plain in his style, Vincent probably did not advert to circumstances such as these that attended the beginnings of his various works. As an “alchemist,” his goal was transformation: that is, a change of the ordinary into something special and important. He accomplished that by inspiring hundreds of men and women of faith and zeal to join him in addressing the ills and injustices in church and society. The marvel is not that he accomplished these wonders, but that he was able to marshal and guide these collaborators so efficiently into a veritable army that swept across seventeenth century France.

September-October, 1994

Vincent the Lionhearted



The meekness of the lamb was the ordinary signature of Saint Vincent's temperament, but when a stance of mildness did not serve the glory of God, the good of the Congregation, or the welfare of the poor, the saint resorted to a more assertive mode. "If, in order to succeed in an enterprise," he once said, with a hint of this other side, "I were obliged to choose between fifty deer commanded by a lion, and fifty lions commanded by a deer, I should consider myself more sure of success with the first contingent than with the second."

There were many occasions when Vincent had to play the lion-leader, even with authorities of church or state. They did not intimidate him; he matched them power for power. Thus, recalling his intent to safeguard, from the start, the independence of his fledgling Congregation, Vincent recounted how he once had to deal with the archbishop of Paris (regarding the management of Saint-Lazare), who in the tradition of past prelates, demanded an annual account: "I earnestly entreated him to dispense us from this. He, however, not willing to do so, I told him that we should prefer to withdraw, and we certainly should have done so, had he persisted in his demands."

On another occasion, in confronting the queen about the desperate state of affairs in Paris and Cardinal Mazarin's part in it, he challenged her, to the detriment of his own position, "Is it just, Madame, that a million, who are innocent, should die of hunger for twenty or thirty who are guilty? Think of the miseries that will befall your people, of the ruins, the sacrilege, and the profanations that civil war brings in its train. And all this for what? To retain one who is an object of public hatred. If the presence of Mazarin is a source of trouble to the state, are you not bound to dispense with him, at least for a while?"

Even at home, in the governance of his own Congregation, Vincent was firm in demanding faithful performance of its members. He would not hesitate to take steps "to purge the Company," as he put it. "Ten such as it needs are worth a

hundred others; and a hundred who have not true vocations, or who do not respond to the designs of God, are not as good as ten.” Nor did he fear the consequences of reduced numbers. He had confidence that “[God] shall augment the Company and bless it.”

Yet, whatever the firmness or the drastic action that circumstances called for, Vincent was always attentive to the gentle dimension: “It is necessary to be firm and invariable with respect to the end to be gained, but meek and humble in the use of means. Herein is the soul of all good government.” He appealed to the example of Jesus as his precedent: “Remember that our Lord did not always deal meekly with his disciples; he spoke very severe words to them, even calling Saint Peter ‘Satan’ ...He also took up scourges against the profaners of his temple, in order to show those who have charge of others, that it is not always [wise] to be too indulgent toward them.”

For Vincent, in the end, firmness and gentleness must converge in relationships. “Let us hold firmly to the end we have proposed to ourselves in our good undertakings,” he insisted, “but let gentleness control the means we employ.” To follow this course is to imitate “the government of the divine wisdom, which accomplishes its ends mightily, while sweetly disposing the means whereby they are attained.”

October, 1991

“*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. . .*”



...because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

It was a dramatic moment in the synagogue at Nazareth when Jesus completed his reading of this passage from Isaiah and announced, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” Luke depicted it as a moment when Jesus inaugurated the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes and expectations. The whole of salvation history seemed focused in that utterance, and a mantle woven down the ages from threads of humanity’s hopes and dreams of salvation might have descended upon Jesus, to define his messianic role as the fulfillment of those hopes.

In light of Vincent’s regular practice of taking the imitation of Jesus Christ as the model of behavior, the saint, in Jesus’ manner, chose Isaiah’s words as the motto to define his life, his ministry and the mission of his Congregation. Jesus modeled doing before teaching. Accordingly, in the *Common Rules* Vincent noted that Jesus first integrated “fully into his life every type of virtue....” That was preparation, after which the Lord “then went on to teach, by preaching the good news of salvation to poor people, and by passing on to his apostles and disciples what they needed to know to become guides for others.” The Congregation, Vincent says, “wants to imitate Christ the Lord...to imitate his virtues as well as what he did for the salvation of others. It is only right that if the Congregation is to do the same sort of work it should act in the same sort of way.”

As a result, Vincent’s earliest labors tended to follow that model, which he described in the earliest purposes of the Congregation: after “patterning ourselves, as far as possible, on the virtues which the great master taught us,” the missionaries’ tasks were “to preach the good news of salvation to poor people, especially in rural areas; and to help seminarians and priests to grow in knowledge and virtue, so that they can be effective in their ministry.”

Without missing a note, today's Congregation has taken up the chant. It is sounded in the opening paragraphs of the *Constitutions*, which declare the purpose of the Congregation "to follow Christ evangelizing the poor," and its spirit "a participation in the spirit of Christ himself," as proposed by Saint Vincent: "He sent me to preach the good news to the poor.' Hence, Jesus Christ is the rule of the Mission and shall be considered as the center of its life and activity." This purpose is specified and achieved in the direction to the members: (a) to "work at evangelizing the poor, especially the more abandoned," and, (b) to "help the clergy and the laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor."

A closer elaboration in time is the *New Evangelization* derived from the *Letter to the Confreres* that emerged from the 1992 General Assembly. It is really a call, say the writers, to "renew our convictions and our commitments for the mission." And so "our fundamental mission will consist in announcing Jesus Christ sent into the world by the Father to proclaim the good news of salvation to the poor." An integral dimension of that challenge for the mission is the call for renewal among the members as *New Men* and for our communal groupings as *New Communities*.

The missionary behavior of Jesus was a lifelong focus for Vincent. He offered it not only as the model for the Congregation's way of life, but also as a motive to the members for observing the rules, which embodied the example of Jesus. Vincent made this clear in his conference of 17 May 1658, when he promulgated and distributed the *Common Rules*: "Another reason to live faithfully according to the rules," he stated, "is that they are drawn almost completely from the gospel...Our divine savior came and was sent by his father to preach the gospel to the poor: *Pauperibus evangelizare misit me.*" Vincent savored the statement several more times, and then proceeded: "Yes, that is what we were founded for. Yes, gentlemen...our portion is the poor...To fulfill our ministry is to continue the work of the son of God, who went out to the countryside to seek out the poor. Our institute attempts to do the same, to serve and help the poor, whom we must recognize as our lords and masters."

In Vincent's appropriating Isaiah's commissioning words after the manner of Jesus, the saint was donning the mantle modeled on that of Jesus and he was sharing it as a legacy to his missionaries and a mark of their identity. Indeed, fidelity to that legacy became a norm for the missionaries' self-judgment, especially at the end. "How happy they will be at the hour of their death," Vincent promised, "who will see accomplished in themselves these beautiful words of our Lord: *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me Dominus!* See, my brothers how it seems our Lord wants to tell us by these words that one of his main concerns was to work for the poor. Cursed shall we be if we fail to serve and help them."

Thus, in Vincent's mind his ideal missionary would wrap himself in the mantle of Jesus and pray that the spirit of the Lord would indeed come upon him, the missionary, and anoint him: that is, to share the Lord's mission and a portion of his holiness. The saint would hope, in turn, that the same spirit would make effective the missionary's preaching of the Good News as to elicit reactions similar to those that the evangelist reported of Jesus' listeners: "All spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

February-March, 1995

Vincent's Leadership



I

Louis Abelly, near the end of his biography of the saint, has a chapter titled “The Leadership Style of Monsieur Vincent.” It is so placed to offer an underlying explanation for the remarkable success of his lifetime ministry in charity.

The most fundamental norm, or end, that the saint proposed whether for himself or others, says Abelly, was “always to act for the greater glory of God and to accomplish his most holy will...This goal dominated his thoughts, his desires, and his intentions...He strove for nothing but that God’s name be blessed, his kingdom advanced, and his will accomplished on earth as it is in heaven.”

As a means of achieving this goal Vincent’s “main and nearly universal method was to conform himself entirely to the example of Jesus Christ.” There was no surer path to follow, or on which to lead others, than “that traveled by the word and wisdom of God.” Accordingly, the saint had “engraved [Jesus’] words and actions upon his own mind, modeling himself in all he did and said upon the prototype of all virtue and sanctity.” In first caring for his own salvation Vincent was ready to care for others: “He knew the truth that the proper measure that we must have for our neighbor is the love we have for ourselves.”

There were certain qualities of his leadership that were easily identifiable. The first of these was humility, whereby he was always open to consultation. Humility was, Abelly notes, “Monsieur Vincent’s first and most faithful advisor. Although he had a clear and capable mind, he always mistrusted his own thoughts. He turned to God in every situation to ask for his light and help. Then he would seek the advice of others...and he advised his confreres to act in the same way.”

Another quality was firmness and consistency in following through, once the decision was made. Vincent told one of his superiors: “Once we have commended something to God and taken counsel, we should remain firm in what we have decided,

rejecting as a temptation all thought to the contrary.”

Although his decisions were firm, he made certain that they were considered and deliberate. It was a principle of Vincent's, says Abelly, “that any advice given too quickly was an expression of one's personal judgment rather than the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, whom he preferred to consult before responding.” If pressed for an answer with little time for delay, “[Vincent] would not answer until he had raised his mind to God and asked his light and help. Otherwise he would base his answer on some passage of holy scripture, or on some action of the Son of God that had a bearing on the matter under discussion.”

As one who regularly had occasion and need to expect certain behaviors of others, the saint was careful to maintain regularity and punctuality on his own part. Says Abelly, Vincent “used to say that those in charge of others ought to be firm in the observances, and be on their guard lest they be the cause of laxity of the community by their own lack of firmness or exactitude. Among all things that might hurt a community, nothing is more dangerous than a superior who is too soft, who wants to please others, and who seeks to be loved...A happy community is largely the result of a good leader.”

Even so, when Vincent had to be firm or insistent with his confreres, he always did it with “a mild grace.” Or sometimes he would be tentative or indirect in his response, as when he was obliged to refuse something, “he would prefer that his confreres would surmise as much, without obliging him to refuse outright for fear of giving pain.” When pressed to agree to something he did not think proper, Vincent would ask, “Would you be good enough to remind me of this some other time?” In any event, he was always aware of each person's feelings or temperament in his responses.

II

His Direction of People

In exercising leadership Vincent himself heeded certain priorities regarding the people whom he shepherded. In the formation of seminarians, for instance — his own especially — he advocated a pattern of progression within their programs. The first task was purgative, that is, as Abelly says, “to destroy sin and the faults and failings in those under his care.” This occurred as they entered the Internal Seminary (the community's novitiate), which represented “a school of virtue.” Then, as they moved along into higher ecclesiastical studies, the task was consolidation: to maintain faith and fervor and to caution against their opposites. The transition from the fervor of the Internal Seminary to advanced studies was an extreme step that warranted caution. “Going from one extreme to another is dangerous,” Vincent said. “A glass that comes from the furnace into the cold runs the risk of cracking.”

Nevertheless in dealing with his confreres generally, his aim was “to lead

them to the perfection of their state and to a most exact regularity,” and not just to “[remedy] vice and [root] out faults.” He took the lead by giving the example himself. “It might be said,” observed Abelly, “that [Vincent’s] example was one of the chief causes of the good order so much admired in the house of Saint-Lazare.”

As leader Vincent had to monitor within his community such disorders as rivalry and slander, “vices more to be feared than others.” In counteracting these, the saint was accustomed to remind the offenders, reports Abelly, that “the traits of envy and detraction pierce first the heart of Jesus Christ before reaching those against whom they are aimed.” Vincent especially recommended fraternal correction as a remedy. To avoid inflaming the situation, it would be done ordinarily “not on the spur of the moment, and never in anger...[but with] grace filled with firmness...like the oil and the wine of the good Samaritan.” Indeed, for success it should promise to be useful, helpful and agreeable to the person admonished. In all cases there should be consideration for the person, even to the point of asking him if he is willing to hear what will be said.

His Management of Temporalities

Abelly remarks that, although Vincent believed in the care that providence showed, he was careful about preserving and managing the temporal goods of the Congregation. “As the father of the family had the responsibility to feed his children...and heads of organizations to influence the spirit and life of their members...so Vincent saw himself as obliged to look after the needs of his community,” said Abelly, reflecting Vincent’s words.

In overseeing these needs he worked on an economy of time, money, and activity. Vincent was not capable of personal presence in all places, and so appointed “procurators and other knowledgeable people to handle these affairs,” even though they stood by for his advice and approval. A function he observed was to see whether something once begun should be pursued to its conclusion. For assurance that some of the work get done, he used the lay brothers and other lay persons to perform duties on the Saint-Lazare farm and in the buildings.

He insisted that missions be given without charge, and that missionaries take neither money nor gifts from those evangelized: on occasion gifts or alms, perhaps, but only if given out of charity and not by way of salary or recompense.

Then, too, he wanted the provisions of food and clothing to be appropriate to the times and to the places where the community was situated. He urged everyone to be satisfied with what was given them. In bad years when prices were high, he tried to see if some cutting back of the usual portion of meat or wine could be made; he sought to share in the common suffering of the people by cutting back on the expenses of the house.

Vincent avoided superfluous expenses, spending only the least amount possible for necessities, and yet he spared nothing when it came to charity. He spent nothing on what he considered “embellishments, painting, ornaments, furniture, or niceties which were not strictly necessary.” Only what was necessary for the service of God did he find valuable. In this regard even time was precious to him. Because of so many commitments inside and outside the community, he strove, said Abelly, “to lose not a single moment in doing anything useless.”

As a conclusion to his treatment of Vincent’s leadership Abelly provided a chapter that is a conversation containing the saint’s advice to Antoine Durand, who was being named superior at the seminary at Agde. Abelly’s intent is to show the correspondence between his outline of Vincent’s “theory” of leadership and the saint’s actual behavior in practice. Vincent ends with a few words of encouragement and a sense of his own needs: “That is enough for today...You are about to undertake a great work...I pray that our Lord will bless your leadership. Please join me in praying he will forgive me all the faults which I have committed in the position I now hold.”

April-May, 1995

Radical Detachment



“*W*hen we have spent all we have for our Lord and nothing remains, then we will leave the key under the door and go.” How is that for radical detachment? Vincent de Paul uttered these words, according to Louis Abelly, in response to a priest-friend of the saint who inquired whether the expense of boarding ordinands at Saint-Lazare was such that the retreatants should be charged for their stay at the house. In that same vein, there was one occasion when the treasurer of Saint-Lazare reported that there was not a sou left to cover either the ordinary or the extraordinary expenses arising from an ordinands’ retreat about to begin. “What good news! God be blessed!” In that exclamation “he raised his voice,” Abelly noted. “Fine,” Vincent continued, “now we will see if we have confidence in God.”

Indeed, the debts incurred by Saint-Lazare from the clergy conferences and other works of charity there were a source of concern to his confreres because of the threat of financial insecurity. His response was: “The treasures of God’s providence are inexhaustible, and our distrust of God does him no honor. If our Company of the Mission is destroyed, it will not be by poverty but by wealth.” This situation at Saint-Lazare thus became a paradigm of the tension perceived between Vincent’s generosity for the mission — of training the clergy and serving the poor — and his abiding confidence in a benign providence to supply what would be needed.

Was this behavior extravagant, imprudent, indeed improvident? From a rational viewpoint some of his attitudes and activities might have seemed even self-defeating. The welfare of the Congregation and its continued progress were uppermost in his mind, but he took positions which, while relying upon providence, would work against the very welfare he wanted to foster. Thus, as Abelly observed, “To assure himself that this dependence was absolute and his confidence complete, [Vincent] never acted in any way to obtain benefices, houses, or establishments, nor even to attract any candidates for the Congregation.” For instance, Abelly continued, “When offered gifts, [Vincent] was more inclined to accept the lesser

rather than the greater. When there was a question of admitting someone to the community he hesitated more to receive persons of some distinction or of some renown in the world than he did for accepting those of the lower class.”

In taking the “lesser” he wanted to avoid a pride that might dilute the purity of his motivation or the appearance of circumventing the direction of the providence of God. “If we place our confidence in men, or on some gift of nature or fortune,” Vincent declared, “then God will withdraw from us...Would you like to know why we will sometimes fail in what we do? It is because we rely upon ourselves...When a preacher, superior, or confessor relies too much on his own prudence, learning or his own gifts...God withdraws and leaves him to himself...He learns through his own experience that no matter how talented he may be, he can do nothing without God.” A contemporary prelate confirmed this policy of Vincent when he observed: “This principle, introduced by him into the Congregation, of not favoring gifts of nature or fortune unless they were joined to virtue and subservient to grace, was one of the major means by which God inspired him to preserve his Congregation in the purity of its spirit.”

In addition to shortages of materials for the mission, like money and provisions, Vincent’s leadership suffered other restrictions or reversals, such as diminished numbers of workers caused by sickness or death or by the need to stretch his manpower to cover the Congregation’s many commitments. Despite the losses, some superiors still clamored for help to accomplish their duties. To one who felt the shortage because of deaths, the saint encouraged him to work with what he had: “Believe me, three [men] can do more than ten when our Lord puts his hand to things, and he always does so when he takes away the means of doing otherwise.” Perhaps Vincent’s greatest struggle to stay fixed in the attitude of confidence in God came at a time when he and the Company suffered major setbacks of this kind, particularly the deaths of eight confreres from the plague in Italy and the deaths of three missionaries to Madagascar, two on the journey and the other on the island. That these losses affected him was evident from the repeated inclusion of the news, almost as a formula, in many of the letters he wrote to confreres during 1657. Despite his sorrow, he always found grounds for hope: “I am inconsolable at the loss of so many good workers...but they are surely very happy because, having died for the salvation of others, after the example of [Jesus], they saved their lives by losing them...We have reason to hope that the ashes of these deceased men...will be the seed for many fine missionaries.”

“Totally radical” sounds like teenage lingo, but that designation for Vincent’s detachment is an accurate fit. In conducting his ministries he was elemental in shunning the appearance of self-reliance and in asserting dependence upon divine providence. He seemingly could stand apart and appear emotionally disengaged from situations that would cause panic in superiors, treasurers, or others

with responsibilities to discharge. Not that he neglected to attend to the practical demands of such cases or was unsympathetic to them; he slowed his response in order to assure himself that his motivation was selfless or that self-confidence alone was not his assurance. He wanted certitude that his solution came from God.

That calmness arose from an unwavering faith in an all-inclusive providence of God. Little wonder that Vincent took his time to act, that in some instances he believed few hands could be as effective as many, that catastrophes did not always seem as disastrous to him as they did to others. Yet the saint did not encourage passivity in accepting reversals, as he noted in writing to many confreres about the death of his Irish confrere, Dermot Duggan, who was a great loss to the mission in England: "Since [God] is the master of the living and the dead, it is up to him to dispose of them as he wishes, and up to us to ask him to raise up new ones, according to his heart, to carry on his work."

It is "up to us," said Vincent, introducing the human element in the proper sequence. In his eyes, only after the vision and the acceptance of providence have first prevailed in all such cases can the individual proceed to take action.

March, 1996

“Thy Will Be Done.”



“There are only two kinds of people in the end,” British writer C.S. Lewis wrote, “those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘Thy will be done.’” That is, the saints, who will blossom outwardly toward God, and the condemned, who will be fixed in the hell of self-absorption.

Vincent de Paul’s life was a litany of invocations of the first kind. “The perfection of love,” he claimed, “does not consist in ecstasies, but in fulfilling the will of God.” That person is “most perfect...who has best conformed his own will to God’s in such a way that no distinction remains between his own and God’s.” Indeed, this approaches the condition of “the angels and the blessed in heaven [who] accomplish the holy and adorable will of God.” This might be an image of Vincent’s own stance before God.

Because Jesus was Vincent’s model in all things, the saint followed the Lord’s example — first to learn and practice virtue before attempting to preach it to others, in this case, correspondence to the will of the Father. Jesus came, said Vincent, “from heaven to earth just to do the will of God his Father in accomplishing the work of our redemption, and he delighted in doing what he knew to be most pleasing to God at the time and in the way he recognized as being in conformity with his will.” Jesus made this stance manifest in his life, which was “nothing else than a web of obedience,” in which “he willed to be subject to the Most Blessed Virgin, to Saint Joseph, and also to others placed in authority, good and bad....” Out of his own experience and practice Vincent offered to his missionaries a comprehensive vision of how the will of God manifested itself in these authorities. “It is the will of God and his good pleasure,” he said, “that we obey the prelates of his Church, kings, magistrates, when they command or forbid us to do certain things. It is his will that we obey the laws of the kingdom in which we live, that we obey our fathers, mothers, relations, and superiors. By acting in this way we do the will of God.” Indeed, he felt, this obedience can be directed even “beyond those who have the right to give us

orders”; that is, in submitting ourselves “to all human creatures...” by way of “condescension, deference and all sorts of services for others.” This attitude has special meaning for persons in community, in the members’ displaying tolerance for differences among themselves, in practicing forbearance, and in seeking mutual understanding.

The saint cautioned that recognizing and accepting so many instances as the will of God must come not in unthinking acquiescence. “Among the multitude of thoughts and inclinations that incessantly arise within us,” he said, “many may appear to be good but do not come from God and are not pleasing to him.” Rather, prudence would dictate that one would discern and discriminate, seek counsel and accept advice, pray for light, and above all, proceed slowly and never anticipate providence.

This conformity to the divine will brings its own rewards. God leads such a person “in everything and by everything.” Using an image from the psalmist (73: 23), Vincent observed how “God holds him, so to speak, by his right hand, and [the person] accepts this divine guidance with complete submission. For tomorrow, the following week, the whole year, and his entire life you will see him living in peace and tranquility, and in an uninterrupted movement toward God.” That person, too, becomes a source of joy — to himself and to others as well: “Everywhere he spreads in the souls of his neighbor the happy spirit with which he himself is filled.” Add to that, being wise and effective: “All his words have strength and energy...The advice he gives to others and all his actions give great edification.”

That striking image — walking hand in hand with God, divine guidance in the lead — would seem to define Vincent’s own lifelong relationship to the will of God. It is little wonder, then, that the saint enjoyed the blessings that accompanied that conformity: peace and tranquility, an inner joy as well as a gift for sharing it with others, and finally, strength and energy in his words and actions that gave power to his service of the gospel.

October, 1996

“I Wish I’d Said That!”



That familiar refrain, an expression of regret that you were not first with the remark or the insight, reminds us that there is frequently someone who is quicker on the draw. It is not necessarily a begrudging sentiment. In fact, it is often spoken in a tone of admiration. Nor is the refrain always limited to words. Given the convention of seeing a person’s life as a statement, one might also use the refrain as an expression of benign envy at the rich meaning of that person’s life. This thought came to mind recently in witnessing the impact that the death of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin had on so many people, who admired him in both his life and his death. It is as if there was a communal, wistful desire on the part of his admirers that their lives might be as edifying as his. “I wish I’d said that!” they seem to exclaim.

This, we might suppose, is the basis for the cult of the saints. It is a kind of “holy envy” we experience when we see a person whose life, at least in its final stages, was the embodiment of the gospel ideal and becomes worthy of imitation. This certainly holds true for the life and the achievement of Saint Vincent de Paul. There are enduring ingredients in his story that give it a universal appeal that takes it beyond eras, beyond nationalities, beyond cultures. People see in his life the validation of the gospel — not only to believe, but to live its values, especially in its mandate of practical charity. “I wish I’d said that!” his followers exclaim.

Vincent himself had occasion to be edified by the exemplary lives of some of his own contemporaries. He viewed Saint Francis de Sales, for instance, who was his mentor and indeed his hero, as “the meekest and gentlest person I have ever met. The very first time I saw him, I saw from the outset that his expression, his way of speaking and conversing with others was an expression of the meekness of our Lord Jesus Christ who had taken possession of his heart.” Another instance he found at home, in the case of one of his lay brothers, Pierre Sirven, a man whom Vincent considered “the living rule of the Company; a wise, intelligent man, benevolent

toward everyone.” Similarly, among the Ladies of Charity his admiration singled out one remarkable woman, about whom he observed that “if through some mischance the gospels were lost, their spirit and maxims would be found in the conduct and sentiments of Madame Fouquet. She makes devotion so attractive that she encourages everyone to be devout.” Vincent, too, was capable of uttering, “I wish I’d said that!”

The source and prototype for all such behavior — his own and others’ — was, in Vincent’s eyes, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. That truth is central in all of these instances cited. The saint took this as a basic rule of his own behavior and left it as a legacy to his disciples. It is the driving spirit of the Congregation’s *Common Rules*, which he acknowledged in his letter of introduction: “I have tried to base all the rules, where possible, on the spirit and actions of Jesus Christ. My idea was that men who are called to continue Christ’s mission, which is mainly preaching the good news to the poor, should see things from his point of view and want to be what he wanted. They should have the same spirit that he had, and follow in his footsteps.” When the saint saw this ideal realized in zealous missionaries he said, “How blessed are they who give themselves to God in this way. They do what Jesus Christ did, and imitate him in his practice of poverty, humility, patience, zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls! In this way they become true disciples of the master...and live purely with his spirit.”

Others recognized in Vincent the embodiment of this ideal. One of his confreres reported the remarks of Monsieur Portail about Vincent (quoted by Abelly) that “Monsieur Vincent was the perfect image of Jesus Christ whom he knew upon earth, and that he had never heard Monsieur Vincent say or do anything except relating to him who said, ‘What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do.’” Abelly himself observed that Vincent “had so imprinted the image of Jesus Christ upon his mind and was so penetrated with his holy maxims that he spoke, thought and acted only in view of God.”

It is possible always to have a sense of admiration and benign envy when we encounter persons whose lives approach the gospel ideal. “I wish I’d said that!” The refrain echoes, whether the life is that of Vincent de Paul himself or that of any one of his disciples who mirror his qualities. Such lives merit imitation as well. They are authenticated, moreover, by their roots in the model of Jesus Christ himself.

December, 1996

“Embrace the Whole World.”



It is remarkable how much a person's life could be programmed or be drained of spontaneity if he or she would let it happen. This is a hazard of the Christmas season, for instance, when the media offer pre-packaged sets of feelings about what the experience of the season should be. The resulting expectations grow to suggest the coziness of a Norman Rockwell Christmas. The same holds true of the gifts that are touted, expensive or exotic items to “make dreams come true.” Victims of such illusions have at the end only a handful of sadness, disappointment, and manufactured guilt. The same temptation is there during the rest of the year as well. Without denying the value of some self-help manuals, there is a flood of such how-to books that stifle initiative — how to feel, how to relate, how to be happy, how to get mad, how to grieve, etc. — running the gamut, it seems, of every phase of living. With such pressures, where is the freedom, the variety, and the spontaneity? The pattern for such living seems as artificial as painting by numbers.

This is a risk within the Christian life, too: to guide one's life by formalism and duty alone, in activities drained of enthusiasm or spontaneity, if not love. Thoughts of this kind call attention to the contrasting expansiveness, richness and variety of Saint Vincent de Paul's apostolic life, which led him down a path wholly different from that other route. His life was defined by the diverse occasions he faced and by his willingness to adapt to what each one called for. The landscape of his ministries was variegated, filled with persons of all sorts and conditions: city and country dwellers, rich and poor, bishops and priests, cleric and lay, royalty and commoners, statesmen and peasants. There was but one way, of course, to deal with everyone — that is, in the spirit of the gospel — but the attention to each individual called for a unique response, each face that of Christ, calling to mind Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins' image, “what in God's eye he [the individual] is”:

...Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

It was the poor who caught Vincent's special attention, mainly because his ministry most often cast him into their midst. Their condition called him to a special way of seeing. Instead of viewing them in the mass, to him each person was evidence of God's presence. The saint's faith saw beyond appearances. "Often enough," he said, "being so crude and earthy, [the poor] do not present themselves as respectable or reasonable beings. But turn the medal over and by the light of faith you will see that the Son of God, who chose to be poor, is present here in these poor people." Far from looking down on them, Vincent took on a new relationship with the poor, privileged as they were in God's eyes, as "our lords and masters...and we are unworthy to render them our small favors." They were not to be taken for granted, and, indeed, they were an avenue to God, as Vincent frequently observed, "God loves the poor, and thus surely he must love those who love and serve them."

Vincent's attitude toward providence also affected the tempo of his life. That stance kept him off balance, as it were, and prevented him from taking predictable, measured steps. He must have felt, at times, a tension between his impulse to move forward energetically and the belief that he must await providence, that is, follow or accompany it rather than anticipate it. No matter how ripe for harvest a field might be, Vincent would not go unless the bishop invited the Congregation. Indeed, even the pastors were considered: "We take it as a rule to work for the good of the people, with the concurrence of the pastors, and never against their wishes. At the beginning and end of each mission we seek their blessing to show our dependence upon them."

Even though the saint recognized the validity of his delays, they must have caused him some frustration, as they certainly did some of his contemporaries, who sometimes waited impatiently for him to act. His persistence just deepened his conviction, though. "What treasures are hidden in...providence. And how those who follow it and not stride before it honor the Lord." His humility caused him to see himself "as a poor blind man, unable to take a step in the way of goodness unless [God's] hand of mercy guide [him]." Conformity to providence, in Vincent's mind, and a practice recommended to his missionaries, was "the one thing we should aspire to."

In his service Vincent burned inside with a fire of zeal that energized his ministry. Those who were touched by this heat must have found it an enriching experience and accounted it a grace. As one religious said of him, "Who has not felt the charity of Monsieur Vincent in fulfilling the needs of their lives, whether of body or soul? Can anyone be found who had recourse to him and went away without receiving some help?" From another source, after an address to the Paris confraternity, one woman exclaimed, "Ah, ladies, can we not say, as did the disciples at Emmaus, that our hearts burned with the love of God while Monsieur Vincent spoke to us?" To which another woman replied, "You must not be surprised, for he

is an angel of the Lord. He allows the love of God which burns in his heart to appear on his lips as burning coals.”

The missionary vision that guided Vincent de Paul was wide and all-embracing: “Our vocation,” he told his missionaries, “is to go neither to a single parish nor to a single diocese. We are to embrace the whole world to gain the hearts of all.” History certainly played this out in the diversity of the works that providence set in his path and in the breadth of experiences they offered. His creative and zealous responses to such variety of offerings are his legacy to his followers. He taught them to think beyond boundaries or fixed positions, yet to watch for the proper signals from providence to set the pace. He offered insight into serving the poor, neither romanticizing them nor dismissing them, but viewing them in Christ’s eyes — an incarnational perspective that dominated his vision. This was a vision which could endure a lifetime, for Vincent held that serving the poor could be a barometer of one’s hope and a guarantee of perseverance. This was an assurance with which the saint consoled a missionary who was afraid of dying: “Those who love the poor in life will have nothing to fear in death.”

February-March, 1997

“A Great Charity Toward All Clerics”



The months of May and June make up the season when fresh classes of the newly ordained are released to the Church at large. The numbers nowadays are not as expansive as once they were, but, whatever their sizes, they do represent infusions of new life.

The Midwest province, like so much of the rest of the world, has also experienced these meager harvests. The province still upholds, though, the tradition and legacy handed down from Saint Vincent of serving the clergy, whether in their initial formation in the seminary or in offering “spiritual assistance to priests both in the work of their ongoing formation and in promoting their pastoral zeal,” as the current *Constitutions* prescribe. With the diminishing numbers in the Midwest seminary apostolate this latter purpose takes on more immediacy. This mandate of “spiritual assistance” would show many faces of priestly ministry: working side by side with priests in the field, giving spiritual support in counseling and spiritual direction, offering retreats, or providing continuing ministerial, theological, and pastoral education. Added to this in the new text are fresh nuances. One of these is the direction “to encourage in them [the parish priests] the desire of fulfilling the Church’s option for the poor.” The other is “to devote themselves to motivating and suitably preparing lay people for ministries necessary in a Christian community.” The list of services to the clergy would include even such a mundane activity as availability for pastoral relief to cover needed absences.

In addition to these services to fellow clerics, Vincent demonstrated for his missionaries another level of service in the form of hospitality. Visitors to Saint-Lazare, and any others who came across his path, were well aware of the saint’s attunement to their needs. Abelly recites a litany of the many instances that Vincent responded to as such. Sickness of guests offered other occasions for hospitality, either because the person became ill while at Saint-Lazare or he came to Paris for medical help and needed shelter. Some even took advantage of the hospitality: one

priest, unknown to anyone and ill dressed, turned out to be a thief; while another got sick and became so demanding that the members of the house wanted to oust him (unlike the case of another priest who felt his sickness was a burden to the house). Vincent wished to take no action against either of these ungrateful visitors. Vincent welcomed priests from the country who sought aid for their parishioners devastated by the wars or some other disaster. The saint's universal stance, said Abelly, was "the great charity he displayed toward all clerics, [that] encouraged all poor priests to come to him as their father, full of confidence in him...Hardly a day passed that someone did not seek his aid."

Underlying Vincent's commitment to serving the clergy was a concern that the missionaries' own focus be clear. He articulated for them his goal in the area of evangelization — "to spread God's love in all directions...to bring fire to the world so that it would be on fire with [his] love." This notion converges with the mission of the Church in the modern statement of its mission of evangelization, as expressed in Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and incorporated into the province's own *Statement on Evangelization*: "To bear witness, in a simple and direct way to God revealed by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit; to bear witness that in his son God has loved the world — that in his Incarnate Word he has given being to all things and has called men to eternal life."

The saint was further concerned that in offering service to others, the missionaries first be credible through their own examples of probity of life and zeal for the Good News. Given the mandate of "bringing fire," he wonders, on his own part, "How could I myself not burn with divine fire?" His frequent remarks about the formation of candidates could equally stand as a mandate to the missionaries for their service to the ordained, especially in modeling virtue to them. Beyond teaching them "chant, ceremonies, and a little moral theology," he wrote once to a seminary rector, "what is important is to form them in solid piety and devotion." In order to do this last effectively, however, the missionary "must be the first to be filled with the above, for it would be almost useless to instruct them on these things without giving example. We must be full reservoirs in order to be able to let our water spill out without becoming empty. We must possess the spirit with which we want them to be animated, for no one can give what he does not have."

Perhaps Vincent's distilled notion of how the missionary is both example and effective minister is best expressed within a long panegyric letter announcing the death of Monsieur Jean Pille, an early associate whom he regarded as "the happiness and blessing of the Mission." In more than fifteen pages the saint surveys the life and virtues of the priest and concludes, "There is a great deal to be learned and to profit from this for all categories of persons who make up our Congregation. The old will learn not to dispense themselves from the rule; the young, to be submissive; the sick, to be encouraged and to be patient; the healthy, not to pretend to be

working; the spiritual, to perfect themselves; and the sensual to be ashamed at the sight of a sick old man mortifying himself...Those who complain of being unfit for preaching, hearing confessions and carrying out other mission functions because of their infirmity or ailments of body or mind, or because they are left at home to work at something else that they do not like, will learn here that it is a great presumption to imagine that God needs their talent, as if he could not convert souls by some other means, and that obedience, mortification, prayer, patience, and similar virtues win souls better than the lofty sciences and all human industry....”

Recognizing the source of the priest's effectiveness in ministry, Vincent concluded, with extravagant praise, that Monsieur Pille “did more by his suffering than all of us by our activity.”

May, 1997

The Apostolate and Good Health



Good health is a hot item on almost everyone's list these days. There are so many built-in hazards to twentieth century living—stress, foul air, cancer-causing agents, to name a few — that many people are taking a defensive stance against these menaces to well-being. There is a special interest in the topic among religious communities, not only for their members' personal welfare, but, in view of diminishing numbers, for ensuring the reasonable continuance of their useful service in the apostolate.

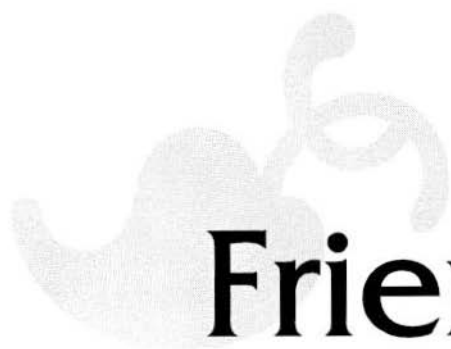
Although Vincent lived almost eighty years, he had abiding anxieties about his health throughout. A minor current running through his correspondence with Saint Louise de Marillac is a lifelong mutual concern about their respective ailments. Their letters are an affectionate exchange of volleys about their health: fretting about each other ("Take care of yourself."), encouraging and reporting on each other's condition ("I am feeling better." "My catarrh seems to be letting up a little."), and offering commonsense advice or their sometimes quaint remedies. As motivation to her friend to "take care of yourself," Louise executed a clever spin on the Golden Rule that could not help catching Vincent's attention: "You should be kind to your body, as you would be toward that of a poor person."

These practical concerns about health he communicated to his missionaries, especially two extremes to beware of: a too delicate concern for one's health and an inordinate expense of energy that would endanger that health — both to the detriment of the apostolate. Thus, he cautions against the attitude that, "for a little health, an imaginary remedy, an infirmary where nothing shall be lacking, for a house that pleases...and a rest that indulges sloth, the missionary would deprive himself of the freedom of serving the Lord. On the other hand, "Be careful to preserve your health. It is a trick of the devil, which he employs to deceive good souls, to incite them to do more than they are able, in order that they may be no longer able to do anything."

Vincent's good sense navigated a reasonable course between these two extremes. Sickness, of course, was a reality, and in the face of it, the saint ordered that "nothing be lacking to [the sick confrere]...to spare no means to regain his health...[even] that the chalices [be] sold...to achieve this purpose." What he advocates in ordinary practice is a moderate care for oneself, succumbing neither to anxiety nor to overwork. He observes, taking the long view: "You will exercise greater charity by preserving yourself in order to serve your neighbor for a long time to come than by wearing yourself out very soon for the salvation of a few."

It comes to this: "Evangelical workers are treasures that deserve to be carefully guarded."

April, 1990



Friends



A Contemporary Tribute



Vincentian novices and scholastics of a bygone day will recall *The Sinner's Guide*, by Louis of Granada, O.P. as a daily part of the annual retreat. Few might know that it has a connection close to home, in that the French version (1645) was dedicated to Vincent by its translator, Simon Martin. Allowing for its baroque convolutions, we find the dedication not only a fitting personal tribute to the saint but also a worthy appraisal of the blessings that he had brought to the Church of France:

"It is most fitting that this instrument so useful to salvation be placed in the hands of a priest whose charitable actions reconcile not only the hearts of the common people but also of kings, and who, in the role of apostle which he continually carries out personally or through his confreres, extends the kingdom of our sovereign master even to places where his glory was, so to speak, buried and, to put it briefly, where the Lord's vineyard was lying fallow and fruitless, for lack of good workers, and who upheld, as it seems fit, the honor of their master.

"Thanks be to God, France is now more Christian than it ever was; darkness and ignorance are giving place there to the beautiful light of salvation and grace. The flocks, who walk according to the desire of their heart, hear the voice of their shepherds and are recalled to their sheepfold; and the gospel of the crucified one is as well taught to the simplest and most wretched people of the country as it is to the most self-sufficient and important persons in the best cities.

"This happiness comes from the fact that there is almost no corner of the kingdom, obscure as it may be, where these new workers called by your zeal and piety to the Lord's harvest, do not go to distribute the bread of heavenly doctrine and the sacred wine which makes virgins; and they do it with such good results that it is apparent that they are most worthy of the title of disciples of the great Jesus in the service of evangelizing the poor.

"It is then to you, Monsieur, as rightly as to anyone else, that this book

which daily makes so many conquests over the three great enemies of our salvation, should be dedicated, since sinners whose guide it is, receive no less instruction from the example of your life than from the truth of its teachings....”

October, 1990

Vincent's Fan Mail



Among the collection of Vincent's correspondence there is a rich vein of complimentary mail addressed to the saint about the striking effects of his missionaries' works throughout the nation. Vincent expected, as a matter of course, to receive reports from his confreres about the progress of their apostolates, favorable or otherwise, but these others — more than forty in number — are unsolicited tributes.

The letters came from beneficiaries of all kinds: bishops, noblemen and women, town magistrates, individual priests and groups of them, all of whom in some way profited from the services of the Congregation or who hoped to. Bishops valued the effects of the missionaries' presence, who, as one prelate commented, "are presently doing in my diocese more than if I were given a hundred kingdoms. I am perfectly satisfied at seeing all the people in my diocese disposed toward what is good and my pastors profiting greatly from the conferences your priests are establishing with success and with blessings."

Local conferences of priests themselves expressed similar reactions to the work of the missionaries in rejuvenating their local presbyterates. More than one individual priest took it upon himself to write to Vincent about the personal effects in his own life.

The successes of the missions and the retreats were such that their renown spread among the untouched dioceses. Some bishops, desperate to remedy the wretched conditions among their people and clergy, pleaded with Vincent to send them such help as the missionaries could give.

Imagine the plight of the bishop who was "horrified" at the thought of his "nearly seven thousand drunken or lewd priests who ascend the altar every day and who have no vocation." In another diocese, "the clergy are undisciplined, the people without fear and the priests without devotion and charity, pulpits without preachers, knowledge without honor, vice without punishment."

Another cause for appreciation was the help that Vincent sent, by way of alms and supplies, to various districts scourged by war, plague or famine. One such village, suffering from “severe measures from our creditors and acts of cruelty on the part of the soldiers, who forcibly deprived us of what little bread we had,” was saved by “one of your children in our Lord who arrived laden with alms and greatly mitigated the excess of our misfortunes and revived our hope in the mercy of the good God.” Other villages in similar straits made their pleas: “Your charity is so great that everybody has recourse to it. Everyone here considers you the refuge of the afflicted poor. That is why several persons have come to me, that I might refer them to you and so that by this means, they might experience the effects of your goodness.”

Vincent did not seek this acclaim. His formula for “success” lay in the very witness of the ministers and their labors: “Good living and the good odor of the Christian virtues put into practice draw the black sheep back to the right path and confirm Catholics on it.” Added to good example is “the exercise of our works, such as instructing the people in our ordinary manner, preaching against vice and bad morals, establishing and encouraging the virtues, showing their necessity, their beauty, their practice, and the means of acquiring them.”

February, 1991

Vincent and Mademoiselle Louise



Because the Double Family celebrates on 15 March the feast of Saint Louise de Marillac, friend and collaborator of Saint Vincent de Paul, it is fitting that both saints share the stage this month.

Theirs was a relationship of many dimensions that developed over the long years of their association. It moved from the quasi-dominance on Vincent's part to a stage of mutuality. Thus, early on, Vincent was Louise's spiritual guide and her director in ministry. In time, their spiritual association developed into a close friendship. Similarly, in the apostolate, the relationship moved from Vincent's role as her supervisor in ministry to their equal status as collaborators and ultimately as co-founders and superiors of the Daughters of Charity.

These and other helpful insights into this association are offered by Father Hugh O'Donnell, C.M. and Sister Margaret John Kelly, D.C. in addresses delivered at the 1989 Symposium, "The Age of Gold." Rather than reinvent the topic we offer some excerpts that further illustrate the relationship. We trust that this does not oversimplify a subject that the authors treat at length in its complexity.

Focusing on the saints' mutual affection, Father O'Donnell cites Jean Calvet, who characterized it as "the very ideal of that friendship between beings with whom God always makes a third." Vincent confirmed this observation in a letter to Louise: "May our Lord be in our hearts and our hearts in his, so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only what he wills."

One way to approach their friendship, suggests O'Donnell, is "to consider the beneficent aspect of love, which is to desire and will the good of another. What did Vincent desire and will for Louise? There are a number of passages which make it clear that he rejoiced most in her conformity to the divine will, in her abiding in God's love, in her patient, peaceful, and joyful honoring of divine providence, and in her love for the poor."

Moving from beneficent love to friendship, O'Donnell asks the question:

“What was the good, what were the goods that they shared? In other words, what was the common ground of the relationship? It seems to me that each independently, and then both together, had in common the love of God and the love of the poor. They found God in their own hearts, in one another’s heart, and in the hearts of the poor. My image is of Vincent and Louise standing side by side, rather than face to face. Their love and communion were fired by two realities: the goodness of God and the mystery of the poor. They had a shared experience of God’s providential goodness welling up in their hearts and were of one heart in responding to the mystery of the poor.”

Sister Margaret John considers the relationship from Louise’s perspective: “The relationship of Vincent and Louise was extraordinary and was characterized by mutual development. The two were quite different in personality and leadership styles, but they shared the same core values and esteemed the same virtues. In their canon of personal virtues, they both gave priority to simplicity, respect, compassion, mildness or gentleness, and cordiality. Each had experienced and was humbled by a serious temptation against faith. Each was a sensitive self-aware individual. Both recognized their need for emotional support and professional affirmation, although Louise was more honest and direct in admitting this.”

“They shared the charism of concern for the poor but their roles were complementary, or better, unitary in approach. Louise and the Daughters witnessed to Christ by serving the physical and social needs of the poor, while Vincent and the missionaries focused directly on evangelization. They were totally comfortable with each other, and despite temporary periods of dependence on Louise’s part, they enjoyed a spiritual, apostolic, and social interdependence. The experience of their own human solidarity strengthened their mission to the poor. When Vincent dropped the paternalistic ‘my daughter’ and replaced it with ‘Mademoiselle’, he signaled his perception that Louise was indeed his collaborator and his equal.”

“Would Vincent have grown as he did without Louise? I do not think so. Would Louise have matured the way she did without Vincent? I think not. Can we precisely define this mutual influence? No, because it was multi-faceted and life-long, but we can gain insights into the richness of the relationship...The relationship of Vincent and Louise was mutually productive and developmental; their friendship presented the lived ideal of the highest order of friendship but it was based in the reality of their humanity.”

It is impossible, Sister Margaret John concludes, to capture completely the meaning and the richness of this thirty-five year relationship: “the generative mutuality of their friendship and the enduring fruit of their shared spirituality and collaborative ministries.” And yet, she continues, “to reflect on these basic sources and the insights they offer is to evoke reassurance of these saints’ struggling humanity, to deepen the respect for their developing sanctity, and to express

gratitude for their vision which continues to inspire and motivate. We can conclude by echoing the Very Reverend Richard McCullen, successor of Saint Vincent, "Their collaboration...became one of the most marvelous and fruitful witnesses to the complementarity between a man and woman, between a male and a female saint who placed all the resources of their widely divergent personalities at the service of the ideal."

March, 1991

The Resurrection of Louise De Marillac



The story of the widow Tabitha (or ‘Dorcas’ in Greek) is a happy choice as the second reading for the feast of Saint Louise de Marillac. Tabitha was “a woman disciple” revered in the Jaffa community, “who never tired of doing good or giving in charity.” In time she got sick and soon died, but was restored to life by the apostle Peter.

The fit of this story to that of Louise is a nice one. The match goes beyond the evident similarities between two women who are widowed, renowned for good works, and esteemed in the community. What is significant in the stories for the present purpose is the “resurrection” that each woman experiences. The modes are different, but the consequences are similar. Peter’s action is a dramatic summons to return to life: “Tabitha, stand up.” In response, “she opened her eyes, looked at Peter and sat up. [He] helped her to her feet.” In addition to restoring Tabitha for further service to the Christian community, Peter acted in the event as a witness to the risen Christ and a sign to the wider community, because “the whole of Jaffa heard about it and many believed in the Lord.”

In Louise’s case, of course, there was no actual death nor even any single act that effected her transformation. Rather, it was a series of events that proved life-giving and in turn served to invigorate her spirit, confirm her in her gifts, and make clear the path toward which her true destiny pointed. Although more than one person on occasion shared in the process — Saint Francis de Sales, Pierre Camus, bishop of Belley, and her uncle, Michel de Marillac, for instance — it was Vincent de Paul who played a major, sustained role in the story. He indeed “helped her to her feet.”

In each case providence saw fit to place Peter and Vincent nearby in order to achieve its purposes. The apostle was at Lydda, not far from Jaffa, and when it was known that he was there, the urgent message arrived from the disciples at Jaffa, “Come and visit us as soon as possible.” Vincent, too, was at hand in Louise’s life

at propitious moments to serve in her rebirth. In fact, even before anything happened, she was assured in 1623 that she would meet a proper director ("one whom God seemed to show me") who would lead her through the shadows. That person was Vincent de Paul.

As noted, the transformation was an ongoing process, not an instantaneous action. Although the route itself is not sharply defined, there were some clear markings along the way, the figure of Vincent standing nearby. The first might be Louise's Pentecost experience in 1623, with the reassurances that she experienced and the intimation about her future director; then her first serious encounter with Vincent in 1624-25; her husband's death in 1625, which freed her further for good works; her first participation in Vincent's charitable works for the poor beginning in 1626, which served to take her out of herself; her choice for the presidency of the Confraternity of Charity in her home parish of Saint-Nicholas-du-Chardonnet in 1630.

Vincent aided Louise's transformation in many ways by his presence and his counsel. Louise, in turn, responded well because she began to feel that she was understood. He helped her to deal with the demons that afflicted her, whether those from within her natural temperament or from outside. Thus, her disposition inclined her to doubts about faith and about herself, to scrupulosity, to melancholy. The more tangible demons that Vincent would have recognized were her chronic ill health and the anxieties connected with rearing her son, Michel.

She was searching, too, for enlightenment about her vocation, especially after her husband's death. She was knotted with persistent doubts about the vow to be a Capuchin nun taken before her marriage but continuing even during that time, despite advice given to allay her scruples. In this and other matters Vincent was able to direct her with a firm hand — leading her in a retreat; reassuring her with his ongoing practical advice; carrying her over disappointments; reining her in by tempering her excesses, whether in devotional practices or in austerities toward herself; encouraging her to wait for providence. As Vincent directed her more and more into works of charity he also was steering her away from thoughts of the contemplative life.

Vincent was also an enabler, playing to her gifts. He recognized in Louise a talented woman, intelligent and well read, genuinely spiritual and devoted to the poor. He appreciated, too, her organizational skills (her efficiently managed home and servants came to mind), her attention to detail, and her practical good sense.

He tapped a zeal for the poor that was evident from her earliest years, and he utilized her good example that tended to inspire other women for doing charity, whether they were her household servants or noble ladies. Vincent's confidence in her was such that he put her to work directing the Charities and serving as a trouble-shooter to visit the various chapters.

The year 1633 might be considered the final threshold over which Louise crossed to enter new life. The date (29 November) marked the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the achievement that henceforth would define her life. Many factors were converging to assure her about where God was leading her. She blossomed in self-confidence. The Confraternities prospered under her leadership. Along with Vincent she discovered a new kind of associate in charity — the Daughters — to collaborate with the Ladies of Charity and saw that these new women could be bonded as a “religious” community into an effective apostolic force for serving the poor.

Louise had indeed stepped into new life. She emerged more focused in vision and purpose, and renewed in confidence and energy. Led by providence, and accompanied by Vincent, she arrived at a moment in her journey when she was so confirmed in direction and commitment that she could first adopt as her own the motto used to characterize her Daughters, “Given to God for the service of the poor.”

March, 1992

Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, Friend and Confidante



Among the many friends in Vincent's life, two stood at its chronological and spiritual center: Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, and Jane Frances de Chantal, co-foundress (with him) of the Order of the Visitation of Saint Mary. It was an association of twenty-three years, beginning with their meeting in 1618-19 and ending with the death of Jane Frances in 1641. Although the bishop died in 1622, he remained the third member of their collaboration. Francis continued as the guiding spirit of his Visitation community, an abiding spiritual mentor for both Vincent and Jane Frances, and in general, a saintly hero to the age.

Vincent's kinship with the spirit of Francis was such that he was a worthy steward of the legacy of the saint. Shortly before the bishop's death he and Jane Frances prevailed upon Vincent to be the superior of the first Paris Visitation monastery (and the others at Paris later), despite Vincent's fear that the commitment would detract from his service to the poor. Likewise, after Francis' death, Jane Frances, recognizing a man who embodied the bishop's spirituality, chose Vincent as friend, advisor and confidant, which he discharged until her death. She appreciated the wisdom of his spiritual direction, his practical sense, and his support over the years in guiding the Order through many canonical and political thickets. "...God inspires in me a very special sense of support and peace regarding your judgment...", she tells Vincent, for instance, in regard to the ongoing discussion about the "apostolic visitor" proposed for her houses. She viewed him in a special light: "Be always a true father and protector for us, I beg you...." Vincent found Jane Frances an impressive woman and a faithful friend. Because her duties called her away from Paris to Annecy and other foundations, their communications were conducted mainly by correspondence. Regretfully, most of her letters were lost. In a deposition after her death, Vincent declared that he was so touched by the depth of her humility, her openness and her holiness that he read her letters with tears. "I never

noticed any imperfection in her, but rather a continual practice of all manner of virtues...She was one of the holiest souls I have known on earth...I have no doubt that God will one day manifest her sanctity.”

On her part, in addition to her devotion to Vincent, Jane Frances’ bond of friendship and admiration extended to Vincent’s family as well. In early 1640 Vincent assigned five missionaries to Annecy, in the diocese of Geneva, where the Visitation monastery was located. In the year before, Vincent responded with a chatty letter to her request to know more about his Congregation, its practices, the order of the day, etc. He asks her reactions to his account. Soon after, he wrote her again to temper what he thought was the too complimentary picture he drew of the Company. As she reports to the saint about the arrival of “your dear children, ...everyone is delighted with them in our Lord...It seems that they are our real brothers, with whom we feel a perfect union of heart, and they with us, in a holy simplicity, openness, and trust. I spoke to them and they to me as though they were truly sisters of the Visitation. They all have great goodness and candor.” Indeed, as she proclaims in another letter, “They, the missionaries, are so good that it takes little to please them...I think this mission here will put more souls in paradise than many others, with the help of divine grace.”

In turn, Vincent appreciated the goodness of Jane Frances and her daughters in welcoming the newcomers to Annecy, not only with good wishes, but also with “the incomparable kindnesses you unceasingly bestow on our missionaries and on me,” specifically, some of the necessary furnishings for setting up the house.

One grace in particular that Vincent cherished was Jane’s willingness and availability to receive the missionaries’ “communications” (the practice in the Company of each member to disclose regularly to the superior the progress of one’s inner life). Such was Vincent’s confidence in her wisdom and good sense that he gave permission to his missionaries to discharge this spiritual responsibility as a regular practice. There was an ease in the saints’ exchange of information about the confreres. Thus in her letter announcing their arrival at Annecy, she confides to Vincent a brief sketch of her first impressions of each of the men. In another letter Vincent discusses with her his own impressions of some of the issues the men are struggling with, and with which she was familiar.

Vincent’s general estimate of Jane’s warm relationship with the Company appears in the words by which he characterized it. Although he addresses Jane as “Mother,” her religious designation as superior, he views her in another way relative to the Congregation. He sees her in a familial role, thanking her “for all your grandmotherly kindnesses toward your dear sons, your missionaries....” Whether “motherly” or “grandmotherly,” the message is clear about the mutual affection.

Many people touched Vincent in his lifetime — kings and queens, nobles

and ecclesiastics, rich and poor, saints and sinners. The chapter of his life that contained Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal, however, marked a special association, whose memory never faded. Pilgrims who met at one point of the journey, they held true to their friendship to the end. Today, their spiritual sons and daughters still bask in the sunshine that beams from that remarkable circle of friendship.

(The liturgy honors Saint Jane Frances de Chantal on 12 December.)

December, 1991

Testimonial for a Saint



(The saint wrote this letter at the request of the superioress of the Visitation monastery in Paris. It is addressed to Pope Alexander VII as a testimonial on behalf of the canonization of Francis de Sales, who was bishop of Geneva, founder of the Order of the Visitation, and a great friend and mentor of Vincent. The canonization took place in 1665, and Francis was named a doctor of the Church in 1877.)

6 June 1659

To Pope Alexander VII

Most Holy Father, I know that all of France and many nations are urgently petitioning Your Holiness to deign to inscribe in the number of the saints the Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Francis de Sales, bishop of Geneva. I know also that Your Holiness, filled with admiration for the outstanding virtues that shone in him and the books of such lofty devotion that he composed, holds his memory in the highest veneration and, consequently, seems disposed to carry out this intention, with no need of petitions coming from others and especially from a man as wretched and unknown as I am.

Nevertheless, Most Holy Father, since I had a very close relationship with this excellent servant of God, who deigned to converse frequently with me, either concerning the Institute of the Visitation Nuns of Sainte-Marie, which he established and founded, or other pious matters, I admired in him so many great virtues that it is very difficult for me to keep silence on this occasion and to be the only person to say nothing.

Faith, hope, charity, and other cardinal and Christian moral virtues seemed almost innate in him. Taken together, they formed in him — at least to my way of thinking — such goodness that, during an illness that came upon me shortly after speaking with him, I took pleasure in turning over in my mind often his gentleness

and exquisite meekness, repeating very frequently these words: "Oh! How good God is, since the bishop of Geneva is so good!"

If I were the only one in the world to think this of him, Most Holy Father, I might believe that I was deceiving myself; but, since everyone shares these sentiments with me, what more could be desired to complete such a holy work, Most Holy Father, than a word from Your Holiness, willing to place Francis de Sales in the catalogue of the saints and proposing him to the veneration of the entire world? This is what all the priests of our Congregation and I myself, prostrate at the feet of Your Holiness, ask of you by our most humble petitions. May God, who is the best and the greatest, deign to preserve you for many years for the welfare of his Church!

I am, Most Holy Father ...

January, 1997

Bishop Louis Abelly: Vincent de Paul's Boswell



Any reader in Vincentian history must acknowledge the presence and the name of Louis Abelly, whose biography, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul, Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, is the doorway to much of the information that we have about Saint Vincent's life and his utterances. Others less familiar with the name might have a question: Who is this man?

The span of his life covers the years 1604-1691. Among the known facts, he was born in Paris and had his education at the Sorbonne, although seemingly without a doctorate. He was ordained to the priesthood in the vicinity of 1628-29. He was appointed bishop of Rodez in 1662, but, caught in the middle of political conflicts, he was not ordained to the episcopacy until 1664, when the *Life* was published. In September of that same year he had a stroke, which left him partially paralyzed. He retired to Saint-Lazare, where he died in 1691.

Abelly's life drew him into the magnetic field of Vincent's influence. Although the saint's first mention of him was in a 1638 letter, their meeting was probably earlier. Abelly was a member of the Tuesday Conferences. Another connection with Vincent was his participation in the anti-Jansenist wars with his writings. With Vincent's recommendation he became vicar-general of the diocese of Bayonne, whose bishop, François de Fouquet, was also a member of the Tuesday Conferences and whose mother was a Lady of Charity. On his journey to Bayonne, Abelly stopped in Dax and met many of Vincent's relatives. A remarkable coincidence during service in Bayonne was that he met briefly a man named Bertrand Ducournau, who was Fouquet's steward at the time and who later joined the Congregation of the Mission. Bertrand later served as Vincent's secretary and was able to help Abelly considerably with writing the biography.

Among the forty books Abelly wrote in his lifetime the one that is relevant here and his most famous was the *Life*. Its origins lay in a request from some "Gentlemen of the Mission," and the requests of "very many persons of quality who particularly honored [Monsieur Vincent's] memory." These reasons encouraged him to offer this history of the saint's life. There were questions of Abelly's part in the authorship. One extreme theory rose in the eighteenth century, and was dismissed by Coste in the twentieth, that the bishop merely lent his name to the work. Actually Abelly was in a unique position to be its author. He had known the saint personally for many years and he had the advantages of hearing the personal testimonies of Vincent's contemporaries and of having some letters of the saint and other authentic documentation that might not have been survived the French Revolution. In good faith the bishop submitted his completed text to Monsieur Alm ras, Vincent's successor as superior general, and to others for examination.

The modern critic is concerned not so much with the author's role in the composition, never seriously doubted, but with the use that he made of these sources. In this respect Abelly differs from Boswell, who claimed that his biography of Samuel Johnson would be inclusive, "warts and all." There is a hagiographical bent to some of Abelly's early narrative, so that Vincent was virtually "Saint Vincent" from his birth. Perhaps this was to prepare for canonization and give a convincing account of his holiness. Perhaps it was a reluctance to admit that Vincent had faults. There are inaccuracies about dates (e.g. changing Vincent's birth date in order to accommodate his ordination date), or about incidents that were pious exaggerations or of questionable authenticity (e.g. the temptation against faith, the substitution for the galley slave), or about canonically questionable practices in which Vincent indulged, such as holding multiple benefices.

On the other hand, the writer took it upon himself to tone down other data that he felt were detrimental to the pious image of the saint. For instance, he did not hesitate to change documents to put Vincent's actions in a more favorable light, or to "improve" what he considered inelegant passages of Vincent's linguistic style. He sometimes was unwise in maintaining a proper proportion between significant and trivial details. As regards something that was beyond Abelly's culpability, he suffered the lack of historical distance and perspective on people and events. Thus, in some cases it was premature to make historical judgments on contemporary figures. For prudential reasons there is the temptation to eulogize those to whom one is beholden, or to be silent about those not worthy of honorable truth, or about whom it would be impolitic to tell the truth.

The critics agree in saying that Abelly is more trustworthy when he describes the later years of Saint Vincent than when he describes his youth. Even Vincent himself was reticent in speaking about those years. Nevertheless, says Coste, "whatever may be said of [Abelly's] imperfections, which are serious enough in form though trifling in

matter, Abelly's life of Saint Vincent, in which we have almost verbatim accounts of persons who were actual witnesses of what they related, should and will, we trust, remain the chief source on which future biographers will draw."

"Unique and indispensable" though it is, the *Life* is "a source that cannot be used uncritically," say Abelly's modern editors. Much has happened since 1664, and even since Coste's day: advances in historical research; different approaches to biography (less hagiography and edification, more reality); the emergence of more letters and documents. "The change of approach has not diminished the saint's stature. Rather, it gives us a picture that is simultaneously more realistic and more appealing. Unfortunately, this fresh research and the insights it has engendered have not yet been incorporated into any modern biography. What an English speaking readership still needs is a new, comprehensive, accurate biography based on original documents and the most current research."

December, 1994

Heroes



I

As a saint-to-be, Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M. is the man of the hour, a cause for celebration, a hero whom the Congregation can toast. However, John Gabriel's martyrdom is but one moment in the long history of heroes of the Congregation, for every age has had its heroes who have made heavy sacrifices for the mission. Of course, anyone who has led the life of the missionary can claim a share of sacrifices, but there are some confreres who endured extraordinary sacrifices, either by way of extreme physical or moral suffering or of the ultimate sacrifice in death.

This parade began in Vincent's own lifetime, when he shared in spirit the many tribulations of his missionaries. The catastrophes of the Madagascar mission, for instance, are proverbial in Vincentian lore: an endless line of missionaries poised to join the mission but thwarted by so many obstacles: maddening delays in setting sail, losses to shipwreck, the hardships of the journeys. Arrival at the island promised equally disastrous sufferings — experiences of the deadly climate, of sickness, of hostile natives and sometimes their own French compatriots. Even after Vincent's death his successor, Renè Almèras, in the saint's name, pursued the mission — in 1663, 1665 and 1666 — by sending a total of eleven priests and seven brothers to the island, who according to Coste, fared no better: "One was poisoned, three were massacred, the others, for the most part died in the prime of manhood, the victims of the climate."

In other settings abroad, like Barbary, for instance, where they ministered to the Christian slaves imprisoned by the Turks, the missionaries lived almost equally at risk. Names like Guerin, Huigier, Philip and John Le Vacher, Husson, and Barreau were prominent in the correspondence of Saint Vincent — serving the wretched and plague-stricken slaves as their advocates with the authorities and as go-

between for the prisoners' families for handling ransoms. The missionaries lived in an uneasy peace, which they bought by holding political positions as French consuls, which made them politically acceptable. They were even able to do pastoral work among the galley slaves, being the only priests to minister, sometimes to the point of gaining the Turks' admiration. But there were hard times too: some died after being exposed to the plague; religious hostilities put some missionaries into prison and led to beatings; they were held hostage by reason of ransoms unpaid, or they suffered expulsion from the country. The ultimate sacrifice was that of John Le Vacher, who, many years after Vincent's death, died at the mouth of a cannon rather than apostatize.

The missions to the British Isles occasioned further anxieties. Vincent sent missionaries to Ireland in 1646 at the request of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide. The band of about nine — a mix of priests, clerics and lay brothers — were thrown into a setting of fierce religious persecution, war, plague, and famine. For the six years they worked there, despite dangers and anxieties arising from their public ministrations in a hostile environment, they enjoyed success and the appreciation of the people. As the bishop of Limerick remarked after seeing the missionaries attending to the persecuted and plague-stricken people, "Alas, even if Monsieur Vincent had done nothing else for the glory of God save the good he has wrought for those poor people, he should consider himself happy." Vincent's attitude was a bit different. To a priest who wanted to write a history of the mission there, the saint said, "It is enough that God knows the good that has been done; the Little Company should honor the hidden life of Jesus Christ. Let us put our confidence in the martyrs; their blood will be the seed from which new Christians will spring." One of the workers indeed did make the sacrifice: Thaddeus Lee, a cleric, who was massacred before his mother's eyes.

The activities of the missionaries in Scotland and the Hebrides were hardly less stressful. They too entered an environment of persecution and hardship in trying to reinforce the faithful or to reclaim those who had strayed from the Church. The closest they came to paying the ultimate price was the imprisonment of Francis White. He was released after five months because it could not be proved that he had engaged in such "forbidden" actions as celebrating mass or exercising any other ministerial functions. Although threatened with hanging if he would have returned after his expulsion, he did return and worked until 1679, when the mission to Scotland came to an end.

"At home," that is, on the continent, especially in France, plague, famine and other hardships from the wars of religion were habitual companions to many of the missionaries as they labored in Lorraine, Picardy and Champagne. In ministering to the refugees only one missionary is known to have died, and that from exhaustion, but there were others who were equally at risk from the stress of that

service. As the rector of the Jesuit college in Bar-le-duc told Saint Vincent, "Your priests are gentle and amenable in all things save in taking the advice given them to give their bodies a little repose. They think that bodies are not made of flesh and blood or that life should last only a year."

There were other hazards to the missionaries just in providing materials to the refugees. Bandits and renegade soldiers preyed on the caravans carrying alms and supplies to the relief sites where the refugees awaited them. So great was the danger, especially at the beginning of the project, that Vincent was forced to request a royal decree of protection for the carriers. The proclamation had its effect in declaring that the priests of the Mission "shall have full and complete liberty to exercise their charity in those places and in whatsoever manner as may seem good to them." Part of the lore of these times concerns a certain lay brother, Matthew Regnard who became legendary for his skill in evading capture or robbery, or even personal danger when he would be trapped by the bandits.

Working among the plague-stricken was almost an occupational hazard for some of the missionaries. They found these conditions in such varied places as Genoa, Rome, and Cracow. The mission in Genoa was the most intense locale of their service, where for a time six thousand persons a day were dying. The confreres there, fearless of infection, served selflessly and gave up their house for a hospital for the sick. They were zealous but not reckless. In fact, Vincent had to counsel prudence to one confrere: "You should say and do all that you can. God does not ask for more. He knows your dispositions and will certainly know how to summon you by name when the hour comes for him to employ you...." The missionaries eventually paid the price, in that seven of them died from the plague.

Thus in his own time Vincent came to know well the price exacted for preaching the gospel. His attitude provided a model of resignation and acceptance for future generations in facing the hardships and reversals in promoting the mission. This example was timely, for the price of preaching the gospel continued to be high and called forth many more heroes.

II

The parade hardly missed a step after Vincent's death.

China

China was to be a new and consistent proving ground for heroes. The introduction of a Vincentian missionary to the country happened in the late 1690s when Ludovico Appiani, C.M., with a contingent of other religious, was chosen by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide to found a seminary for native clergy at either Beijing or Canton.

And the parade goes on. Vincent knew there would be challenging times for his missionaries. In fact, he once declared that "all who come to the Company [should do so] with the thought of martyrdom, with the desire to suffer death and to consecrate themselves totally to serve God either in a foreign land or here at home...." On his own part, Vincent often expressed envy of those who were engaged in perilous missions, as he confessed to a priest destined for Madagascar: "There is nothing I desire more upon this earth, if it were permitted, that I might be your companion on this mission."

The times and the missions are still challenging. Maintaining the continuity, our superior general, Father Robert Maloney, C.M. has himself initiated such missionary enterprises around the world and has sounded the call for missionaries to carry them out. None will be easy, he promises, but for one, Rwanda, he even says "I feel as if I am calling for martyrs," given the recent past history of that unfortunate country.

It is not canonical, but it almost seems that, given its consistency throughout the Congregation's history, heroism could be a sixth characteristic community virtue.

October-November, 1995



Seasonal



ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

Thanksgiving Thoughts



“One of the most touching and edifying acts to be seen in the Church is gratitude,” said Saint Vincent. “Nothing more completely wins the heart of God than gratitude.” So, “we should spend as much time in thanking God for his benefits as we spent in asking him for them.”

The absence of gratitude, on the other hand, renders a person “unworthy of receiving any benefit either from God or men.” To the saint, ingratitude is “the crime of crimes.”

As a man who was the beneficiary of so many gifts from God for his charities (by way of human donors) and who consistently depended on others’ generosity to maintain his work, Vincent was aware of the cycle of generosity that gratitude perpetuates. Nothing stayed in his hands very long, and when they seemed empty, his thankfulness drew down more abundance.

There was, too, a reverse generosity in his spirit. “If we are very grateful for the charities that have been extended to us, we shall always be disposed to repay voluntarily to our benefactors the favors they have bestowed on us, if it is in our power to do so.” This graciousness appeared in many instances in which the saint did extend himself to benefactors in some kind of need. In acting thus, he claimed, he was doing nothing more than “to return to our benefactor in his need, what he has given to us in his abundance.”

“Is it not just for a servant of God to inconvenience himself for charity and for gratitude?”

November, 1989

Time and Providence



On New Year's Eve, "Father Time" is hooted off the world's stage as if he were the villain of the universe. To Saint Vincent, however, the old gent appears in another light, not so much an adversary to be scorned as an ally to be embraced.

Vincent was sensitive to the criticism that he sparked because of his delay in making some decisions. Although occasionally apologetic for his tardiness, the saint was most often firm in asserting his belief that time was on the side of providence. To a superior who was pressing him for quick action, he wrote, "...You will object that I take too long, that you sometimes wait six months for an answer that can be given in a month and that, meanwhile, opportunities are lost and everything stands still. To that I shall answer, Monsieur, that it is true that I take too long in answering and in doing things; still, I have never yet seen any affair spoiled because of my delaying, but everything has been done in its time and with the necessary foresight and precautions...."

"Shall I tell you something without blushing, Monsieur?" the saint goes on. "It is that, reflecting on all the main events that have taken place in this Company, it seems to me...that if they had taken place before they did, they would not have been successful. I say that of all of them without excepting a single one. That is why I have a particular devotion to following the adorable providence of God step by step. And my only consolation is that I think our Lord alone has carried on and is constantly carrying on the business of the Little Company."

In the end, Vincent asserts, God is "greatly honored by the time we take to weigh with mature deliberation matters having to do with his service, as are all those with which we deal."

January, 1990

June Thoughts in May



Traditionally, June is decked out as the month of weddings. For many people it is doubly festive, for it is also the month of ordinations. It marks the joyful culmination of the years of preparation by the young men (and older) whose lives have been directed toward the priesthood. The occasion likewise brings a sense of achievement to their seminary mentors, their families and friends who have nurtured them on their journey.

The education of the clergy is one of the glories of Vincent de Paul. He stood at a moment in history when the ecclesiastical state was so devalued that the work of reform and evangelization could not proceed effectively without an informed, worthy and zealous priesthood. For this reason he steered his labors in every direction that would foster priestly life: toward the participants in the Tuesday Conferences, the ordinands on the threshold of orders, the ill-prepared priests ripe for re-education, and in time toward those in need of an extended program of priestly training. Moreover, he rejoiced that he was not alone, that his contemporaries — Berulle, de Condren, Olier — came to emulate the example of “our little functions,” as he called his work.

Vincent was awed by the responsibility that the times had thrust upon him. “Who can comprehend the dignity of this employment?” he marveled. “It is the loftiest that there can be.” However unworthy he felt, he was not overwhelmed by the prospect, because “God has conferred the honor on this Little Company.” Hence it is necessary to undertake it with “all care and attention.”

Knowledge, of course, is essential in formation, but example is equally important. Because of previous education, some ordinands and clerics at the Tuesday Conferences, Vincent remarked, are won over “not by science or the beautiful things that will be said to them...but rather by the virtues which are practiced here...Let us be humble and submissive, bearing in mind the dignity of this employment of helping to make good priests....” If surprised that God has chosen

us for “such a great work,” we need only remember that “he makes use of the humblest materials for his extraordinary operations..., as he does in the sacraments, where he employs water and a few words to confer his greatest grace.”

After seeing the custom in seminaries other than his own, Vincent came also to believe in the leaven of practice in ministry, “as there is no better way of learning than to see how a thing is done.” For this reason he was concerned to have his seminary associated with a nearby parish in order to initiate the students in all the works of the ministry. Moreover, he did not hesitate to send advanced students on the mission, at least for some time.

Vincent always returned to a basic principle that priestly formation, like charity, begins at home. “It is not enough,” he says, “to teach the ordinands chant, ceremonies, and a little moral theology; the chief thing is to form them to true piety and devotion. And to that end we should first of all be filled with it ourselves, for it is almost useless to instruct them without giving them an example. We should be fountains, filled to overflowing, so as to pour forth without exhausting ourselves; and we ourselves should possess the spirit with which we desire them to be animated, for no one can give what he does not possess.”

May, 1990

Vincentian Springtime: The First Days of Creation



Folleville

25 January 1617

A glow suffuses the story of the beginnings of the Congregation of the Mission and radiates the freshness of something new and hopeful. Vincent himself apparently carried this feeling throughout his life, for he readily repeated the tale to anyone who would listen. Now, as late as two years before his death, in the conference that accompanied the distribution of the *Common Rules*, he wonders still at the exciting days of the Congregation's birth. The occasion triggers memories of the simple events that had such far-reaching consequences: Vincent's exhilaration from the confession of the unknown penitent and its aftermath; the flood of confessions consequent upon his sermon; the trust shown in leaving the key of the house with a neighbor and in asking him to sleep in the bed; the one sermon Vincent preached (on the fear of God) which he admitted that he would "turn in a thousand different ways."

As his memory roamed over those early days, the fire is rekindled in recalling their remarkable effects: "Such was our manner of acting, when some ecclesiastics, seeing the blessings that God bestowed on our labors, asked and obtained permission to join us." In the recollection of the numerous works that flowed from the events there is wonder at the unexpectedness of it all: there is Monsieur Portail, "who can tell you that nothing was further from our thoughts than all this...[Indeed] Monsieur Portail never thought of it; I myself was quite so far from thinking of it; all this was beyond our hopes."

The moment and the memory cast their spell. In distributing the rules, which crystallized four decades of the missionaries lives, Vincent feels a kinship with Moses the lawgiver, “who promised to those who observed the law a thousand blessings in all things.” Or, as the recorders of the occasion remarked, “All imagined they were with the apostles at the moment when our divine redeemer, in addressing them his last words, gave them likewise his rules while he communicated to them the beautiful precept of charity, ‘My command is this, that you love one another, as I have loved you.’”

The saint’s mellowness is evident as he spoke to his missionaries, “in a middle tone of voice, full of sweetness and unction, which caused the hearts of all who heard him to feel the paternal affection which filled his own breast.” Nor was Vincent forgetful of his old companion of those days, whom he invited to be among the first to receive his copy of the rules: “Come, Monsieur Portail...come, you who have always borne with my infirmities; may God bless you.”

These glowing moments that Vincent experienced are his alone and incapable of repetition. Unique as they were, they can, nevertheless, be cherished as family heirlooms, not consigned to the attic but given a place of prominence in the missionaries’ hearts, to offer them and succeeding generations an enduring sense of the hope and the promise that were present at the creation of the Company. Vincent’s memories are a window in which to view, in imagination, a springtime which once blossomed, but beneath which lies a grace ever ready to burst anew upon the Congregation, to give it a freshened share of abundant life.

January, 1991

Vincent and First Communion



In this season of first communions it is instructive to turn to a letter of Vincent that throws light on one of the saint's practices in conducting missions. That is, to provide solemnity for children's first communions. Written to a missionary on the site of a mission in progress, the letter offers Vincent's advice to the harried priest, who seems to be having trouble with the pastor.

A professor at the Institut Catholique de Paris, Abbé Villien, was of the opinion that Saint Vincent was the first to introduce the custom of solemnizing first communion.

Monsieur,

The grace of our Lord...

I was consoled to see in your letter that the pastor has relented a little in his determination not to allow children's communion. I hope he will give in completely once you take care to point out to him: (1) that we are bound to this by our Rules; (2) that it has always been done this way in all the missions we have given; (3) that the children are well instructed and in a state to prepare well for communion, which serves them later to make other communions well; (4) that this is one of the principal means we have to reach older persons, whose hearts are obdurate and hardened, and who allow themselves to be won over by the devotion of the children and the care that is taken with them. With regard to this, I have learned from Genoa that the cardinal-archbishop is so attached to children's communion that he is there for most of them and weeps with emotion as if he were a child himself. Lastly, our experience with the blessing God bestows on this act should serve as a motive to the pastor to give his approval to it in his own parish.

If he says he wants to do it himself and that he will instruct them during

Lent so that they can receive communion at Easter, you could reply to him that he will do a much better job of it than we, that is true, but what we will do will not prevent him from doing the same thing then. If he is afraid that we might admit to communion children who may not be adequately prepared and do not have the other dispositions necessary, please tell him that it is our custom to examine them all in presence of the pastors who will judge for themselves whether or not they should be allowed to receive this sacrament, and the pastor could put off to another time those he does not find ready. Lastly, if he objects to the solemnity of the procession, we shall make it as simple as possible, without show and without dressing up some of the children like angels, as is done in certain places. I do not think we can oppose him in that.

So please explain all these things clearly to him, and I hope he will give you full liberty in this regard; otherwise, we shall consult the Company to see whether it is advisable to continue the mission without this communion....

(Letter no. 897. The original has been damaged to a point where surmises have been made in reconstructing words and phrases. Those textual marks have been omitted here.)

May, 1991

Vincent de Paul's Joyeux Noel



One will look in vain for “Christmas-y” sentiments from Vincent de Paul. In his letters and conferences to the missionaries he rarely adverts either to the presence of the feast of the Lord’s Nativity or to the mystery that the feast celebrates. Much less are there any traces of seasonal greetings.

True, there is the occasional exception, as in his letter to the superior at Turin, Jean Martin, which Vincent ends with a nod toward the season, praying that in “the mystery that draws near of the savior who emptied himself under the figure of a child we can find ourselves at the crib to be drawn to follow Jesus in his abasement.” Also, later in life, in three letters written on the same day, the saint designates the date *ce jour de Noel 1658* but with no other reference to it in the letters. Similarly, another letter, written to Bernard Codoing, has a specific date of 25 December 1642 but makes no allusion to the day on which it was written. It was a note concerned with serious community business that could have been written on any day.

More often there are no references at all. One passing nod, hardly “Christmas-y,” appears in remarks that Vincent made at a community “Repetition of Prayer,” responding to the previous remarks of a seminarist about conflicting feelings he experienced. Vincent reassured the young man that Jesus himself had such fluctuations, which the saint illustrates with examples from Jesus’ life, extending from his birth through his death and glorification. Of the season, Vincent offers New Year’s greetings as the year winds down, even though the date is Christmas Eve. The same absence of allusions is evident in conferences given in the vicinity of Christmastide.

Although Vincent himself rarely speaks in a seasonal vein, some of his correspondents reflect their awareness of the time. For instance, Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, in a letter of December, 1636 opens with the greeting, “I entreat the divine Infant of Bethlehem to fill your soul abundantly with the graces and blessing

of His holy Nativity.” And Saint Louise, in the same year, writes about establishing a confraternity at the parish of Saint-Étienne in Paris, and tells him: “The pastor greatly desires it, and he thought it advisable that [two Ladies of Charity] take up the collection for that purpose *on these holy days* (emphasis added), which they have done.”

It is not fair to put expectations on Vincent that reflect our own customs. But he rarely alludes even to the liturgical event that Christmas celebrates. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Vincent ignores the reality that gives Christmas its meaning, viz. the Incarnation. For him that theme is not just seasonal but runs year long, minus any seasonal coloring, and through all of his utterances. Jesus is prominent in them, but mainly with examples from his public life. It is indeed a major thrust of Vincent’s spirituality: As Jesus embodied himself in human life, so the missionary is to incarnate Jesus in his own life.

A compact and coherent source in which to trace this emphasis are the *Common Rules* of the Congregation. This document, thirty years in the writing and in the living, is representative of Vincent’s incarnational vision that colored the mode of life he proposed for his Congregation. In his introduction to the rules Vincent states at the outset that he has based them, where possible, on “the spirit and actions of Jesus Christ.” “My idea,” he goes on, “was that men who are called to continue Christ’s mission, which is mainly preaching the good news to the poor, should see things from his point of view and want what he wanted. They should have the same spirit that he had, and follow in his footsteps.”

Thus Vincent begins each chapter with the example of Jesus Christ as the model of the missionary in all facets of life. The saint follows through in his conferences with further elaborations on this theme. At bottom is a call to personal holiness, “to imitate [Christ’s] virtues as well as what he did for the salvation of others.” These virtues and the evangelical counsels are indeed the characteristic marks for the missionaries. Or stated another way, the member’s responsibility is “to put on the spirit of Christ,” a priority is to “seek first the kingdom of God...to carry out God’s will in all circumstances and at all times,” motivated as Jesus was, “always to do what pleases the Father.”

This attitude that nourished personal holiness also reached into the external activities of the missionaries. Thus, after the example of Jesus who gave directions to his disciples for getting along with each other (and with others outside the Congregation as well), Vincent directed that his own disciples live in a spirit of “love, like that between brothers...as well as the bond of holiness.” Similarly, the example of Jesus served as model for the various spiritual practices of the Congregation. It is the pattern, too, for dealing with the sick, for behavior in conducting missions, and in whatever other ministries the Congregation sponsors.

Although Vincent did not send many Christmas greetings as we know

them, he was never far from the mystery that Christmas celebrates. Indeed, he made the Incarnation a central focus of the life of his Congregation. In this way the meaning of Christmas is kept alive, not through one season alone, but throughout the whole year — Vincent's own way of saying JOYEUX NOEL!

December, 1992

Vincent and Louise: The Last Days



A tender thread runs through the narrative of Vincent's and Louise's last days in 1660 that further defines their relationship. Although both stood on the threshold of death — Louise would die on 15 March, Vincent on 27 September — they seemed more solicitous about the fragile condition of each other than about themselves.

Louise would be the first to die, but Vincent's health is foremost in her mind, where she pictures him painfully immobilized at Saint-Lazare. Closing many of her letters during these weeks, she invariably asks her correspondents to pray for Vincent in his illness, which restricts his movements in getting around, to the point of depriving him of opportunities for celebrating mass.

She expresses this concern to Vincent himself in the few extant letters. In one message she says that she is sending him some devotional objects, such as "this Jesus surrounded by thorns...a medal that [a] good young woman who was here during her illness sent me, along with the chaplets, after she returned [home]." In the same letter she asks news of his health: "Is the swelling in your legs increasing? Are you in less pain? Do you have any trace of fever?" There are even some health tips: "As a sick person you must take some nourishment in the evening, but not bread or wine. Herbs have an unpleasant taste, but they build good blood. Cornachin powder — 18 or 21 grains only — is very good occasionally for children and old people. It does not upset the system and it draws off fluids without leaving the body dehydrated."

In spite of her filial concern, she is capable of needling him for what looked like stubbornness, as when she wrote him, for instance, around the same time: "Permit me, my Most Honored Father, to inquire about your ailments which I

believe could be relieved if you would allow yourself to be treated as your charity would command someone else to be treated....”

Louise’s anxiety about Vincent’s absence did contain a measure of self-interest. She felt deprived of his company and counsel for several reasons. She needed him for her own reassurance and she looked to his advice about the Company of the Daughters. She consoled herself by the reminder that this anxiety and suffering were good for her growth. In one letter she touches all of these issues: “From time to time, I feel strongly the pain of the state to which your charity has reduced you as well as the suffering of being deprived of the honor of speaking to you. Since I am still the same, I am afraid that my cowardice, self-love and the other threats to my salvation may profit from this situation. As I reflect upon the present condition of the Company, I also worry about no longer being able to discuss matters with you. I am afraid that reading my letters imposes a burden upon you....” She then goes on to write about her particular fears for the Company.

The records of Vincent’s communications with Louise at this time are scarce. He, too, remembered her in his correspondence, as in this letter to Mathurine Guerin, to whom he wrote on 3 March. After alternating between fear and hope about Louise’s condition, he says, “She [Louise] is suffering greatly, as you may imagine, and although no longer feverish, she is not, for all that, out of danger on account of her age [almost 69 years] and feebleness. Everything that can be done is being done to preserve her, but that lies with God, who having preserved her for twenty years contrary to all human expectations, will continue to preserve her in so far as it may be expedient for his glory....”

At the end Vincent still was unable to visit Louise in person, but he sent a message to comfort her. His words showed some awareness of his own fate: “You are the first to set out; if God forgives my sins, I hope soon to rejoin you in heaven.”

Vincent ultimately had the last word. Although he was unable, in her final moments, to visit Louise in person, he was alert enough in July to preside at two conferences with the Daughters (3 and 24 July). Thankful to God for sparing him up to this point and for the opportunity to address this group once more, he regretted his prolonged absence from them. Like Louise, he said, “I too was suffering from an illness which weakened me considerably...[but] it was God’s good pleasure that all should have happened in this way and, in my opinion for the greater perfection of the person of whom we are now going to speak, I mean Mademoiselle Le Gras.”

Vincent calls his words a “conference...on Mademoiselle Le Gras,” its topic “the virtues you have observed in her and which of those virtues you would wish to imitate.” It is hardly a conference in the usual sense. Rather, it is an interactive exercise in which he asks some leading questions and opens the floor for the sisters to respond in ways that would help them to express their grief, and to articulate for

themselves the meaning Mademoiselle had for them. This becomes another way in which Vincent directs attention from himself and focuses on his collaborator and friend.

At the end of the second of the conferences, and after the sisters had the chance to express themselves, Vincent, ever the pragmatist, announces: "However, we must proceed to the election of a superioress in place of Mademoiselle Le Gras. And where shall we find her among you, sisters?"

Thus, with Louise gone and Vincent himself soon to go, he looked to the future. However, even at the end the saint allowed no self-absorption but faced the end with characteristic detachment. "Do not be scandalized if I am doing nothing to show I am preparing for death," he told a fretful attending confrere. "I have never gone to bed for the last eighteen years without placing myself in a state to appear before God before morning."

March, 1993

What's in a Name?



“The name Missionaries, or Priests of the Mission, clearly indicates that the work of missions is the primary and most important of all ministries to people. And we did not invent this name for ourselves, but popular usage, reflecting divine providence, gave it to us.”

With this assertion in the *Common Rules* Vincent spoke his mind about the most acceptable name to identify his confreres according to their works. Because it was a designation whose usage both providence and the people sanctioned, it was not to be taken lightly.

That this was no abstract concern was evident in 1651-1652 when Vincent had occasion to complain about the use of the name “missionaries” by other congregations or individuals. (Even Father Olier was ready at one time to change his congregation’s title of “Priests of the Community of Saint Sulpice” to that of “Priests of the Mission.”) In a letter that lays out the saint’s concern he notes the existence of several such groups that are using that name for themselves. One of these was a congregation proposed as “Missionaries to the Indies” and sponsored by the Duke de Ventadour, a canon of Notre-Dame, “a very fine man.” Indeed, Vincent indicates that he himself has “nothing to say against the nature of the thing, which is good and praiseworthy. On the contrary, we should be very glad that there are men who give themselves to God to serve him in this way.” However, the saint continues in the letter to (probably) Achille Le Vazeux, assistant in the house at Rome, whom Vincent called upon to represent the Company’s interests to the Holy See, “It is advisable to prevent them, if possible, from being called ‘Missionaries,’ pointing out the inconveniences that arise when two or several different companies have the same name. Please make it clear that this confusion of names is very prejudicial to us. We have had only too great experience of it.”

That experience goes beyond simple confusion of names. What Vincent had in mind were instances when his own Congregation suffered from the sins of

others with similar titles. Thus, speaking of Monsieur Authier's "Company of the Blessed Sacrament for Missions" — a community similar to his own and at one time desirous of merging with the Congregation of the Mission, but now under a cloud for political intrigue — Vincent said, "We thought we could be expelled from Annecy, especially since they are at the College des Savoyards in Avignon against the will of the people. The latter, thinking that we and they were one and the same congregation, turned against us and, in the heat of things, tried to drive us out of their region." There was even a fear — fortunately never to materialize — that because "the Chambry Senate has even refused absolutely our foundation...I think that, in the end, we will have to leave Savoy."

Another example concerns a priest who went to the Lyons hospital and was so dissatisfied with its management that he advised the cardinal of Lyons to end the disorder. "Since he signed the letter 'priest of the mission,'" Vincent said, "this good prelate took it that he was one of our men, although it was not so. He complained about this everywhere and attacked us for it. I went to see him and gave him clear proofs that this priest was not a member of our Company, but he was never willing to believe it. Ever since then, he has thought badly of us."

"Here is a third example. Some time ago the bishop of Beziers asked us for a few priests to work in his diocese. A priest who had lived with us, whom we had sent away because he had a weakness for wine, learned of this. He went to see this bishop, saying that I had sent him. The bishop welcomed him and put him to work, but he recognized soon after that he was a drunkard and, from that time on, lost any esteem he had for the missionaries."

Fortunately, the hazard of identical names was recognized by some persons in authority. One such was the chancellor of Paris, who, Vincent said, "had clearly foreseen this, for when the bull for Monsieur Authier's establishment was presented to him for the king's authorization, he flatly refused, without my saying a word or having anyone else mention it. He said that there was already a Congregation of Missionaries in France. Since God has been pleased to bestow a certain blessing on ours, new societies desiring to do what we do are happy to take our name as well. Thus, the faults of others will fall on us, and ours will be blamed on them. Also, it is no use to say that the Company will be called 'Mission for the Indies' because ours is also for the Indies, as well as for elsewhere. Do not the Jesuits and other religious communities send people there also? However, they are distinguished by their own name and not by 'the Mission.'"

Although "that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet," Vincent, in his case, had to be more concerned than that about the question, "What's in a name?" He was always open-minded about God's work and had felt that, as long as it was done, it mattered little who was the agent. In fact, the saint complained to the superior, Jean Dehorgny, about Father Le Vazeux's rudeness in his

manner of opposing Monsieur Ventadour's community, by finding "some means of maintaining our little Congregation, imagining that its preservation depends on the destruction of others." As Vincent tells Le Vazeux, "It would be better to have a hundred ventures under the name of 'Missions,' even were they prejudicial to our institute, than for us to have thwarted one good one, such as his, under the pretext of maintaining ourselves."

Thus Vincent was not simply possessive of a name for his Congregation, but he was protective of its integrity and reputation. Experience taught him that, unless the titles of these contemporary communities were clearly distinguished from each other, the identity of his own Congregation would be blurred, and, consequently, the bishops, clergy, and people would lose faith in this good work that providence had begun and he and his missionaries had worked so hard to make flourish.

April, 1993

Christmas Compassion



Compassion is a year-round virtue, but in time it tends to lose its impulse and to fade. An extreme instance of this decline has happened in our own day. Someone has recently coined the expression, “compassion fatigue,” to describe the weariness that people have felt from the relentless emergency appeals that have come for refugees and for victims of hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes. Whatever the reason for the deficiency, whether overload or indifference, compassion does seem to enjoy a revival during the Christmas season among all people of good will.

Vincent de Paul was a great model of compassion, but he did not limit its practice to Christmastide, even though he too must have felt the weariness. In any event, this season is a good time to recall some of the saint’s thoughts on the virtue.

Compassion begins at home, as it were, where we have first received it from God. “Think for a moment,” he told his confreres, “of how much we ourselves stand in need of mercy, we who must exercise it toward others.” Compassion begins in our hearts, which we must open “so that they become responsive to the sufferings and miseries of the neighbor. We should pray God to give us a true spirit of mercy, which is in truth the spirit of God. The Church says that it is the nature of God to be merciful and to confer this spirit upon us.”

Our outward demeanor, said Vincent, should reflect our inner attitude, like that of Jesus, for instance, who wept over the coming fate of Jerusalem. Or in personal address to the neighbor: “We should use compassionate language to make our neighbors aware that we truly have their interests and sufferings at heart.” Finally, there should be action, “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.” Vincent’s biographer, Louis Abelly, observed this body language in the saint: “When people would speak to him about some particular misery or necessity of the poor, he would sigh, close his eyes, and hunch his shoulders like a person weighed down with sufferings. His face would reveal the deep suffering by which

he shared in the misfortunes of the poor.”

Vincent continued, encouraging his missionaries to wear this badge of recognition: “Ask this grace of God, that he may give us this spirit of compassion and mercy, and that he may so fill us with it that as soon as anyone sees a missionary, he immediately will think, there goes a person full of compassion.” One can never feel satisfied that he has done enough. “Our entire lives are but a moment, soon gone.” Even Vincent lamented in his own case: “Alas, the seventy-six years of my life seem now only a momentary dream. What remains now is only the regret that I have used this time so poorly. Think of what unhappiness we will have at the moment of our death if we have not used this brief time of our lives to show mercy to others.” The lesson, he told his brothers, is “never meet a poor person without seeking to console him, or an uneducated person without seeking to help him understand, in a few words, what he must believe and do to assure his salvation. O savior [he prayed]...do not withdraw from this Company the spirit of mercy.”

The operative word in Vincent’s thinking here is heart. It is the heart that the misery of others first touches. It is the heart so moved that springs into action, especially with the prior realization that God has first touched it with his compassion. It is the heart that continues to sense the needs of others and to keep the charity of Christ alive, not only at Christmastide but throughout the whole year.

December, 1995

The Deaths of Missionaries



The recent death of a beloved Vincentian priest, Harold Persich, C.M. evokes some thoughts from Saint Vincent on the deaths of his confreres. Over the years the saint parted company with many of his missionaries: some who left the Congregation for another mode of life and others who departed in death. There was a single theme that he repeatedly sounded at the news of death.

Speaking of Louis Lebreton, a man of “marvelous great works,” Vincent was able to say with hope: “I think that this holy man will do more in heaven than he was able to accomplish on earth. He will be like a host offered to God and consumed for his Church, who will intercede for us in heaven and obtain the blessings necessary for this undertaking.”

There was one occasion in 1657 when Vincent had to announce the news of eleven confreres recently felled in death — three by sickness on the way to Madagascar and eight by serving the plague-stricken in Genoa. These ten priests and a lay brother died “in actual service of their neighbor and in a most holy and wonderful manner.” There are, he said, “so many missionaries whom we now have in heaven; there is no room to doubt that all of them sacrificed themselves out of charity, and there is no greater charity than that of giving one’s life for one’s neighbor...If then we have lost on the one hand, we have gained on the other, inasmuch as it has pleased God to glorify our confreres, as we have reason to believe. Moreover, the ashes of these apostolic men will be the seed of a great number of good missionaries.”

Unless sustained by this hope, Vincent was convinced, “we could not meet with a greater sorrow without being utterly crushed by it.”

December, 1989

The Death of Vincent



The Year 1660 saw the convergence of events that neatly, if sadly, brought to a close the opening chapter of the Vincentian story. Early on, Vincent's lifelong friend and co-worker, Anthony Portail, fell on 14 February, followed a month later, on 15 March, by Louise de Marillac, Vincent's collaborator in charity. The sequence culminated in the death of the saint himself on 27 September. Although Vincent and Louise acknowledged their terminal conditions, they encouraged each other's hope. As late as January of her final year, Louise chided Vincent: "I think [your health] would improve if you would let yourself be treated as you would command someone else to be treated." As the inevitability of Louise's end was apparent, Vincent recognized the imminence of his own and sent her the message, "You are going before me. I shall be following you soon."

Because sickness laid him low so many times in the past, even with the threat of death once or twice, Vincent was at home with the thought of death. To a priest who had fretted about Vincent's precarious condition, the saint gave him this reassurance, "I have not gone to bed for the last eighteen years without placing myself in a state to appear before God in the morning."

Vincent's impending death became a quasi-public event. Convents of religious offered a steady stream of prayers for him. Others made inquiries, and prominent personages sought to have a final visit. His attendants elicited his final blessings for his disciples and constituents — his missionaries and Daughters, the Ladies of Charity, the foundlings, the poor, his benefactors and friends, the priests of the Tuesday Conferences. Although Vincent did not deny his pain, he turned the solicitude of his visitors back upon them, seeking to comfort them and to downplay his own condition. "Our Lord suffered more than I do," he told them.

At the end, the rituals for the dying, and the accompanying agitation of his attendants, continued into the night of 26 September until the early hours of the next morning. Then, at about 4:00 A.M., Vincent's life began to ebb, and by 4:45 A.M. he had

breathed his last, the name JESUS floating on his final breath. As Coste described the peaceful scene: “He died in his chair, close to the fire, fully dressed, and without a struggle. Death, far from disfiguring his features, seemed to have endowed him with a beauty and majesty that amazed all who were privileged to look upon his countenance.”

August, 1990

Celebrating Vincent's Death



"Now will I praise those godly men, our ancestors, each in his own time." (Sirach 44:1)

(The recent death and funeral of Father James W. Richardson, C.M., former superior general, and the honors paid him on the occasion recall the death and celebrations after the death of his predecessor, Vincent de Paul, whose anniversary we remember on 27 September.)

In death Vincent de Paul passed beyond the restraints to which his humility had held him. No longer could he ward off or discount compliments about his personal virtue or his achievements. Admirers were free to heap praise without limits. Then, too, so widespread was the admiration for these accomplishments that a single memorial in his honor seemed hardly sufficient to accommodate the various constituencies whom he served and who wished to pay him tribute.

Because the saint died early on the morning of the 27th, it was possible for his confreres to make swift preparations for the public so that the rest of the day and the night hours were available for all manner of friends and admirers to visit. "By morning," Coste reported, "the whole of Paris had learned the sad news, and visitors began to arrive in streams: great lords and ladies, presidents of the parlement, bishops, priests, members of religious orders of men and women, and laymen of all conditions, filed by the bed on the which the body lay." The funeral in the church of Saint-Lazare, which took place on the 28th, likewise drew a similar army: papal representatives, bishops, pastors, and great numbers of people. Even after the burial, the flow of mourners to the tomb continued for days, including, says Coste, "numbers of sick and infirm attracted there in the hope of obtaining a cure."

In addition to the personal visits, there was an abundance of other of tributes that arrived at Saint-Lazare from a wide range of friends. The messages came from high Church and civic officials, from royalty, from pastors. Coste cites one of these, from a priest, which seemed to echo the common sentiments of all: "I had the

honor of knowing Monsieur Vincent for the last thirty years. I have never seen anything in him that was not great and holy. I have always regarded him as an apostolic man, filled with the spirit of God, in a word, as a saint of our time in whom all virtues were combined in an eminent degree.”

Apart from the main, official celebration there were many others — at cathedrals around the nation, at parish churches and religious houses. There was one particularly appropriate memorial that was held several weeks after his death — on 23 November — sponsored by the priests of the Tuesday Conference to honor their founder. The event was postponed to allow the speaker time to prepare his sermon. The speaker on the occasion, once again attracting a large gathering of “prelates, clergy, religious, and an enormous gathering of other people,” was Henri de Maupas du Tour, bishop of Le Puy, who, Abelly reported, “could not say all he wanted, even though he spoke for over two hours, [the bishop claiming that] his subject was so vast he would have required a whole lenten series to do it justice.” Although the sermon contained “some fine passages,” it was a pity, Coste observed, with a hint of pique, that Bossuet could not have been the preacher: “The greatest hero of charity certainly deserved to have his praises proclaimed by the greatest of Christian orators.”

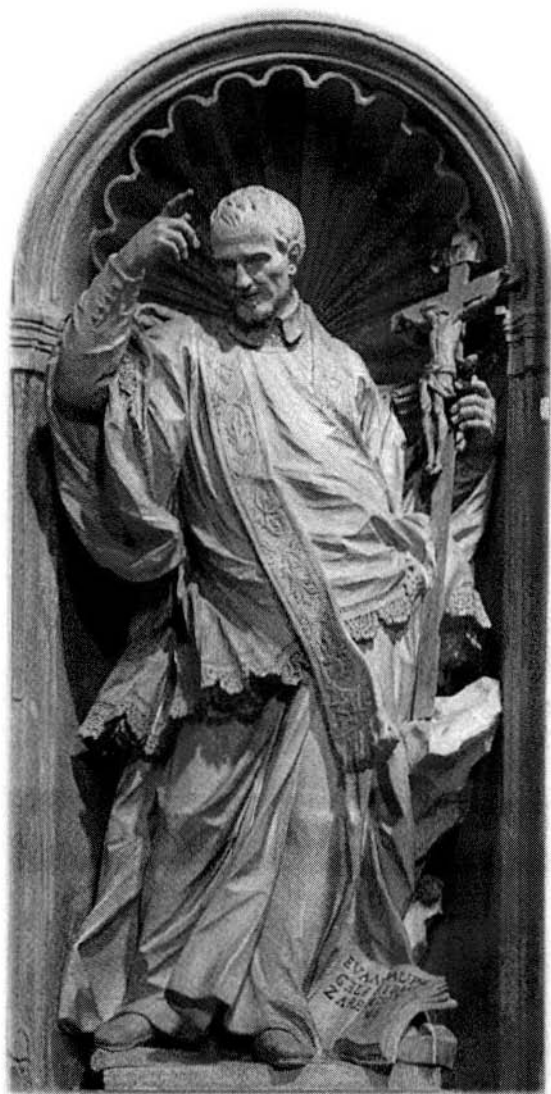
When death did arrive for Vincent, she came as a guest long expected. Abelly described the saint’s composure, as he awaited the end, “in a profound sense of peace and in an undisturbed frame of mind...He had only to be seen shortly before his death, so afflicted with various ills that he was watching himself dying, as he expressed it, but still with no discernible change in his exterior demeanor except for weakness and gradual wasting away.” It was a natural setting of watchfulness, the saint, “as always, seated in his chair, fully clothed tending to the affairs of the community as was his custom. His spirit changed even less than his body, and remained calm and tranquil until the last moment.”

For Vincent this was an habitual attitude of resignation. He felt no need to make any extraordinary preparation for death. “For the last eighteen years,” he once told a confere who wondered about the saint’s failing health, “I have never gone to bed without putting myself into the disposition to appear before God that very night.” It is not surprising, therefore, to hear his response, “with a smile,” to someone who remarked about his prolonged sleeping during those last days: It was “the brother coming to meet the sister,” which to Abelly meant “sleep as the brother awaiting sister death.” That meeting finally took place on 27 September 1660.

November, 1990



Virtues



Vincent and the Cowardly Spirit



Vincent's energy and apostolic zeal occasionally brushed up against the resistance of some confreres, whom he called "cowardly and unsettled spirits...capable only of discouraging others," and who balked at the Company's responses to new "opportunities of serving God" in the mission. These adversaries seemed ready to write off not only the present but the future as well.

"What good are so many employments," Vincent has them say, "so many missions, seminaries, conferences, retreats, assemblies, and journeys for the poor? When Monsieur Vincent is dead, all these will soon be abandoned, for what means will there be of keeping up all these undertakings?"

Vincent's reply to that line of thinking was to assert that, if the Congregation "at its birth and in its cradle" has had the courage to embrace these opportunities of serving God, is there not reason to hope "that [the Company] will grow stronger and increase with time."

The Congregation at that moment (in the late 1650s) Vincent felt, still had "the first graces of our vocation flowing upon us...." To act in cowardice, he was convinced, was to "render ourselves unworthy of the many blessings that God has, up to the present, poured down upon the Company, and of the many holy employments which his providence has confided to it."

When providence spoke, Vincent was determined to act, even in the face of risk. "Let us not be discouraged," he said elsewhere in similar circumstances, "either by dangers or by the apparent fruitlessness of our zeal...Do merchants refrain from going to sea because of the dangers...or [speaking from his different cultural sensibility] soldiers from going to war because of the wounds and death to which they are exposed?"

In this spirit Vincent encourages his missionaries to "give ourselves to God, Gentlemen, so that he may grant us the grace to stand fast...He will be faithful to his promises; he will never abandon us as long as we remain fully obedient to him

for the fulfillment of his designs.” The saint reassures them in their fears against over extension: “I do not say that it is necessary to proceed to infinity and to undertake all things without distinction, but those things which God lets us see he asks of us. We are his and not our own; if he increases our work, he will also increase our strength.”

In fact, it was well known that Vincent never deliberately sought a foundation. His belief was that “if we are good, we shall never lack foundations, and if we are not good, then we already have too many.”

November, 1990

Vernacular Spirituality



That is a nice phrase that Vincent would like. It is not his, but he would certainly understand the notion and feel kinship with it, for it makes a good fit for his incarnational approach to holiness. “Vernacular” suggests a level of the ordinary: of understanding and achievement that are within reach of everyone. “Vernacular spirituality,” regardless of whose term it is, would point to finding the sacred in the ordinary, and God in everyday life. It is broader than Christian and suggests that the path of anyone’s search for the transcendent will lead through the mundane.

That Vincent was an adherent of this informal path to holiness is commonplace of his life story. One of his signature utterances is the observation that “perfection does not consist in ecstasies but in doing the will of God.” That is, holiness does not need extraordinary signs to be authentic. Instead of flashy displays, the more convincing sign is the day-to-day, unspectacular fidelity to duty. “God attends to the affairs of our soul,” said Vincent, “while we are attending to those of our vocation.” This does not preclude intensity of love that drives the action, for, he urged, love of God should be exercised in “the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow.”

Accordingly, the “size” of the act means little in determining value. In fact, it is better, says the saint, to be attentive “to the smallest circumstances, in order that nothing may be wanting in what we do.” There is “safety,” too, in that smallness, for it tends to hold pride at bay. “Little actions done to please God are not subject to vanity as other actions that are more brilliant, which often go up in smoke.” Economy, too, is a factor that makes for quality: “Do not overburden yourself with rules and practices, but strengthen yourself to fulfill well those you have, especially as regards your daily actions and employments....”

Perhaps the best window into Vincent’s mind on this subject is what we might call the principle of priority. The religious-apostolic life is not so neat as to ensure that everything will always stay in its place or follow in its proper order. Thus, there were often seeming conflicts — more so, tensions — between devotions and apostolic duties, as when the immediate demands of the poor, the sick, or other needs of the apostolate

clashed with times for prayer, mass, or other “at home” activities. This tension more often faced the Daughters of Charity, who had urgent calls from the poor. As Vincent instructed them, “We should accommodate ourselves according to the demands of our vocation. At times certain things are to be dispatched which cannot be put off and which are not compatible with the hour of prayer.” The sensible solution, says the saint, is “to advance or postpone the customary hours.” Actually, “the duty of charity is above every rule.” In a way, both obligations revealed the face of God, and therefore are of equal importance. For this supposed dilemma, Vincent coined the expression that the person who chose the more urgent action was “leaving God for God.”

If the path to holiness for Vincent was a way of simplicity, he was equally convinced that the language to clothe the gospel message should be simple. In this regard he indeed spoke and advocated “vernacular.” If holiness was to be within the reach of the ordinary person — under the action of grace, of course — the directions for achievement should be intelligible on that level.

This drive for simplicity led Vincent into his work to reform the preaching of his day. His contemporaries recognized his difference in style. One of them, in a book dedication to the saint that contrasted his mode with the inflated style of many churchmen, complimented him on his preference of “plebeian knowledge rather than of noble ignorance.” Vincent indeed crusaded against pride in the pulpit, that is, “preaching oneself and not Jesus Christ.” He claimed that “to play the peacock by making beautiful discourses is to commit a sacrilege.” Preaching that was “over decorated,” and punctuated with “bombastic language and style” and “ornamental speech,” distressed him. In the end, the “Little Method” of simplicity, order, and directness in preaching that he developed was such a success both within the Congregation and among the other clergy that the ultimate compliment for a cleric was to say that “He preaches like a missionary!”

When occasions warranted, Vincent could be oblique: he could write a florid, convoluted letter to a bishop that equaled the style of any contemporary; or his Gascon temperament was capable of political craftiness for getting things done. But his basic sensibility leaned toward the simple and the direct. For his approach to spirituality this disposition served him well in making holiness intelligible and in demonstrating how, under grace, it is within the reach of everyone. The route that the saint pointed out was incarnational: that is, it is grounded in God’s immediacy and presence in the world and in daily experience. The notions entailed are neither unique nor original with Vincent, nor did he expound them in any single mode as in a treatise. Rather, they are a network of threads scattered through all his utterances. Like the road lines of a map they are multi-colored and stretch in all directions. Unlike the map’s configurations, these lines are capable of leading to God whatever direction you take.

November, 1993

Meekness, the Charming Virtue



Vincent took a lifelong interest in promoting the virtue of meekness. His conviction about its worth undoubtedly grew out of his own personal struggle to master it, even to the point of praying to God to change his “austere and disagreeable disposition” into a “meek and benign spirit.” He found encouragement in the example of his friend and mentor, Francis de Sales, a man of “gentleness and exquisite meekness of character,” who was to Vincent a mirror of the face of God. In testifying later to Francis’ sanctity, Vincent exclaimed, “Oh! how good God must be, since the bishop of Geneva is so good.”

Vincent recognized meekness as an effective behavior for ministry. It was one way, for instance, to moderate the violent passions that accompanied the religious and theological disputes of the day. In this arena, Francis de Sales was again the model: the controversialist, in Vincent’s mind, who converted heretics “rather by his graciousness than by his doctrine.” Of another disputant, Vincent said that this man was “able to convince heretics, but that it appertained only to the bishop of Geneva to convert them.”

Vincent himself had “never seen or known of a heretic who was converted by skillful dialectics...but [of] many converted by kindness...”

This stance was likewise a useful norm for promoting good day-to-day relations, both within the apostolate and at home in community. The meek and the gracious people are the steady and reliable ones, Vincent felt, unlike those driven by irascibility, “who only act by fits and starts; ...they are like torrents, strong and impetuous only when in full flood, but which dry up afterwards.” The gentle and gracious ones, on the other hand, are the rivers that flow on “noiselessly, tranquilly, and unfailingly.” In another image, such personalities born out of barren soil bear only thistles. For effective ministry, Vincent believed, “a certain charm and pleasing exterior are necessary in order not to repel anyone.”

Daily experience confirmed these insights. Indeed, Jesus himself had to

exercise enormous meekness and restraint in managing successfully the impetuosities and the rivalries among his apostles. Closer to home, Vincent directed superiors to act in the same spirit toward those in their care. The resistant confrere is to be drawn forward "as mildly as possible." This is not to rule out firmness in the exercise of authority. Firmness in pursuit of the end is necessary, Vincent repeatedly insisted, but the means to be used are always to be "apt, gracious, and attractive." Likewise, the missionaries are advised to act meekly and humbly toward the poor, for "otherwise they [the poor] will be disheartened and will not dare to approach us, looking upon us as lords, too stern and too great for them."

"The heart of another is opened by gentleness and affability," might be an axiom by which the saint lived. "If a man is not won by meekness and patience, it will be difficult to win him by other means." The power of the virtue derives from a source beyond the human. Indeed, Vincent claims, "it is proper to the Spirit of God, and therefore, to imitate [the Spirit] in this manner of acting is the most assured means of obtaining success."

February, 1990

Charity is a Verb



“Charitable action is the true characteristic of the love of God,” Vincent declared. The love expressed in charity mirrors on earth the “pure act” of the Godhead, who, in addition to the loving action of the divine nature within itself, is externally engaged in creation and conservation, sanctification and salvation.

In other words, true charity, in the love both of God and of the neighbor, is authenticated by visible action. It makes a person, says the saint, “solidly virtuous, and not merely so in imagination...It excels knowledge, ecstasy and study. Prayer and study should resolve themselves into action. The light in the mind should become a fire in the heart and on the lips of the apostle.” In the end, “the hand should conform to the heart.”

Thus, the perfection of charity lies in its fruitfulness, Vincent claimed, as it passes from words into deeds. If we had “but a spark of the love [that Jesus modeled] could we remain with our arms folded and neglect those whom we might assist?” Moreover, not only does charity have its visible effects, it also “begets love in the hearts of those toward whom it is exercised.”

Charity, however, is not a “soft” virtue, but it is exercised at a price. God does not only say, Vincent notes, “Thou shalt use the industry of the mind to gain your living,” but also, “Thou shalt labor with thy hands, with thy arms, with thy whole body, and with such activity and fatigue that sweat shall fall from thy brow.” For this reason, there is no room for “discouragement or cowardice” in the service of charity. It is a task, the saint tells his followers, to which they should dedicate themselves “without the fear of shortening our lives, and with the firm conviction that the death which is most glorious and desirable is that which finds us with [the tools of service] in our hands.”

Throughout his life Vincent, the man of action, lived these convictions and personally modeled them for his followers and for the Church at large, meriting from the Church the esteemed title of “universal patron of charity.” This is the rubric

under which most people know Vincent. It is significant that they who know little else of his words have at least heard what might be the distillation of his charity, as framed in his best known counsel: "Let us love God, but let it be at the expense of our arms and in the sweat of our brows."

March, 1990

Glory to God



“**B**lessed are they who spend their lives for the service of God.” Vincent never lost sight of the perspective that his missionaries’ service to people, whether clergy or the poor, must be focused on God and his justice before all things, “to seek first the reign of God in ourselves and to procure it in others.” That is, “not only to love God, but to cause him to be loved.”

Indeed, “it is the intention that gives value to all our works and renders them valuable before God. Do as many good works as you please, they will profit you nothing unless they are well done.” Actions thus performed take on a beauty and a worth, like garments whose cloth is enriched and ennobled by “the gold lace and rich embroidery, pearls and precious stones with which they are adorned.” In a way, the outcome matters little: “God does not so much regard the success of our efforts as the charity that inspired them.”

Selflessness should underlie service: “Be ever ready to inconvenience yourself in order to accommodate others.” In this spirit, “let us dedicate ourselves unreservedly to God and to the service of our neighbor. Let us strip ourselves, to clothe our neighbor; let us give our lives to procure his salvation and to extend the reign of Jesus Christ.”

Conversely, self-serving and self-congratulatory actions sap good works of their value. Vain complacency, Vincent asserts, is “dangerous, a poison to good works. It is a plague that corrupts the holiest of actions.” He goes so far as to declare that “it would be better to be bound hand and foot and cast upon burning coals than to do an action in order to win the praise of men.”

Missionaries who live and act in a mode that is directed toward “the instruction and the sanctification of the poor...verify the presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church.” Souls brought to salvation through our ministry will be “witnesses in our favor at the hour of death.” For this reason, Vincent prays,

“May it please God to render us worthy of employing our lives, as our Lord employed his, for the salvation of his poor creatures remote from all assistance.”

December, 1990

Humility, the Sure Foundation



“Who is there that does not love a humble person?” Vincent asks. “What can we do but love a person who humbles himself? He is like a valley that has been enriched by the mountains. He draws upon himself the blessings and the good will of all.” True, the saint admits, everyone regards humility as “beautiful and amiable,” but if so, why are there “so few who embrace it and still fewer who possess it? It is because they are content to consider it in itself without taking the trouble to acquire it.”

Certainly Vincent is not content to leave it in the abstract. Admiration is not enough. He speaks in tones of reality: “Let us not deceive ourselves; if we do not have humility, we have nothing.” Indeed, “we might be like angels and might excel in the greatest virtues, [but] if we are devoid of humility, those virtues, having no foundation, could not subsist.” Conversely, he believes, “even though we were criminals, if we should have recourse to humility, it would make us just.”

Hence, in practice the missionaries are encouraged to refrain from self-advancement and to flee from seeking honors or from actions that attract vain applause. Their origins, and those of their founder, match the condition of Jesus, who was “not only humble in his own person, but he was also humble with respect to his Little Company, [which] he formed...by degrees from poor uncouth men...” Granted, humility permits one to recognize the gifts that God has entrusted to him, yet “we are nothing more than the bearers of these gifts,” which God uses through our agency. “The rod of Moses, which wrought so many prodigies, did not cease to be a piece of fragile wood.”

The footing on which humility grounds the individual confrere is the same for the community house. Thus, the saint directs a superior: “Establish humility and self-abjection as the foundation of your house, and henceforth it will be a house of peace and benediction.” Indeed, the superior should first set the example of humility, “as he should of all other virtues necessary for the preservation of union.”

This modeling would forestall “the spirit of rivalry...the evil of communities, especially of small communities.” If such a spirit takes hold, “its remedy is humility.”

In truth, the ideal of the missionary is to be equable in maintaining “a truly humble spirit, as well in honors as in contempt. Imitate the bee that forms its honey as well from the dew that falls upon the wormwood as from that which falls upon the rose.”

April, 1991

Life at the Foot of the Cross



“*T*he foot of the cross is the best place in the world for you,” Vincent once declared; “fervently love to dwell there.” This is not advice to court suffering or affliction for their own sakes, but to identify the cross as the matrix in which human ills can find meaning. At the cross, as John Shea puts it, “God is redemptively present to every moment of human life, and therefore even in our sin and suffering we are not abandoned.”

The trials and difficulties of the missionaries — temptations, sickness, death, and crosses of every kind — in many ways were basically no different from those endured by the rest of men and women. In his own life the saint had experienced many such reversals, which he welcomed as “messengers from God.” They are also authentic marks of discipleship. “Whoever wishes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ should expect [these], but he should also hope that, when the occasions present themselves, God will give him the strength to bear afflictions and triumph over torments.”

Nevertheless, there were trials that were proper to the life of the Congregation. Some were heavy, like failure or frustration in ministry, persecution, and even martyrdom. Others were of another gravity and of a “domestic” kind, related mainly to community living. Vincent’s mode of response for all cases was ultimately reduced to the counsel of patience and forbearance, “the universal remedy.” Take the challenges of the common life, for instance, an enduring problem in religion. It is almost natural, thinks Vincent, to have conflict in groups: “From whom shall we suffer unless from those who are round about us? ...From whom and by whom did our Lord suffer unless his apostles and disciples and the people among whom he lived?” Even in minimal cases of two men dwelling together, he claims, the parties “afford each other occasions for the exercise of patience. Even if you were alone you would be a burden to yourself and an object for patience.” Vincent sees this at work particularly with “persons who have placed their ideal high. They have

a great need of patience even to bear with themselves.”

Fidelity to religious exercises is also a trial. “Sooner or later God tries, by repugnance for religious exercises, souls that he calls to his service.” This feeling will be there from the start, but, the saint admits, “It is better that this be at the beginning of a person’s vocation, because he then early learns to provide a fund of patience, fortitude and self-denial — virtues whose practice is necessary at all times through life.”

There are even words of comfort and encouragement to superiors for enduring the burdens of authority. From experience Vincent learned that “there is no superior in the world who has not much to bear from those under his charge...[Remember] that our Lord himself had much to endure from his disciples.” Indeed, as he says to one superior anxious to be reassigned: “I know of no superior who does not ask to be relieved of his office.”

There is a certain dynamism in God’s action that is salutary. Thus the turmoil in one’s life can be more challenging and purifying than placidity or stagnation: “The water of a swamp by reason of its being at rest, becomes foul, miry and offensive; while on the contrary, the waters of rivers and fountains that flow with rapidity among rocks and stones, are always sweet, clear and wholesome.”

A more familiar image for God’s action that Vincent uses is one of sculpture. The artist begins his work with such heavy blows on the rough stone “that you would think that he is about to break it into pieces.” As he continues, his action and his tools become progressively more delicate, to the end that he will “fashion [the stone] with a beautiful image.” Thus it is evident how God sometimes treats the soul with apparent harshness and why he does so: “He takes pleasure in enriching it with his graces, and he never ceases until he has rendered it perfectly agreeable.”

Thus, says Vincent, “It is through the cross that God sanctifies souls.” The missionary who lives the Christian life faithfully will encounter the mystery of the cross. An outward sign of that identification, the saint observes, will be “the stigmata of Jesus Christ [made visible in] the imitation of his virtues.” This renders the cross a part of everyday life, redemptive and giving hope — a sign, notes John Shea, of “God’s presence to our pain and twistedness.”

November, 1991

The Virtue of 'Cool'



Saint Vincent was inclined to choose “little” virtues to characterize his followers; that is, virtues that effect modesty and self-effacement and that serve to minimize the indulgent self that is so much an obstacle to grace.

Akin to the five virtues that specifically define the missionaries’ vocation (simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, zeal for souls) is another that Vincent regarded highly, what a modern might call the virtue of “cool.” Or call it “tranquility of spirit,” as he did. Without this quality, he believed, “it is impossible to succeed in any exercise....” Tranquility is a state of mind that mirrors “the heart of our Lord...[who is] tranquility itself.” To stand in that relation to him is a “supreme honor” to be “in a condition to serve him.”

Tranquility has a restraining effect on the impulses. “The spirit of the world is restless, and wishes to accomplish everything; leave it to itself...Distrust the fervor of nature...Moderate your ardor and weigh matters maturely in the scales of the sanctuary.” The affairs of God, on the other hand, are accomplished “little by little and...imperceptibly, and his spirit operates without commotion or violence...The soul under the divine influence is always serene and humble...The good that God wishes is done of itself, as it were, without our being aware of it...[and] loses nothing by the absence of man’s activity.” Indeed, “he who is precipitate retards the things of God.”

Thus tranquility fosters “true wisdom, [which] consists in following providence step by step.” Wisdom disposes the soul for listening to the inspirations of God, which are “serene and peaceful, inclining us lovingly toward the good that he desires of us.” While admitting that “the human mind is quick and restless,” Vincent observes that “the most active and most enlightened minds are not the best, if, at the same time, they are not the most cautious. Those walk securely who do not wander from the road that has been traveled by the majority of the wise.” If, in fact, necessity demands haste, “do so moderately.”

Again, tranquility also provides a climate conducive to discernment. "Only to souls who possess tranquility is true discernment given, for as anger is a passion that disturbs reason, the contrary virtue is necessary to give discernment." Examples from the wisdom of the saints tell us that "a thing of importance concerning the glory of God and the good of the Church, which has been done after serious prayer and consultation, must be regarded as having been well done." When God eventually does communicate himself, "he does so without effort, in a sensible manner, full of sweetness, meekness and love."

A final fruit of tranquility is peace — "peace...worth more than all the goods of the world." Vincent sees the kingdom of God as "peace in the Holy Spirit, who shall reign in you, if you are in peace." And if in turn the heart is at peace, "you shall thereby pay sovereign honor to the God of peace and love."

The peace, too, is many-faceted. It touches not only the individual, but it is a quality that has consequences in both community life and the apostolate. With it comes "the spirit of Jesus Christ...a spirit of union and peace." With that spirit the confreres would be one with each other at home, and be effective in their ministry abroad. As Vincent put it, "How would you be able to attract souls to him if you were not united to one another and to him?"

The frequency of Vincent's exhortations could form a litany against fretting:

"Live in peace."

"Keep yourself tranquil."

"Courage! Be not disquieted."

"Let your heart be at peace."

"Cool it!" he is saying. "Oh what a grand lesson our Lord has given us, by not hurrying in the little things that he did!" These results are not without their pain. As the gardener knows, "a way of enabling trees to grow very high is to cut off some of the branches." Likewise, Vincent says, you must "retrench...your natural ardor." In speaking thus, the saint is not dealing in abstractions. His own practice of prudential restraint in coming to decisions stands as an example of the caution that he promotes. If there is any question about the wisdom of this approach, one need only look at the rich harvest that Vincent's ministry reaped for both his Congregation and the Church.

February, 1992

“The Virtue I Particularly Love”



In a confessional moment Vincent once declared, “Simplicity is the virtue which I particularly love, and to which, it seems to me, I am most attracted in my actions.” Perhaps he felt thus because he found it the quality most characteristic of God himself, “who is most simple, or rather he is simplicity itself. And wherever there is simplicity there also God is to be found.”

In addition to his own experience of the personal rewards from the practice of simplicity, Vincent acknowledges the universal approval that descends upon those so graced. It is evident, for instance, that our Lord himself “visibly blesses simple and candid souls and imparts many graces to them.” Elsewhere, the saint observes that “the good pleasure of God is to converse with the simple of heart.” And the straightforward person, that is, the one “who tells things simply as they are in themselves...is, in my opinion, very pleasing to God.” Indeed, God is pleased “only by humility of heart and by simplicity.”

Similarly, one’s fellow human beings value this attitude. “Everyone loves simple and candid persons, who use neither artifice nor deceit, who proceed with simplicity and speak with sincerity.” Even those “who have neither candor nor simplicity in their spirit or their words, nevertheless love those qualities in others.” Not only is this group affected by such directness, they can even be touched by it: “The best means of being helpful to cunning and crafty people is to act with them in the spirit of great simplicity.”

Simplicity draws God down upon us, as it were, and, from our perspective, it leads us to him. Thus, “the joy and contentment of God, if we may use such an expression, is to dwell with the humble and simple, when they themselves dwell in the knowledge of their own abjection.” On our part, “simplicity makes us go straight to God and to the truth, without ostentation, evasion or disguise and without being influenced by our own interests or by human respect.” And a person without this mind is one whom “God deprives of an insight into Christian truths and virtue.”

This desire for simplicity reached even into Vincent's concern about preaching, which is a separate, major topic in itself. It is sufficient to note one of his observations on this score that "God blesses those who preach simply and devoutly...[He] blesses sermons which are delivered in an ordinary and familiar tone, because he himself taught and preached in this manner...and the people prefer it, and derive greater fruit from it." It is not "the pomp of words" that convinces, but "simplicity and humility."

Simplicity indeed was a pervasive theme in Vincent's life — in his thinking, in his ministry, in his personal behavior. His own words defined him: a personality endowed with a directness and a transparency that endeared him to people and attracted them to his company. Simplicity explained in part his success in entering so many lives and feeling welcomed there. Whoever encountered him knew that they were meeting the authentic Vincent de Paul, nothing more, nothing less.

April, 1992

That Beautiful Virtue



And what is that? “Mercy,” says Vincent, who praised it as “the proper attribute of God himself...[who] bestows the spirit of mercy.” For this reason, the saint urges his missionaries, “Let us be at all times men of mercy, if we wish to do in all things and everywhere the will of God.”

Mercy is a facet of charity that calls us, first, to identify in spirit with the other person. For instance, Vincent suggests, “To be compassionate toward the sufferings of our neighbor and to weep with him...to soften our hearts and to render them responsive to [his] sufferings and miseries.” Indeed, “love gains for us an entrance into the hearts of others.” Mercy calls as well for outward signs or gestures. As Vincent observed, “Heart and hand should go together as far as possible.” Consequently, he urges, “Weep with your poor and your sick. God has appointed you to be their consolation...Serve the sick with gentleness, compassion and love.” As Jesus wept over Jerusalem, so should the missionary reveal sympathy in his countenance. And “speak sympathetically so as to let the neighbor see how profoundly [you] share in his interests and sufferings.” Even when away from the poor, the saint showed that they, or their afflictions, are not to be forgotten, as he fretted during one winter, “Here indeed is a rigorous season. What shall become of the poor, and where shall they go? Herein is my affliction and my sorrow.”

This call to identification with others is a reminder that “we are members of one mystical body, of which our Lord is the head...[so that] if we are to reign with him in heaven we should, like him, sympathize with all his members on earth.” If even dumb creation is sensitive to the sufferings of each other, “for a much greater reason should the bond of common sympathy exist among men and especially among Christians.”

Mercy calls for another type of sympathy — toward sinners. Vincent’s compassion stemmed from his own self-awareness, for “as I am a great sinner, I cannot reject those who are great sinners, provided they have good will.” Similarly,

it is profitable for his Congregation to reflect “for a little how much we stand in need of mercy ourselves — we who should show it to others, bring it with us into all sorts of places, and suffer all things for its sake.” If God is tolerant and understanding, it is wise for us to follow: “Let us imitate the goodness of God, who never reproaches us with the faults he has forgiven us.” And if it happens that “hearts are barred to you, make every advance in manifesting goodness toward [them].” From Francis de Sales he learned tolerance and understanding. Said Vincent, “Habituate yourself to judge the best of things and persons, at all times and under all circumstances. ‘If an action has a hundred faces,’ says the blessed bishop of Geneva, ‘look at the best.’”

Vincent recognized that the mercy and the charity characteristic of Christian practice also have a special place in the religious life, for “charity is the cement that binds communities to God and persons to one another.” And for the individual confrere, “Fraternal charity is a mark of predestination, since by it a person is recognized as a true disciple of Jesus Christ.” There is something, too, for superiors, who are urged to “treat with gentleness those under your authority, continue to govern them with your customary wisdom and mildness.”

To Vincent, “our life...is a moment of time (to use) for the sake of mercy.” Because life is fleeting and elusive — “a moment which flies away and disappears immediately” — there is an urgency in seizing the moment of mercy. The saint finds regret in his own life, as he laments, “Alas! the seventy-five years of my life that have passed away now seem to me to be only a dream, only a moment, and nothing now remains to me but regret at having employed this moment so badly.” In the same spirit he cautions his missionaries: “Let us reflect how grieved we shall be when we come to die if we have not made use of this moment to be merciful.”

Among his hopes for his Congregation Vincent prays for God “to give us this spirit of mercy and compassion, to replenish us with it, to preserve it in us so that whoever sees a missionary may be able to say: ‘There goes a man who is full of mercy.’” And how would that person be recognized? Vincent would suggest: “Let us show mercy to all so that we shall never meet a poor person again without consoling him...nor an ignorant one without teaching him in a few words all that he is bound to believe...and do for his salvation....”

The prayer of the missionaries, in turn, should be that we not “make a bad use of our vocation...[that God] not take the spirit of mercy from the Company, for what would become of us, O Lord, if you would withdraw your mercy from us?”

May-June, 1992

The Virtue of Perspective



It is not so important for us to live a long time as to continue in the vocation to which God has called us....” In this letter to one of his priests who had expressed undue anxiety about his health, Vincent puts a spin on his response that counters what seems a notion of conventional wisdom. The “reasonable” advice to expect here is that the quantity of a life in doing good holds more value than a shorter one. Maybe so, but Vincent’s point is that the focus and the intensity of a life, brief or long, are more important than length of days.

These words reflect the unexpected slant that Vincent gives to much of his advice. There were many queries that came his way or initiatives that he took to advise a confrere: perhaps to clarify an ambiguity or to counter an insensitivity in his correspondent; to illumine some facet of the truth that the inquirer overlooked or to make a point that he might have missed. Vincent’s wisdom in these instances arises out of a perspective born of his peasant good sense alone, or out of that common sense informed by faith. But in responding he gives an unexpected twist to his words, so that his statements take an aphoristic, paradoxical turn.

Thus Vincent replies to a missionary who asked permission to take the discipline. The saint cautioned against such an overzealous request with the reminder that “we can fall into excess in the practice of the virtues, and that excess is sometimes a greater evil than the failure to practice them.” Indeed, there are people “who find sensual and shameful pleasure in that sort of thing.” After further thought Vincent relented, and he permitted the request with very restrictive conditions that would forestall the priest’s falling into the excess, reminding his confrere that “merit comes not so much in pain as in love.”

Moderation is always paramount, he insisted, as he did when advising Monsieur Portail to curb the length of a visitation: “Those which drag on are not usually very successful.” Or in his advice to Étienne Blatiron to take care of himself, even if Cardinal Durazzo in his zeal overworks the missionaries: “...In the final

analysis, virtue is not found in extremes, but in prudence, which I recommend as strongly as I can....”

A serenity born of faith underlies other responses, as he advised about the poverty suffered in a house at La Rose: “Things arrange themselves with time. Only God can have everything to his liking. His servants should act as our Lord did.” In less tangible areas, do not look for “results,” Vincent tells Blatiron, who is discouraged that no one is “profiting” from his mission or that his opinions are not being accepted: “...Are you not willing to accept that our efforts and prayers may be ineffectual, if such is God’s good pleasure? For, Monsieur, what would it be like if everything was favorable to us, and what right have poor people like us to expect that we shall always be successful?” And as to contradictions: “We have even less reason to be upset when someone offers resistance to our humble opinions.” After all, Vincent concludes, “Since God is satisfied with our good will and honest efforts, let us also be satisfied with the outcome he gives to them.” With this frame of mind “our actions will never be without good results.”

Even Vincent’s customary attitude toward the use of authority occasionally emerges in an unexpected way. Take the advice to Philip Le Vacher, a missionary and papal appointee as vicar-general of Carthage. The appointment had both ecclesiastical and pastoral implications. In this case Vincent advised in favor of pastoral responses concerning the Christian slaves. Whatever the abuses, “do not take a hard line” against them, if greater harm can result. “Use gentle methods,” the saint continues, “to get whatever you can from priests and monks who are slaves, as well as from merchants and captives. Resort to severe measures only in extreme cases for fear lest the hardship they are already enduring in their state of captivity, joined to the severity you might want to exercise in virtue of your authority, drive them to despair. You are not responsible for their salvation, as you think. You have been sent to Algiers only to console afflicted souls, to encourage them to bear their sufferings, and to help them to persevere in our holy religion. That is your main concern and not the office of vicar general, which you have accepted only to the extent that it serves as a means to attain the aforementioned ends.”

Vincent fired out counsel in every direction: to his missionaries about mundane affairs; to Saint Louise and her Daughters about details peculiar to their lives; to clerics, nobles and politicians about matters of church and state. The wisdom of the saint in these messages is found not in grandiose sentiments but more often in pointed statements of good sense. Whatever the occasion, a response from Vincent usually took an unexpected, perhaps unconventional, turn that conveyed an answer, true, but also disclosed the distinctive perspective out of which he viewed life.

January, 1993

Prudence, the Preventive Virtue



“A doctor who preserves a man from sickness,” said Vincent, “deserves more than he does who cures him.” This concept of prevention is a familiar one, based on the principle that action is usually more salutary than reaction. For the saint this same notion underlay the meaning of the virtue of prudence.

It is a virtue that calls for foresight, discretion, restraint and proportion. Vincent sees its purpose “to regulate and govern both words and actions [and judgment, he would include elsewhere]...” It disposes us “to speak wisely and to the point. The prudent man acts as he should, when he should, and for the end he should. He does all things according to weight and measure.” Accordingly, for making choices confidently, the saint advises that “for an apparent and uncertain good we should not abandon a real and present good.” Similarly, restraint calls for withholding oneself from novelty, from “too readily pursuing new notions.” For this reason “great perseverance in our first intentions is necessary.”

As usual, Vincent relies on the example of Jesus to give credibility and force to his teaching. Take it as “an inviolable rule,” he says, “to judge of all things as our Lord judged them, so that on all occasions we should ask ourselves how [he] under similar circumstances, judged of such things.” In addition to judging, prudence includes “speaking and acting as the eternal wisdom of God, clothed in our frail flesh, judged, spoke and acted.”

Vincent always distinguishes between that kind of prudence and the “purely human” kind. The latter is based upon “what people say, or upon the fear of making enemies. [It] furnishes low and miserable motives, which defeat the interests of God and of his Church.” In some ways “human prudence” can be an acceptable path to decision, but insufficient. In such cases where it “fails (or) does not see at all,” says the saint, one should seek the path where “the light of divine wisdom begins to dawn.”

Prudence seems always to have a companion. Simplicity, for instance, is

one. Vincent considers them “like two inseparable sisters.” Simplicity will drive one “to do all things unostentatiously, without pomp or show, choosing ways and means the most humble, as well as the most charitable in order not to excite the envy or the contradiction of men.” The notion about this pairing echoed the prescription of Jesus in the gospel, about combining the prudence of the serpent with the simplicity of the dove, and found its way into Vincent’s *Common Rules*.

Prudence is important for the person in authority, whether in making decisions or in taking action: “It is very important that those who govern should do nothing of consequence, only after having taken the advice of two or three.” Far from its “being improper to take advice,” it is, on the contrary, Vincent insists, “necessary to do so when the matter is something of importance and when we are unable of ourselves to reach a decision.” Indeed, the superior who wisely takes counsel “renders [his] authority more worthy of love and respect.”

In some cases wide consultation might be called for, including outside advisors: “In temporal matters the advice of attorneys or other intelligent externs is [to be] sought.” And locally, “with regard to internal affairs...the officers of the house are consulted, as also other members of the Community when this is deemed expedient.”

Providence is also a necessary partner in the equation. Vincent rarely advises about intended actions without a reminder to heed the voice of providence, which gives perspective to the rightness of the decision. As he wrote to Bernard Codoing in Rome, who was worried about some affairs in other places, Vincent says, somewhat impatiently, “Stop being concerned about things happening far away that are none of your business...Let us abandon ourselves to the providence of God...and put our feet only in the place it has marked out for us.” And, in a later letter to Codoing, he says that it has been “a consolation our Lord gives me...to believe that, by the grace of God, we have always tried to follow and not to anticipate providence which knows how to conduct all things so wisely to the end our Lord destines for them.”

Vincent is likewise strong on the responsibility of the individual confrere to seek counsel in personal matters, with especial reliance upon the superior. Although nowadays this path to wisdom (that is, via the superior) is not as absolute or exclusive as it was for Vincent, it was, in his view, an important factor in seeking God’s will: “By taking counsel of your superiors, you will avoid many inconveniences and you will be assured of the will of God.” Similarly, “take the advice of those whose mission it is to counsel you. God, ordinarily, is found in their advice.”

“It is not enough to do good, but to do it well,” said Vincent. Because his communities are essentially active, the members thus would be concerned with “doing”; and if “well,” to exercise care in the doing. Vincent saw prudence as an aid

to wise performance. The virtue counsels foresight and deliberation. It forestalls precipitate action, calculates possible consequences, and yet demands action when it is time to act, that is, as he says regarding this last, to trusting more in providence than in our own precaution. Above all, because apostolic works are intentional and directed toward the glory of God, prudence helps to focus motivation. For Vincent this point is the culmination of the virtue, whereby service to God is perfected, in that excellence in intention converges with effectiveness in execution. Vincent caught the essence of this combination when he said, "God is greatly honored by the time that is taken to consider maturely the things that concern his service."

February, 1993

Simplicity: a Countercultural Virtue



“Simplicity” and “countercultural” put together seems a contradiction in terms. “Countercultural” might suggest an aggressive advocacy, whereas “simplicity” is more static. Simplicity speaks for itself against its opposites: “Since prudence of the flesh and hypocrisy are so prevalent in this corrupt age, to the prejudice of the spirit of Christianity,” Vincent once said, “the best way to overcome their baneful influence is by a true and sincere simplicity.” And according to his biographer, Louis Abelly, the saint certainly conducted himself in this manner: he was “simple, rejecting all pretense, duplicity, artifice, or prudence of the flesh.” Even when he forgot or delayed some responsibility, he made no excuses or invented no explanation, even to the point of embarrassment, preferring to state things as they were.

Others who came into contact with him had the same impression of consistency, as did the bishop who, after repeated meetings with the saint, was able to characterize him in this famous comment: “Monsieur Vincent is always Monsieur Vincent; that is, he is as humble, affable and prompt to serve everyone as he was before being called to the Court. He has falsified the proverb that says ‘honors destroy virtue.’”

Simplicity is virtually its own reward, as might be implied from Vincent’s own experience and from his remarks to his confreres: “Look around our own group to consider those in whom this virtue is particularly noticeable. Are they not the most lovable?” They do not work to be so, it is just who they are and the impression they convey.

He shared another example he had from the field. His missionaries, he learned, usually received better acceptance than the resident clergy in many places. These clergy, he said, “did recite the breviary, celebrate mass and administer the sacraments, however, poorly, but that is all. Even worse, they lived in vice and disorder.” In response to these reactions, he told his own men, “Even if you do not

say a word you may touch hearts merely by your presence, if only you are wholly taken up by God...[Two priests on a mission] went in surplice from their house to the church, then back again without saying a word. Their recollection was so remarkable that it made a strong impression on those who saw them, never having experienced the like. Their modesty was a silent sermon so efficacious, I am told, that it may have contributed more than anything else to the success of this mission.”

In another situation, where the people lacked simplicity, he warned a missionary he was sending there, “You are going to a region where the people are for the most part cunning and devious. If that is so, the best way to be of help to them is to treat them with great simplicity. The maxims of the gospel are utterly opposed to those of the world. Since you are going there to serve our Lord, you ought to carry his spirit, a spirit of uprightness and simplicity.”

Simplicity, as Vincent once described it, is the virtue that causes one “to act directly and forthrightly, always in view of God, in our business, our employment, or in our exercises of piety, avoiding all hypocrisy, artifice, or vain pretense.” The virtue arises out of honesty, “which never allows us to do one thing but really mean another.” Thus, simplicity is violated in those “who through human respect wish to appear other than what they are, or who do good deeds exteriorly to be thought virtuous, who collect quantities of books to be judged learned, who strive to preach well to have the applause and praise of others, or...who do their spiritual exercises or pious works for unworthy motives.”

This virtue, indeed, finds its model in God, who is “very simple, or better...is simplicity itself, and therefore where one finds simplicity one finds God.” In this spirit the saint admonished one of his missionaries who had acted otherwise, “God is never honored by duplicity, and...to be truly simple we must think of him alone...[for, as he said elsewhere] God is the only end of all our actions.”

As Vincent’s life reveals, simplicity was one of his defining virtues and one which he left to his followers as part of his legacy. The virtue was a personal value, but it also set him apart from many cultural values surrounding him that were contrary to the maxims of the gospel. Given the love and the admiration that he elicited from his contemporaries, and the credibility that he enjoyed, we must surmise that this modest man, and the simple, direct qualities he possessed, was powerful enough to affect an age.

March, 1994

Mortification: a Countercultural Virtue



Just to say “mortification” is a countercultural act, and the very thought of self-denial in a self-indulgent culture is an alien notion. Consequently anyone who would promote mortification is working against the tide.

Mortification is an evangelical maxim that is based upon the insistence by Jesus that to be his disciple one had to deny the self and take up the cross daily. As such it naturally opposes the maxims of “the world,” that is, those contrary to the gospel.

The virtue is thus one that Vincent identified as essential for gospel living: for himself, for his missionaries as characteristic of their state, indeed for any would-be followers. It was not an abstraction to Vincent. He put into personal practice what he advised his missionaries: “We should preach penance to others in vain if we are not mortified and if there is no sign of it in our actions and conduct.”

He needed the virtue in order to exorcize some of his own demons. One of these was his temperament. In later years Vincent came to be admired for his meek and calm demeanor, but it was one that came about only with strong discipline. He was conscious at one time of his “curt and forbidding disposition,” but, sensitive about its effects, he prayed for change to “a meek and benign one.” Eventually, he acknowledged, that “by the grace of God and with some effort on my part...[I was able]...to repress the outbursts of passion [and] get rid of my black disposition.”

Another was attachment to his family that brought its own set of tensions that needed balancing. Vincent never abandoned his love for his family, but he struggled to keep them at arm’s length, so that they would not be a distraction from his work, as he responded once to a suggestion to help some relatives known to be in need: “Do you think I do not love my relatives? I indeed have the same sentiments of affection for them that anyone would have. My natural instinct is to help them, but I must act according to the movements of grace, and not those of

nature. I should think of those poor persons who are even worse off, rather than of my friends and relatives.”

In promoting mortification to his missionaries Vincent reflected, in part, his own struggles. He was mindful of his own experience, for instance, when he warned of undue attachment to family. Likewise, in encouraging meekness he sometimes felt, even at an advanced age, that he had not entirely established that discipline in his own life: “O wretch that I am! I have been studying this lesson [of meekness] for so long and have not yet learned it! I fly into a passion; I lose my temper; I complain; I find fault....”

For the missionary the virtue called for personal restraint in tempering his judgment, his senses, and any strong, disordered feelings. Similarly, it entailed coping with sickness and living without undue anxiety about his health. These are areas open to self-deception and rationalization. “Woe to him who shuns the cross!” Vincent warned. “The man who makes little of exterior mortification on the plea that interior mortifications are far more perfect shows clearly that he is not mortified, either interiorly or exteriorly.”

The saint also identified many occasions in community life, both at home and on the missions, that demanded mortification. “If we are not animated by the spirit of self-denial,” he asked, “how can we live together?” There are criticisms to deal with, from among their own numbers and sometimes from the aggravation of non-members. There are challenges equally at work on the missions, if of a different sort: kind and conditions of lodgings, the state of the parish, and other varying circumstances. And so, Vincent asked, “If we are not mortified how can we endure what must be endured in varied employments [like dealing with the poor people, persons in retreat, the ordinands, convicts and slaves]? ...Let us not deceive ourselves, my brothers. Missionaries stand in need of self-denial.”

Thus, the aim of the virtue of mortification, according to Vincent, is “to divest ourselves of whatsoever displeases God,” that is, to act in opposition to “worldly values.” Although seemingly negative in its thrust, the virtue does not promote mere avoidance, but rather encourages action of a kind that ultimately responds to the challenge of Saint Paul: “If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

April, 1994

Murphy's Law and Divine Providence



"How are things going?" the man asked.

"Pretty good," the other replied.

"Only pretty good?"

"Well, if I said 'Fine!' sure enough something will come along to chase the feeling away, and so I play it safe."

Call this an ethnic phobia (name any ethnic group, it would fit), call it a belief in Murphy's Law, that if anything can go wrong, it probably will. Whatever its source, it reflects a mild fatalism that taints the prospects for peace of mind with fear of something worse happening.

It is idle to ask whether Vincent had Murphy's Law to contend with in his culture (Boudreaux's Law or some such?), because it seems a universal human temptation to fear the worst, no matter how joyous the moment. For Vincent, however, belief in providence put his reliance on divine guidance of events rather than on caprice. That belief calls for a delicate balance in approaching events, both before they occur and after: "Grace has its moments," the saint once told a missionary. "Let us abandon ourselves to the providence of God and be on our guard against anticipating it." And, once arrived at a decision to proceed, "[Let us] put our feet only on the paths providence has marked out for us." Even if something unfortunate happened subsequently, the cause would be more than just a perverse turn of events.

If anything would go wrong in an enterprise, it was usually for good reason, as for instance, Vincent would think, "the poor success of things [because they are] done too precipitously." Proper timing is all. Even offering advice too hastily was

suspect, because it reflected one's personal judgment rather than awaiting the inspiration of the Spirit. In reassuring a confrere about the security that reliance on providence brings, the saint testified from his own experience with the Congregation: "Reflecting on all the principal events that have taken place in this Company," he recalled, "it seems to me quite evident that, if they had taken place before they did, they would not have been successful. I say it of all of them, without exception. That is why I have a particular devotion to following the adorable providence of God step by step. My only consolation is that I think our Lord alone has carried on and is constantly carrying on the business of the Little Company...Let us take refuge in this, trusting that [he] will bring about what he wishes to be done among us."

Detachment and indifference are twin virtues that accompany belief in providence and put one in a proper stance toward the will of God. Detachment is the ability to stand apart from persons or things that could be obstacles to growth in resignation. Many tragedies struck Vincent in his Congregation: he saw his missionaries shipwrecked on the way to Madagascar, dead of the plague in Italy, imprisoned in Barbary, victimized by the religious wars, and the Company struck by the loss of the farm at Orsigny. In all of them his reaction usually began with the utterance "Blessed be God" and went on to a statement of acceptance. There were no exceptions to his resignation to events. Even the future of his Congregation was not spared: so intensely did he feel about fidelity to God's work that he prayed at one time that God "destroy us if we are not useful to him in his service."

Indifference, as Vincent described it, "leads us to be so detached from creatures and so united to the will of the creator that we are almost totally freed from any desire for one thing rather than another...." There is equanimity in accepting what happens or does not happen: a person is neither elated by prosperity nor cast down by adversity. On one occasion Vincent showed that kind of restraint and control in the way that he responded to a possible favor offered the Congregation. He was in no hurry to act. "I think we should allow this matter to simmer for the time being..." he cautioned. "It will help us develop holy indifference, and allow our Lord to manifest his will while we offer our prayers for this intention. We can be sure that, if he wishes it, it shall come about...The less there is of ourselves in this, the more he will make it his own."

One man's patience breeds another's exasperation. Vincent's well known slow and deliberate pace — and others' reactions — reflects not indecision, but rather a prudent wait for assurance about God's will. It is a further paradox that for all this apparent procrastination, the designation, "man of action," is one of the saint's most prominent titles in the Church to honor his remarkable accomplishments. "I have never yet seen," he wrote to one of his missionaries, "anything spoiled by my slowness to take action, but everything has been done in its

own good time, with the necessary foresight and precautions.”

Indeed, the saint believed, “God is greatly *honored* [emphasis added] by the time taken in considering all those matters that concern his service.” For his part, the missionary will find meaning and value in his works according to the care he brings to them, that is, “by seeking God in them and by doing them in order to find him in them, rather than just to get them done.”

Was Vincent excessive in his reliance on providence? To someone who wondered aloud about whether one can offend by having too much of the hope and confidence he should have in God, the saint replied, “Just as we cannot have too much faith in the truths of the faith so we cannot trust in God too much.” There are, of course, conditions under which a false hope operates, e.g. hoping for something God has not promised, or seeking God’s mercy without undergoing conversion. But “true hope,” the saint concluded, “can never be excessive since it is founded on the goodness of God and on the merits of Jesus Christ.”

“Chance” and “surprise” would seem to have no place in Vincent’s active vocabulary, for in his perception of events nothing was capricious or startling. Belief in a benign providence put him in a special stance toward reality: it spared him shock from the unexpected and the irrational, and opened him to acceptance of them. Knowing that the wisdom of God directed events, Vincent was able to maintain a serenity in their midst, no matter what “laws,” rational or otherwise, seemed to be operative.

November, 1994

The Gift of Tongues



“*T*he whole world spoke the same language, using the same words,” said the biblical writer to describe an idyllic condition of the races that antedated the world of the tower of Babel. Subsequently, because of the increasing wickedness into which the people were falling, “the Lord confused the speech of all the world.” Thus the tower of Babel became a symbol of the diversity of languages among peoples that formed a barrier to their mutual understanding.

The Pentecost experience is the antithesis of Babel, because it brings harmony and understanding rather than chaos. All those who received the Spirit “as of tongues of fire,” began with a common language among themselves, but as they proclaimed the experience, their auditors heard them speak “in different tongues as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.” The auditors, in turn, were “astounded and in amazement” that “each of us hears [the disciples] in his own native language...Parthians, Medes, Elamites...”

In a community “Repetition of Prayer,” held on the Feast of Pentecost (9 June 1658), Vincent invoked this image of tongues, first celebrating this gift to the Church at the coming of the Spirit, but immediately transposing the notion into a pragmatic image for his missionaries: “I think we should do well today to ask God to give us the grace to learn foreign languages thoroughly, for the sake of those who are to be sent to distant lands....”

It was not presumptuous to seek this gift, for as providence has raised up “this Little Company to preach the gospel throughout the world as the apostles did, [so] it is necessary for us to share with them the gift of tongues, since it is so essential for teaching the people the doctrines of our faith.” In the modern case, however, this was not a gift spontaneously given as it was to the apostles, but something to be sought, in prayer and through one’s labors. “How can [missionaries] learn other languages,” he asked, “if they do not ask God to teach them and devote themselves to the study of them?”

Vincent became more conscious of this need as he spread further the net of his missionary endeavors. He was already sending men to Poland, Italy, England, Ireland, and Madagascar, and would have liked to extend the list. Learning the native tongue was a priority among Vincent's instructions to missionaries destined for these places. He admired the practice of the Jesuits: "One of the first things done by those who are sent to a country of whose language they are ignorant is to set about learning it; they make that their chief study; they get in touch with someone from the country, or someone who understands the language..." Even the niceties of language differences are important, as the Jesuits discovered among the various tribal languages of the native Americans.

Perseverance in study was important. The first reaction of some missionaries is discouragement at their initial labors. "There are some," Vincent observed, "who imagine, when they get [to the mission country] that they will never succeed. They grow discouraged after some attempts and, instead of praying and trusting in God to make progress therein, instead of waiting patiently for this favor from his goodness, they lose their desire to remain, and persuade themselves that they are only fit for their own country and, behold, they attempt to return." On one occasion Vincent expressed his double disappointment about the unresponsive confreres under Jean Martin, superior at Turin: "I am distressed by the meager help you are getting from your men and the lack of enthusiasm some show for the language of the country and the functions of the Company."

On the other hand, Vincent was happy to hear cases of application, as he was, for instance, on hearing from Charles Nacquart on his attempts to learn the Malagasy language, while he is on his way to Madagascar, and when finally on the island to get in touch with a Frenchman who understood the native language. Likewise with the Polish mission: "I am very glad to hear how Messieurs Durand, Eveillard and Simon are applying themselves to the Polish language and of the progress they are making. Please congratulate them for me...[especially] Monsieur Duperroy for applying himself so well that he now teaches catechism in Polish, so I am told."

Vincent himself had no occasion to leave his native France that would compel him to learn another language. However, he showed a willingness to stretch himself beyond conventional language when necessary, as he did in his friendship with Lambert aux Couteaux, superior at Richelieu. When the saint was in Picardy, Lambert's native district, he tried to speak the dialect — a struggle, he admitted. On one occasion Lambert's cousin, on a visit to Saint-Lazare, had a pleasant meeting with Vincent, who said about their conversation: "We spoke a great deal in the Picard dialect but with this difference: he did his best to speak good French and I to speak good Picard."

This concern of Vincent for the gift of tongues was an expression of his

abiding zeal for evangelization. The possibilities in Turin were symbolic of the mission everywhere — “a beautiful harvest,” as he described Monsieur Martin’s apostolate. There was a sadness, however, that accompanied those missionaries there and elsewhere who were hampered by ignorance of the language. The feeling would not be permanent, the saint promised, but it would change to joy according to the missionaries’ efforts to learn. Indeed the hope of “a beautiful harvest,” Vincent believed, should stir up the zeal of any missionary to seek the gift of tongues.

January, 1995

The Virtue of “Modification”



I once heard someone mistakenly call mortification the virtue of “modification.” It is easy to see how that is possible for a person who is a stranger to the lingo. Actually, the mix-up is not too far off the mark. The words do have a similar ring and, upon a closer look, do suggest a natural kinship: both entail some change, some trimming, some reduction.

Vincent saw mortification as a basic value for the Christian life, indeed a prerequisite. It begins and ends in Jesus Christ, who put mortification as a condition for discipleship: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” The saint saw the process as renunciation of “judgment, senses, will, passions, and so on.”

As was his custom, Vincent pointed to the particular example of Jesus Christ, who first practiced whatever behavior he was later to advocate. The most fundamental act, Vincent noted, was Jesus’ declaration at the beginning that his work was to do the will of the one who sent him. In living out a life in accordance with the Father’s will, Jesus accepted whatever conditions fell to his family: he experienced a simple life and its attendant frugality and privations. In the family he practiced obedience in subjecting his will and his judgment to those entrusted with his care. In his public ministry he endured the hardships of travel and, more importantly, the opposition and hostility to his message, to the point of surrendering his life.

Vincent sought to match his confreres’ experiences in mortification with those of Jesus, if not literally, at least in that spirit. Thus, the missionaries would be expected to orient their lives by subjection to the will of the Father, which is “the grace to remain always in the disposition of doing his will, obeying his commandments, the rules of our state of life and the orders of obedience....” They were to live in the spirit of simplicity and detachment similar to that which Jesus displayed. They were encouraged to live by selflessness instead of self-promotion,

that is, to seek “the grace to rid ourselves of ourselves...to resist the love of self, which is the root of all our sensuality.” Finally, to practice detachment: from relatives, from frivolities, from inordinate actions of the senses or the emotions, from excessive preoccupation with health.

Thus mortification is compatible with “modification,” that is, a certain tempering of behavior or of some aspects of human life that might need tighter management, direction or discipline.

Vincent’s own practices of mortification are more admirable in the telling than in the imitation: sleeping on a bare cot without a mattress, in a room without a fire; even foregoing legitimate comforts, as when he was sick, whereby he “endured” for the sake of mortification the special attention his brothers showed him. It was expressed in the hair shirts, the discipline, and other instruments of mortification he hid from view, and in the violence to his senses. There were intangibles, too, like bearing with resignation the bad news about his Congregation and the members.

And yet there was no flashy display of the virtue. In fact, as his biographer Abelly says, the saint for good reasons kept much of it hidden: “[Vincent] certainly did not project an image of an extremely austere life. He judged that a life seemingly more ordinary would succeed better in the service of the people and the clergy to which God had called him...[and] would also be closer to that of Jesus Christ and the holy apostles...He felt obliged to give the example of a well ordered life, neither too strict, ...too lenient, ...too rigorous. In private, mortifying his interior faculties to have them both perfectly submissive to the will of God. His way of doing this was the more excellent and more holy in that it was concealed from the eyes of others.”

In the end, Vincent believed, mortification was a sign of true discipleship: “The way to know if a person follows our Lord is to see if he mortifies himself continually.” In this way comes assurance that the Company “shall then walk in the narrow way which leads to life; Jesus Christ will then reign in us during this mortal life and we in him in life eternal.”

September, 1995

“First The Heart, Then The Work.”



Vincent de Paul was very much up-to-date in dealing with a question that is still current in religious life and among those given to altruistic service to the neighbor. He spent a lot of energy demonstrating to his followers that each person had meaning and value apart from the work in which he or she was engaged. Personal identity was not exclusively derived from one's work, but from one's inner worth and its direction. One comment of his to the Daughters of Charity, for instance, without specifying any particular work — whether teacher, nurse, social worker — reaches to the core of identity: “You are poor Daughters of Charity,” he told them, “who have given yourselves to God for the service of the poor.”

Even today, strangers of all types, trying to connect with each other, will use the icebreaker, “What do you do?” as if identifying one's line of work ultimately defines the person. Indeed, if work did define value, then that worth would disappear when the work was over, such as through retirement or sickness. Or one's value in religion would be measured according to the salary one commanded, or the prestige of the job, or the “success” one achieves in the work.

Motive — that is, the intention — is what marks one's identity in the apostolate, and not the external nature of the work. Vincent grasped the reality of Saint Paul's advice to the Colossians: “Whatever you do in word or in work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus....” This is equally true of any demand that God makes, whether it be of conversion — “Rend your hearts and not your garments” — or of authentic sacrifice — “My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite heart.” Vincent reinforces this notion: “Do you think, Sisters, that it is any great thing to act as you do unless you elevate your actions by a good intention? ...Do you think that to serve the poor because it amuses you, to obey because you like what you have been told to do, to labor because one cannot exist without some employment, to pray because others do so, is to accomplish your duty? Certainly not, Sisters, do not deceive yourselves; the merit of our actions depends upon the end for which you perform

them.” What is of central importance, Vincent goes on to conclude, is that God “first of all demands the heart and then the work.”

To speak of heart and work separately is not to express the realities as totally divided. The truly apostolic person fuses motive and work. The thought of Saint Louise runs parallel to Vincent’s: “[Sisters], may you never take the attitude of merely getting a job done. You must serve from the heart....” In our own day Thomas Merton, on this topic, observed that religious action is not a double activity of performing the work and looking to God. Rather, work should be union with God, the person finding God in the work, not just in doing his will, but by seeking him in the truth of what is being done. To act in this frame of mind, moreover, is to assure the work is done well and to achieve peace and satisfaction in its performance.

Vincent anticipated the temptation that would occur when a person would look for a different location in which to serve, as if this would put them in a better frame of mind. God is using them, he told his Daughters, to further his own designs of salvation. So, “hold yourselves ready to carry out all that he wishes you to do. But make no claims, either to be in this house, or in that parish, or in that country, and do not be afraid to go wherever you may be sent....” And to one of his priests the saint warned, “[God] has no use for our knowledge or our good works if he does not have our heart, and he does not want that heart if we give it to him away from the place where he asks for it.”

Ultimately, the heart will out, as it were. Although its action is an inner reality, it cannot remain hidden. The power of charity makes it manifest as a visible sign, as Vincent guaranteed: “A heart filled and animated by [charity] shows forth [God’s] inner fire, and everything in a charitable person breathes and preaches charity.”

March-April, 1997

“Words So Filled With Spiritual Grace...”



Vincent de Paul's consistently affable manner was a source of admiration to his confreres and to any other contemporaries who dealt with him. It was not always thus. Regarding a contrary temperament that early on plagued him, he confessed: "I addressed myself to God to beg him earnestly to change this curt and forbidding disposition for a meek and benign one. By the grace of our Lord and with some effort on my part to repress the outbursts of passion, I was able to get rid of my black disposition." As his experience taught him, affability was not just a helpful virtue for the missionary, but an occupational necessity, for, as he put it, "By our vocation we must often talk with one another and with our neighbor." That virtue, he said, is "like the soul of good conversation."

Affability engenders mutual respect within a community. It is an equalizer, Vincent claimed, for conditions where there is a diversity of backgrounds, of places of origin, of temperaments and dispositions, and it smooths the path to easier communications. The saint told his confreres, "As charity is the virtue that unites us as members of the one body, affability...perfects that union." The tone of conversation demands a delicate balance. It would take only a soft word to convert a hardened sinner, whereas harshness could cause suffering. Contentiousness should be avoided as self-defeating: often argument is designed to gain the upper hand and thus close the door to agreement. Affability, on the other hand, would keep that door open. Flattery, too, is "unworthy of a Christian." Especially should the missionary be careful in dealing with the poor country people. Otherwise, Vincent noted, "they will pull back and fear to deal with us, thinking us too severe or too lordly for them. When they are treated affably and cordially they feel otherwise and are better disposed to profit from the good we seek to do for them."

It becomes evident that the demands of affability draw upon many more virtues than this single one. Like so many tributaries, virtues such as meekness and humility, kindness and charity, patience and forbearance feed into the mainstream to determine each nuance that affability demands. Examples abound of the saint's adaptability to

these modes. At Saint-Lazare, Vincent had the practice, almost a ritual, of meeting with missionaries to encourage and instruct them as they departed on assignments or to welcome them upon their return. One priest described his own meeting as a “cordial reception...[that] overwhelmed me,” and recalled that Vincent’s words “were so filled with spiritual grace, so gracious and yet so efficacious that they accomplished what he had in mind.” Vincent was sensitive about inquiring about a confrere’s health and frame of mind before making a difficult assignment, but he looked for a positive response nevertheless. As he wrote to one confrere: “I am writing to ask you about your health, and what you think of a proposal I have in mind for you...I would ask you, Monsieur, to pray to God, to listen to what he has to say to you about this. Please write me soon about your health and your attitude toward accepting this assignment....”

In other areas less pleasant, he could show himself firm but diplomatic in his affability. Abelly told the story of how Vincent once dealt with a layman who looked to borrow some money. Vincent explained how the Company did not have money for this purpose. The saint “spoke with such gentleness and prudence,” and with such benign effect, that the man “left in peace...,” giving the reader a sense that this exit was the equivalent of finding oneself out the front door without realizing how you got there. There were times when Vincent had the unpleasant duty of declining a permission requested by a confrere, but he hoped that the petitioner would surmise the refusal. In order to avoid giving pain, Vincent would say “Would you be so good as to remind me of this some other time?” Yet another missionary testified that “I never had the honor of meeting with him that I did not leave with perfect satisfaction, whether he had granted what I asked or had to refuse.”

The virtue of affability was a regular theme that Vincent addressed to the community at Saint-Lazare. It is a part of the larger virtue of meekness, he claimed, “to have a great affability, cordiality, and serenity of expression for everyone we meet so as to be agreeable to them. Those who have a smiling and agreeable countenance please everyone. God gave them this grace, by which they seem to offer their hearts and invite others to open theirs...A missionary must strive to be affable and so cordial and simple that he puts everyone he meets at ease....” In time, the saint was able to experience the effectiveness of his words and his example taking root. He passed on to the confreres, as a compliment on their behavior, the remark by a visitor to Saint-Lazare: “I was consoled just three or four days ago at the sight of someone leaving here. He was all smiles, and said to me, ‘I noticed here a gentleness, an openness of heart, and a certain charming simplicity (these were his words) which touched me deeply.’” This perception confirmed in Vincent the belief that a large part of the “successes” of the Mission from the beginning could be attributed to this sensitivity: “If God has blessed our first missions we may say that it is because we have acted amiably, humbly, and sincerely toward all sorts of persons.”

June, 1997

“Where Are Your Wounds?”



I

A man appeared before Saint Peter, who asked him, “Where are your wounds?” The man replied, “I have no wounds.” To which Peter rejoined, “Was there no passion in your life, no cause in which you spent and risked yourself that would invite scars?”

This modern parable speaks the same language as Vincent’s discourse on the meaning of zeal. To him zeal is more than simply a show of interest in doing God’s work. It is the fire that powers the motors of ministry. It is ardor, excitement, commitment. And yet it is not free-standing. The saint defines zeal as “a pure desire of rendering ourselves pleasing to God and profitable to our neighbor.” Consequently it has its origins in love, from which it issues: “Zeal is that which is most pure in the love of God...If the love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its rays.” Zeal is a virtue seemingly without limits, whose exercise comes at a heavy cost. Vincent welcomed the limitless field for evangelization that the apostolate offered, while chiding those who would set boundaries. “How happy is the missionary,” he declared, “who has no limit in this world on where he can go to preach the gospel. Why then do we hesitate and set limits, since God has given us the whole world to satisfy our zeal?”

Vincent was generous in offering advice and encouragement to his confreres about their responses in zeal to the challenges of ministry. But immersed as he was himself in the apostolate, he was aware of his own attitudes and often gave expression to the zeal that drove his ministry. His biographer, Louis Abelly, observed that “Vincent’s charity seemed like a burning fire, ever ready to spread when the conditions were right...” He was indeed “consumed by that heavenly fire which Jesus Christ came to bring upon the earth, to respond to everything to do with the glory of God and the salvation of souls.”

Vincent's apostolic energy was restless. "True charity does not know how to live in idleness, nor of seeing our brother in need and not to respond." He could not forget that the work of evangelization was endless nor could he shake the guilty feeling that his labors were inadequate: "I remember formerly when I was returning from one of the missions, as I approached the gates of Paris I felt they would fall upon me and crush me. Rarely did I return from a mission but this thought came to me. The reason was, I heard a voice saying within me, 'You have gone out to such and such a village, but others await the same help as you brought them.' Again, I seemed to hear it said, 'If you had not been there, probably many persons would have died in their miserable state....'"

When distance or age cut him out of the action, Vincent still felt the impulse to be a part of the enterprise. To a confrere ready to depart for Madagascar he confided, "There is nothing I desire more upon this earth, if it were permitted, that I might be your companion on this mission." On another occasion, reflecting on the deaths of several missionaries from the plague in Genoa, he drew a lesson on the willingness of the confreres — including himself — for total sacrifice, whether at home or on the missions. "Even as old and decrepit as I am," he confessed, "I should also adopt this attitude, even being ready to go to the Indies to gain souls for God, knowing that I would probably die on the way."

As Vincent sees it, age alone is no excuse for holding back. He therefore refuses to exempt himself from the obligations of the apostolate, whatever his age or other limitations. "If I cannot preach every day," he says, "all right! I will preach twice a week. If I cannot preach more important sermons, I will strive to preach less important ones. And if the people do not hear me, then what is there to prevent me from speaking in a friendly, homely way to those poor folk, as I am now speaking to you [at a Repetition of Prayer], gathering them around me as you are now?"

If Vincent's words were not sufficient testimony to his zeal, his lifelong achievements in the apostolate would certainly be a most convincing witness. Driven by boundless energy and armed with a vision that embraced all manner of projects for the poor, Vincent was to his age a spectacle of charity and zeal in the service of the gospel. That gift had a personal impact, too, on his contemporaries and collaborators. Like the image of the sun whose rays are zeal, Vincent's own zeal radiated others in a way that inspired and energized them.

II

Vincent expected of others the standards of zeal that he demanded of himself. Among these norms was his notion that authentic zeal admitted to no modifications. As a challenge for members entering the Congregation he proposed

that "all who come to the Company [should do so] with the thought of martyrdom, with the desire to suffer death and to consecrate themselves totally to serve God either in a foreign land or here at home...." That is an ideal, of course, but Vincent evidently thinks that it is within reach: "Is anything more reasonable than to give one's life for him who has so freely given his for us?"

This stance holds also for those already at work in the Company. Once, reflecting on what the confreres in Genoa were suffering while serving the plague-stricken, the saint reminded those at home that they must have "a similar disposition and the same desire to suffer for God and for the neighbor and to pour out our lives for this. Yes...we must be committed to God without reserve, to him and to the service of or neighbor. We must strip ourselves of everything for their benefit, giving our very lives for their benefit, always prepared to give all and suffer for the sake of charity...."

Faith is another necessary virtue. It will sustain any confidence for the Congregation to meet the uncertainties of the future. Vincent cites for confirmation the confreres' determination in the early days. "If the Company at its birth and in its cradle had the courage to seize the opportunities to serve God...," he asked, "should we not trust that it will be fortified and grow in time? ...We still feel the effects of the first graces of our vocation poured out upon us." Indeed, a great fear to heed is that "by our laxity we will become unworthy of the blessings God has so abundantly given the Company until now...."

The underside of zeal for Vincent was lukewarmness. In dealing with faint-hearted confreres, who surrendered to discouragement about the future works of the Congregation and who tainted others with the same depression, he could only wonder what damage "these cowardly souls" do in the Congregation. Gone to extremes, this attitude of men who live in Saint-Lazare could cause "the priests of the Mission who once gave life to the dead [to have] but the name and appearance of what they once were. They will be but corpses...the cadaver of Lazarus, not the resurrected Lazarus, and still less men who bring life to the dead." In rebuking this mentality, he appeals to the members' self-respect: "O Gentlemen, if you had but a spark of that sacred fire which consumed the heart of Jesus Christ could you spend your life with folded arms and abandon those who call for your help?"

Similarly, lukewarmness sometimes breeds laziness. Although Vincent feared excesses, he accepted it at times, on the score that something, even though more, is better than nothing. To a superior who had in his charge some discontented and lazy missionaries, he conceded, "I admit that virtue has two closely associated vices, defect and excess. Of the two, excess is more praiseworthy than defect and should be encouraged."

Although Vincent decried the limits that people put on their zeal, he recognized the need for prudence to moderate the unhealthy effects of its excesses —

“indiscreet zeal,” he called it. Such excesses are counterproductive, as Vincent once warned the Ladies of Charity: “By attempting too much [other confraternities] have succumbed under the burden...It could happen that a whole company could fail, if it attempts too much...We seek virtue by doing more. But virtue is not found simply in doing more.”

To a missionary (Philip Le Vacher) sent to Barbary, Vincent defined the limits of the confrere’s mandate there: “You were sent to Algiers to console afflicted souls, to encourage them in their sufferings, and to help them in persevering in our holy religion....” Regarding the proper stance toward the Moslems and renegade Christians who made up the society, the saint was realistic: “You are not responsible for their salvation, as you may think...Above all, you must not attempt to reform things long established among them, even if they are evil.”

Vincent’s legacy of zeal is a rich one. The quality of his own zeal, and that which he inspired in his followers, reassured him about the ongoing work of the Mission. In speaking about zeal the saint frequently used images of sparks and flames, that burned within and that flashed outward, as signs of the love of God and zeal — they went together — that drove his ministry. To work within those intense flames is easily to be scarred.

Thus the virtue of zeal, with its attendant costs, was an integral part of Vincent’s life, whose course his biographer Louis Abelly fancifully traced thus: “He accomplished and suffered so much during his life until he was finally consumed in the flames of his own zeal.” An insight that enlarges on this consuming vision, and serves as a fitting summary of his zeal, comes from the story that, while not “factual,” is “true” and has passed into the body of Vincentian mythology. Its source is the film, *Monsieur Vincent*. In the final scene the saint is seated, weary and in pain, on a bench opposite the queen of France, telling her that he has done little or nothing with his life. The queen is incredulous: “If you have done nothing, what about us?” He replies, “I don’t know — I only know that I have done nothing.” The queen asks sympathetically, “What would you have had to do in order to have accomplished something?” After a silence, Vincent’s head lifts and he says with animation, “More!”

December, 1993-January, 1994

Vincent Meditates on Loving the Poor



If only love were epidemic as the plague!
To spread, insinuate itself along the current of the blood and take
possession of the heart.

Lord, your prophecy is daily true: the poor are still among us.
The settings of their anguish change with time; the story is the same.

Indeed I worry more for them than for the Company.
In crisis we can surely improvise, but who will hear their call?
Would that love were coextensive with their plight!

But I must not delude myself with self-indulgence, empty words.
Compassion felt from custom, service minus love, are feelings soon dried up.
Nor will rhetoric, though angel-eloquent, fill the need, if I stop short of action.
It is to give a stone when asked for bread, a serpent-substitute for fish.

Nor even bread and fish themselves are equal to a hungry heart.
I must see you in my neighbor's need and feel it as your Body's throbbing hurt;
Show the love that consecrates a cup of water given in your name.
With eggs and soup must come a bellyful of hope as well.

And I must be prepared to take some hurt myself:
To summon smiles before ingratitude and impudence
humility to call the poor my lords and masters;
composure in the face of sores and squalor.
But let me not recoil: your very life has touched the poor, for you yourself
were one of them.

In doubt about your love for me I only need reflect: you love the poor,
and therefore anyone who loves them is your friend.
Then let them be my entree into your love.
Although the task is hard, my prayer is simple:
Grant me a gentleness receptive to the poor man's miseries,
but muscle equal to loving you, in them, with strength of arms and sweat of brow.

A Reverie: Vincent Looks to the Future



My vision leaps ahead in time to ponder what is future for the Company.
Call it curiosity, but is more.
Call it rather care that what you, Lord, have begun will continue to flourish.

Does the prospect frighten me?
Faith in your providence forbids me to fret about the years to come.
If there is fear, it is not of God, but of men without vision,
whose vision, like the snail's, is the circumference of a shell.

Life will change, as even now it does before my eyes, and I would not bind posterity to mindless imitation.
What, then, can I bequeath that will endure?
Of signal value, and bequest enough, is the distillation from my life and labors of a precious spirit of too great worth to die.

As now, I would have service be the missionary's watchword:
Service to the poor, however the future finds them;
Service to the clergy, whatever the mode;
Service to the Church, according to its needs;
Service, indeed, to everyone.

Let my heirs find their strength and security in a network of loving bonds:
To you, to each other, to all.

Let their visage be open to the world:
Simple and consistent, the same within as without;

Free of artifice, of pretense, of the husks of fashion.

To survive their pilgrimage, let your will be their guide,
prayer their nourishment,
charity their livery,
poverty their coin,
your Cross their power.

Pauper that I am, this is my sole legacy. But I am not ashamed, for it is product of your Spirit.

Nor is the credit mine alone.

This is the family treasure, endowed from the labors of all who were present at our creation.

It is treasure insured to last; designed, if wisely spent, marvelously to renew itself.

No, I am not afraid to look nor to hope.

In this spirit that bridges the years, I feel at one with the future.

Lord, do I err in my hope?

January, 1996

Final Soliloquy



27 September 1660

I have been ill many times before,
But this, it seems, will be my final night.
Lord, let it be a fruitful one.

In the past I have never gone to bed without facing the prospect
of appearing before you in the morning.
That moment now seems imminent.

When that time arrives, my hope is
to have breath enough to pronounce the sacred name;
to utter: *Credo* (I believe), *Spero* (I hope), *Confido* (I trust),
Commendo (I commend myself).

If I must suffer, let me remember that Jesus suffered more than I do.
Also, I have always sought to die poor — as the Son of God did.
And if I were strong enough, how I would love to serve the poor to the end of my days.
I take comfort in what I often told the missionaries:
that they would be happy who could repeat at the hour of their deaths,
“*Evangelizare pauperibus misit me.*”

How I would like the chance to bid farewell, to seek forgiveness, to offer thanks, and to
bless all those people who have been dear to me and those others who have been my life.

In my mind's eye I see them all — living and dead — Francis de Sales, Mademoiselle Le
Gras, Monsieur Portail, the Gondis, my sons and daughters in the service of the poor, the
Ladies of Charity, the foundlings, the poor, the prisoners, my benefactors.

A string of other names passes in review before me — both blessings and crosses — that have made me strong in your service, Lord: Clichy, Folleville, the College des Bons Enfants, Chattillon, Barbary, Saint-Lazare, Port Royal, Madagascar.

The vision has ceased.

I return to the present, poised between what has been and what you hold in store for me.

I am at peace, as I fall back on what I have always believed:

Today is my concern; tomorrow belongs to providence.

September, 1992