

7-1997

## Seeing and Discerning the Challenges: From St. Vincent's Eyes...To Ours

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### Recommended Citation

d'Inville, Emeric Amyot C.M. (1997) "Seeing and Discerning the Challenges: From St. Vincent's Eyes...To Ours," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 41 : No. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol41/iss4/3>

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## **Seeing and discerning the challenges From st vincent's eyes . . . to ours**

*Emeric Amyot d'Inville, C.M.*

Our Vincentian Month on Parish Missions(1) is structured, as we said at the beginning, around the procedure of "See - Judge - Act", and will be brought to a close through a concluding process, and the drawing up of a document expressing our convictions concerning this ministry today.

At present we are at the first stage: "Seeing". Up to now we have been trying to take a look at the reality surrounding us: the world, the Church, the needs they have, their challenges, our difficulties....I would now like to offer you a reflexion about the way that St Vincent focussed on the social and ecclesial reality surrounding him. Because, as a result of this very focussed look which became aware of the cries of the poor, the signs from God, the challenges to be faced, there was born his missionary and charitable work by way of appropriate and effective response. This will be for us an opportunity to make a critical appraisal of our own way of "seeing", and of the attention which we pay today to the reality which surrounds us. Also of our capacity to perceive the key challenges of our times, and of our manner of being attentive to the signs that God sends to us through events. All this in order better to adapt our missionary action. It is only if the popular mission is centred in on the real needs of our age that it can be an effective instrument for the new evangelization to which the Church is calling us.

This exposé will be essentially focussed on St Vincent unlike most of the other presentations which will have present-day missions as their starting point.. It is good, at the beginning of the Vincentian Month, to plunge back into our roots. I will divide my esposé into three parts:

- I The acquisition of an apostolic outlook.
- II The procedures of Saint Vincent for discerning the challenges of his day.
- III The great challenges which St Vincent faced up to.

### **I The acquisition of an apostolic outlook**

Fr Jean Morin in a fine study of the outlook of St Vincent's which appeared in the book about the fourth centenary of St Vincent, "1581 - 1981"(1), begins with this penetrating remark that in the portraits of St Vincent which have been preserved, "it is doubtless the eyes which are most impressive.. Noticeable in them is a great quality of attention, of observation; one also discovers a suggestion of Gascon mischievousness; above all one finds there a great goodness"

St Vincent is a man of the concrete whose starting point is direct knowledge of events about which he reflects before acting. And so we often find in his letters and conferences the verbs "see" or "look".

To Pope Innocent X whom he is asking on 16 August 1652 to intervene in favour of peace he describes the horrors of the war and he adds: *It is a small thing to hear or read these things; they must be seen and ascertained with one's own eyes* ( IV, 458) (4, 446)

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(1) "Popular Missions" is not a phrase which is used in Great Britain and Ireland; so, in order to translate " Mission Populaire", I have written "Parish Mission", which is a current expression. Translator.

(2)*Histoire d'un regard sur le pauvre*, in "1581 - 1981", published by the "Fiches Vinciennes", Toulouse, 1981, pp 41 to 83. I have besides referred to certain analyses of Fr Morin.

St Vincent did not straight away turn upon the world this compassionate look which we know and which made him undertake a rich diversity of apostolic and charitable works. He acquired it progressively along a complex route. It is only little by little that he learned to "see" in depth the world and the Church with the very eyes of Christ, and to read there how God was calling him through the appeals of the poor and the abandoned. We will briefly trace this evolution. That will help us to stand back and assess the outlook which we direct on to the world and the Church and which determines our manner of situating ourselves there and acting there.

## **1. A poor country lad looking out at the world (1581 -1595)**

Vincent's first view out on to the world was through looking at his parents, his family, his neighbours, his milieu. A poor country boy viewing the other villagers of Pouy. This marked him deeply. He was to admit this later: *I'm a farmer's son who looked after pigs and cows.* (IV, 215) To the Daughters of Charity he said: *I'll speak to you more readily about the virtues of good country girls because of the knowledge I have about this through experience and through nature, being the son of a poor labourer and having lived in the country until the age of fifteen* (IX, 81). This "inside" view of the poor was to characterise him right to the end of his life, in spite of a period of separation.

Thus it was that he experienced for the first time the poverty of living in the midst of small farmers who were needy, and also of humble work in the fields. This early experience, this first viewing by Saint Vincent was formative, and often enough he will refer to it in his writings. He wouldn't hesitate often to take the side of these poor country folk, feeling himself to be one of them. He praised their faith and their courage under trial, setting it in contrast to missionaries who were unwilling to suffer and sought their own ease reluctant to do much work: "It is in these poor people that there continues to exist the true religion and a living faith....poor wine growers, who offer us their work, who count on us to pray for them while they wear themselves out in order to nourish us! We go looking for shade! We don't wish to go out into the sun! We're such great seekers of our ease! At least while giving a mission one is in the church protected from the weather, the heat of the sun and from the rain, to which these poor people are exposed....!" (XI, 201)

In spite of a period of separation from his milieu, as we shall see, he maintained his awareness of belonging to these needy small farmers, having been immersed among them during the 14 years spent in Pouy. He maintained a deep sympathy for them. This basic experience which enabled him to see the poor from the inside certainly contributed to give to his charity its realism, its sense of the concrete needs of the poor for which practical and effective solutions needed to be found.

## 2. Developing another View of the World (1595 - 1617)

Those 14 years spent at Pouy were very enriching, but Saint Vincent didn't advert to this until he decided to devote himself to the poor with a view to evangelising them and serving them. Meanwhile he was to go away from them for about twenty-two years. And that's where a new outlook on the world was to develop thanks to contact with the wealthy, an outlook from which he would subsequently know how to draw great profit in his apostolate.

In 1595 he left his father's farm and the testing life of country folk in order to go and study in the college at Dax, while lodging with the well-off family of M. de Comet, the lawyer from Pouy. He was beginning a long period of his life where he was seeking more and more to draw himself out of his milieu and make a career for himself.

Since the ecclesiastical state was the quickest way for young men from his background to climb the social ladder, they set him out along this way. After a few years of study he was ordained a priest at the age of 19 while continuing his theological studies at the University of Toulouse.

He was out to seek his fortune, but with little success. In 1608, he entered the service of Queen Marguerite de Valois, as one of her chaplains, with the task of distributing her alms. But he was still far from his hoped-for wealth.

Ill- at- ease with his unsuccessful efforts and the lack of direction of his life --he had been a priest for 10 years and had exercised almost no priestly ministry-- he placed himself under the direction of Pierre de Bérulle, the founder of the Oratory in France. He, in November 1611, had him appointed parish priest of Clichy, near Paris, where he was to spend 16 months happily *in the midst of poor country people* (IX,646).

But Vincent left this parish and in 1613, on the recommendation of de Bérulle, entered the powerful de Gondi family as tutor. He had the confidence of Mme de Gondi and was her spiritual director.

Little by little he eased his way into the world of the influential and the rich. In spite of the ambiguity of this procedure -- he was seeking social advancement -- it was for him an opportunity to develop another way of looking at the world. He was seeing things from the viewpoint of the wealthy. In their name he was meeting the poor, distributing the alms of Queen Margot or, in the company of Mme de Gondi, visiting the villagers working on her lands. He was discovering also the generosity of these rich people who were helping the poor with their money and sometimes visiting them. This experience marked him with regard to a large part of his social and pastoral activity, especially in respect of the confraternities of Charity. He was noting the material and moral resources of this milieu.

After 1617 and up to his death, M. Vincent was to devote all his time to the evangelisation and service of the poor. But he also never ceased to keep up contact with the well-off and to seek their collaboration. From 1610 to 1617, Vincent could see the shortcomings of the wealthy but also the values and resources of this milieu which he was to direct towards the service of the poor. One need only think of the numerous Ladies of Charity from among the nobility and the WEALTHY.

### 3. Maturing towards an Apostolic Outlook (1617)

The most fundamental experiences which were to establish definitively his outlook as apostle of the poor took place in the year 1617. Let's pause here a little. It will be a chance for us to go back again into the origins of parish missions.

#### a) *Folleville and the discovery of spiritual misery*

In January 1617 Vincent was with the de Gondis as tutor. He went to Folleville accompanying Mme de Gondi who was visiting the villages situated on her lands.

We know about this episode which is at the origin of the popular missions. Let us recall it in a few words. M. Vincent was called to the bed-side of a dying man in the neighbouring village of Gannes. He hears his confession. It's an event which might appear common-place for a priest. But then the old man makes an admission to Mme de Gondi concerning: *grave sins of his past life*, as Vincent recounts to his missioners. The lady is alarmed: "*Ah!, if this man who was taken for a good person was in a state of damnation, what about others who live worse lives? Ah, M. Vincent, how many souls are being lost! What's the remedy for this?*" (XI,4) Mme de Gondi begged M. Vincent to preach on the theme of general confession in the church in Folleville. And the result was that the people were deeply moved, and crowded along to confession. He was to do the same thing in nearby villages on subsequent days.

M. Vincent was challenged by the massive reaction in the parish of Folleville to his improvised preaching on general confession as much as by the confession of the man at Gannes. Suddenly he had evidence that the poor country people were left abandoned by the Church and that all that was needed was a priest and a sermon in order to arouse in them an unexpected longing for conversion.

*All these good people, he recounts, were so touched by God that they were all coming along.....But the crowd was so great that, being unable to cope, we had to call upon the Jesuits from Amiens (XI,4).*

This alarming discovery of the immense spiritual needs of the poor country folk and their abandonment by the Church was for him the revelation of a challenge, and a powerful appeal. For the future he wanted to continue the apostolate which he had so well begun in Folleville.

His focus was now no longer on himself, on his social success, on his family. It was definitively directed to the poor country people and their spiritual needs. And that is why, a few months after the experience at Folleville, he secretly went away from the de Gondis and from any idea of personal promotion. He travelled to Châtillon in order to be free from every constraint so as to preach and administer the sacraments. Châtillon was going to reveal to him another dimension to his vocation.

#### b) *Châtillon and the rediscovery of material misery*

M. Vincent arrived on 1st August 1617 in Châtillon, a rural parish of 2000 inhabitants and very run-down. Three weeks after his arrival there took place the second event which

was to challenge him as at Folleville and through which God was again going to speak to him. He would discover what was to become one of the constituents of the missionary apostolate: service of the poor through the Confraternity of Charity.

We are aware of what took place. Just before preaching, *a message was brought to me*, he recounts, *that there was a poor man who was sick and very badly housed in a wretched barn.....Greatly moved with compassion, I strongly urged that he should be helped, and with such feeling that all the women were touched (IX,423)*. Without delay they all off went at the same time bringing him help. In order to remedy this inefficiency, due to lack of organisation in their generosity, Saint Vincent set them up as a Confraternity of Charity to help the poor who *have often suffered owing more to lack of order in assisting them rather than lack of charitable people* (First Rule of the confraternity of Charity of Châtillon, XIII, 423).

In Châtillon, M. Vincent discovered two facts which would profoundly mark his action in the future:

- 1) Effective intervention for improving conditions in the lives of the poor must go hand- in-hand with evangelisation. They cannot be separated.
- 2) The essential place of the laity, their irreplaceable role both at the level of evangelisation and that of material service and promotion of the poor.

In Folleville, M. Vincent had been struck by the *spiritual* misery of the poor who were abandoned by the Church, and by priests. In Châtillon he was challenged by the *material* misery of the poor who were abandoned by society, as well as by the Church. The Church is directly concerned in this question and cannot close itself off into the purely spiritual dimension of ministry. For the future there would constantly come to his lips the two adverbs: *spiritually* and *corporally*, which became for him inseparable and which were found in the very first rule of the Confraternity of Charity of Châtillon: a few women of the village *agreed to give spiritual and corporal assistance to those in the town (XIII, 423)*. This regulation of M. Vincent's first foundation already contained the seed of everything which was subsequently to characterise his charitable and social action. In it could be found especially his astonishing organising ability as well as his respect for the worth of the poor person who deserves to be treated with dignity.

This year 1617 was therefore decisive for Saint Vincent. At the beginning of January he was still hesitant about what direction to give to his life. And now he had arrived at the decision to devote the rest of his life to the evangelisation and the material support of the poor whose real needs he had been able to discern as a result of the basic experiences of Folleville and Châtillon.

#### **4 What is My Outlook on the World?**

Such was, in broad outline, the story of Saint Vincent's outlook with its stages and its maturing. We are now going to reflect for a moment on our own personal outlook and on its evolution.

a. *The initial outlook inherited from within the family circle.* Saint Vincent, like each of us inherited from his family circle a certain way of looking at the world. He hadn't therefore chosen it. This outlook was to remain fundamental for him even if it was to be completed by other subsequent ways of looking. Let us think back for a moment on the outlook which is special to each one of us and which was formed in the family and social circle of our first years. It constitutes generally a formative influence where we have learned to view things from a particular angle. It is sometimes a outlook which needs to be changed because it has suffered so much from the limitations and prejudices of a particular background. Certainly it still leaves its imprint on us today. We need to be aware of it.

b. *Then there comes another outlook which completes it.* Saint Vincent had later distanced himself from his milieu in order to try and enter another, in an effort to forge a career. However, in spite of the ambiguity of his procedure, this allowed him to discover another view-point on the world, that of the upper classes. He undoubtedly saw their faults, but he also became aware of their material and moral resources and of their generosity. He was able to understand them, speak to them and obtain their collaboration in the service of the poor. It is good for us to notice the other viewpoints from which, as a result of our subsequent experiences, we looked at the world, and which have contributed to form our present outlook on it.

c. *A basic outlook* Folleville and Châtillon were definitive experiences for Saint Vincent. In the course of these, taking on an apostolic outlook, he focussed his view definitively on the poor with their spiritual and material needs. Such was the viewpoint from which he was in future to look at the world and understand it. Each of us individually can ask ourselves what is today the basic viewpoint from which we view the world, and if this is truly Vincentian.

Saint Vincent developed an apostolic outlook which enabled him to grasp the great challenges of his day and which directed him towards practical and effective solutions. By reflecting on his experience we can ask ourselves through what stages did he pass in order to identify the challenges.

## **II Saint Vincent's Procedure for Discerning the Challenges of his Time**

Becoming sensitive to the challenges of an era is a complex process, taking place at several levels. It is far from being purely intellectual. Saint Vincent didn't begin by reading learned reports, of which however he knew the usefulness as well as the limits, as we see in his already quoted letter to Pope Innocent X: *It is a small thing to hear or read these things; they must be seen and ascertained with one's own eyes* (IV, 458). Even if nowadays research and reports can be very useful they are not sufficient to make us notice the challenges of today's world or at least they do not constitute stage one.. What was Saint Vincent's stages of procedure, and what might be ours?

### **1 To encounter certain challenging experiences**

Let us reflect on what was decisive for Saint Vincent in his sensitivity to the great challenges of his day. It ought to be said at the start that for several years the material and spiritual misery of the poor, although he was aware of it from close quarters, had not

constituted for him a challenge. He had been immersed in poverty for the first fourteen years of his life and he suffered from it. Then he wished to get away from it for twenty-two years. But this lived experience of poverty nevertheless had not for him been transformed into awareness of a challenge to be met. Besides, during all these years, he didn't try to remedy it, but only to get away from it, he and his family. The reason for this is that he was still centred on himself and on his immediate family as extensions of himself.

In order to become aware of the challenges of his times Saint Vincent would have to undergo certain powerful experiences which would entail the blending of: a) certain important events, and b) an opening of the heart to be sensitive to them, an opening to the neighbour as well as to God and to what God wanted of him. His heart would then quicken, being profoundly touched. He would be *moved with great compassion* in the face of this misery (IX, 209), as he said on several occasions. And he would at the same time feel himself personally challenged, and called to do something which would help. The result was that the course of his life was changed. In fact, in the face of all corporal and spiritual suffering, he would be captivated by the very charity of Christ who lived in him and "worked on" his heart.

*Charity, he said to his Missioners, makes us unable to see the neighbour suffer without suffering with him, to see him weep and not weep with him. It is an act of love which makes us enter into the hearts and feelings of each other. Far removed is it from those who feel no compassion for the afflicted or the suffering poor. Ah! how tender of heart the Son of God was. He is called to visit Lazarus and he goes.....He weeps with them, so tender and compassionate is he. It was this tenderness which caused him to come down from heaven, seeing people excluded from his glory. He was touched by their misfortune (XII, 270).* We know how, in the case of Saint Vincent, this love would not be merely affective but very effective indeed, practical, active and inventive in relieving any suffering and for bringing the good news of salvation.

It is this openness of the heart to the neighbour and to God which enabled him to read the meaning of events and to see God's call in them. He would then understand the real challenges facing society and the Church, and at the same time would discover that he was capable of taking action with regard to them in order to bring about an effective solution. These basic experiences which vigorously challenged Saint Vincent's conscience were principally :

- the meeting with the countryman from Gannes and the subsequent very successful missions;
- the encounter with the poor invalid at Châtillon and the formation of the first Confraternity of Charity; to which one could add:
- the encounter with the Protestant from Marchais who threw it in his face that the Catholic church cannot be led by the Holy Spirit since in it the poor are abandoned; and then a year later the conversion of this same Protestant when he sees in the course of a mission that the poor are evangelized.

After these basic experiences Saint Vincent was always attentive to the signs from God who ceaselessly speaks anew through events. The encounter with new forms of poverty would be for him pressing calls to take up the challenge by seeking to provide solutions through his diverse foundations: the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity. Thus, meeting with the galley-slaves, the sick in hospital, the abandoned children, the aged, the war-refugees, the Catholics persecuted in Ireland or in the Hebrides, etc.



Coming to another stage, the re-reading of the experience in the light of the word of God would enable Saint Vincent to move deeper into his understanding of reality and to confirm his discernment of the calls which God was expressing there. That will be my second point.

## 2 Re-reading the Event in the Light of God's Word.

a. It is in a re-reading of the Gannes-Folleville event in the light of the Gospel, especially Luke 4, 17-22, that he understands the depth of the challenge which is thrown at him. This is in line with the mission of Jesus who, returning to Nazareth at the start of his public life, reads out in the synagogue a text of the prophet Isaiah: "*The spirit of the Lord has been given to me for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.*" Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them: "*This text is being fulfilled **today** even as you listen.*"

After the experience of Folleville, this text of the Gospel affirming that Jesus came to evangelise the poor confirmed Saint Vincent in his call to evangelise them. He sees clearly that announcing the good news to the poor puts him at the heart of the Gospel and in line with the mission of Jesus. This is indeed the challenge which God asks him to take up after the example of Jesus. For the future he will have his eyes and his heart wide open to welcome and discern the various spiritual needs of the poor so as to respond to them.

b. Another Gospel text would help Saint Vincent to re-read and understand in depth the Châtillon event and the foundation of the first Confraternity of Charity. It would at the same time enable him to focus more deeply on the poor to the extent of seeing there the presence of Christ himself. It is the parable of the Last Judgment (Mt 25, 31-46): "*Then the King will say to those on his right hand : Come, you whom my Father has blessed..... for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me.....I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine , you did it to me.*" This text throws a clear light on the Châtillon event and gives him confirmation of his call to relieve all suffering, since anyway, it is Jesus whom one meets and helps in the person of the poor and the suffering.

And so Saint Vincent would be able to say: *Turn the medal and **you will see through the light of faith** that the Son of God who wished to be poor is represented for us by these poor people....Lord! how beautiful to see the poor if we consider them in God and in the esteem which Jesus showed them!* (XI, 32)

## 3 And now what about ourselves?

What are the challenging experiences which I have met and which opened my eyes to today's great challenges with regard to evangelisation? Has the word of God helped me to understand them more deeply? What are my key texts?

### III The great challenges to which Saint Vincent responded

Saint Vincent was able to involve himself and his various foundations (Confraternities of Charity, Congregation of the Mission and Daughters of Charity) in appropriate apostolic action which had a profound effect on the social and ecclesial life of his time because he could see and discern clearly the challenges of his times and the call of God involved in these. He almost changed the face of the Church, Henri de Maupas du Tour was to say in the homily at Saint Vincent's funeral. If we wish today to get to grips with our world we must, like Saint Vincent, know how to view and understand situations in their context and distinguish what exactly is at stake and what challenges need to be met. I am now going to evoke briefly 4 of the biggest challenges which Saint Vincent discerned and which are linked to missions. That will be able to help and stimulate us in seeking those of our own time and our own region of the world.

#### 1 Challenge of the spiritual misery of the poor country people

The country people are perishing with hunger for the word of God according to Saint Vincent's beautiful and touching phrase. He became aware of this misery in Folleville.

a. He discovered also that *the Church has abandoned them: those living in the towns of this country, he wrote, have the help of plenty of doctors of theology and religious....it is only the poor country people who alone are left as if abandoned* (Foundation Contract, XIII, 198).

That Protestant whom Saint Vincent met at Marchais in 1621 was right; he made the objection: *One sees the Catholics of the countryside abandoned to vicious and ignorant pastors, without being instructed in their duties, with most of them not even knowing what is the christian religion; and on the other hand one sees the towns full of priests and monks who are doing nothing; and in Paris perhaps there are ten thousand who however leave these poor country people in this dreadful ignorance which causes them to be lost* (XI, 34). This same Protestant was to return to the Catholic church where he was to see, one year later, in the course of a mission given by Saint Vincent, that the poor were being evangelised.

b. The poor country people are in *a profound ignorance of their faith*, according to Saint Vincent who says with compassion: *The poor people coming to confession are so gross, so ignorant, so obtuse, not to say so animal! They don't know how many gods there are, or how many persons in God. Get them to repeat it fifty times and you'll find that in the end they're as ignorant as at the start* (XIII, 305).

The situation is quite serious more or less all over Europe. Thus at Niolo in Corsica, Etienne Blatiron writes: *We found almost no other traces of the faith except that they said they had been baptised; and there were a few churches, but badly kept. They were in such ignorance about their salvation that it was hard to find a hundred people who knew the commandments of God and the Apostles' Creed. Asking them if there is a God or if there are several, and which of the divine persons became man for us was like talking Arabic* (IV, 412). In the Islands of the Hebrides Dermot Duggan thus described the situation in Eigg and Canna: *God has converted eight or nine hundred people who were so poorly instructed in matters concerning our religion that there weren't fifteen who knew any of the mysteries of the christian faith....I found thirty or forty people aged seventy, eighty and a hundred or more who hadn't received holy baptism* (IV, 516). Mission reports provide abundant descriptions

of this profound ignorance of the country people. Saint Vincent believed that their eternal salvation was in danger.

c. In addition, being badly instructed in their faith, *many became Protestants*. This religion was dominant in northern Europe. It continued to spread into France where the priests were not very competent or caring about giving good spiritual teaching to their parishoners. So people began to accept what was said by Protestant ministers who were often zealous and explained the gospel to them. Speaking of Champigny near Richelieu, Saint Vincent wrote: *O Father, what spiritual needs there are in that area, where there are many heretics, because, so they say, they haven't heard God spoken of in the Catholic churches!* (I, 514)

The great remedy invented by saint Vincent would be, as we know, parish missions. The missionaries went to meet the abandoned rural populations and offered them a basic catechesis adapted to their level in which the principal aspects of the faith were proclaimed. They paid special attention to the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Eucharist which Saint Vincent had represented on the front of the Common Rules. It was this faith proclamation through the "catechism classes" during missions which in Saint Vincent's eyes was most useful to the people. We will have occasion to come back to that on another day.

## **2 The challenge from behaviour which is at variance with the gospel**

Moral disorders in personal, family and social life were often very prevalent among christians; their style of living was far from the gospel. This gap between a professed christian faith and a life which contradicted the gospel was a challenge which Saint Vincent and his missionaries clearly discerned and to which they would try to bring a solution in the course of missions. I shall take principally the example of interpersonal relations.

a *Disrupted interpersonal relationships*. Disunity between people in whatever form was a frequent evil in families and in village or parish communities. It is interesting to note that Saint Vincent and his missionaries were very aware of this since it represents a clear contradiction of the gospel message given to us by Jesus. It would be one of the principal aims of the missions to try to remedy this.

We find in mission reports very numerous descriptions of these broken relationships and of the missionaries' attempts to repair them in order to build up a family, or village or parish community where there would exist a practical charity worthy of true christians.

Deep-rooted hatred, revenge, unjust taking of other people's property, and lawsuits were frequent everywhere and were poisoning the life of families and villages. Let's cite just one example from among the worst, taken from the account of a mission at Niolo in Corsica: *vengeance was so rife that no sooner had children learned to walk and to talk than they were taught how to seek vengeance at the slightest offence. It was useless to preach the contrary to them because the example of their ancestors and the bad advice of their own relatives regarding to this vice were so deeply rooted in their minds that they were incapable of accepting any opinion to the contrary* (IV, 412).

Faced with this type of problem the missionaries would do what the Common Rules states about taking as an objective during the missions *to settle differences and lawsuits* (C.R. 2). In fact: *We have been established*, Saint Vincent used to say, *to reconcile people with God and people with one another*.

The missionaries were to give themselves with zeal to this interpersonal and communitarian ministry of reconciliation. They would do it by preaching forcefully on the subject and by making much personal contact with the people concerned so that they might become reconciled and forgive one another and might restore ill-gotten goods. Let's give one example from among very many, drawn from the Niolo missions account: *Finally, on the eve of the general Communion, I was coming to the close of the sermon, after exhorting the people once again to forgiveness, God inspired me to take in hand the crucifix I was wearing and to say to them that anyone who was willing to forgive should come and kiss it. Then I invited them to do so in the name of Our Lord, who was stretching forth His arms to them saying that those who kissed that crucifix would be giving a sign that they were willing to forgive and were ready to be reconciled with their enemies. (in fact nobody budged but a reformed Franciscan who was in the church called upon them again). Then a parish priest whose nephew had been killed and the murderer was present at the sermon came to prostrate himself on the ground and asked to kiss the crucifix. At the same time he said in a loud voice: "Let a certain person (his nephew's murderer) come forward so that I can embrace him". When this was done another priest did the same with regard to some of his enemies who were present. These two were followed by a throng of others, so much so that for the space of an hour and a half, we saw nothing but reconciliations and embraces. For greater assurance the most important matters were put in writing and authenticated by a notary public. The next day --- Communion Day --- a general reconciliation took place. After the people had asked pardon of God, they asked it also of their pastors and vice-versa; it was all very edifying....(IV, 415)*

It is interesting to note that above and beyond an indispensable effort towards individual conversion, the mission was the occasion of a whole drive to build up a communitarian life of fraternal charity and peace which should be a gospel sign at the level of the family, the village and the parish. Because, as Saint Vincent said, in a conference to missionaries: *I must love my neighbour as the image of God and the object of his love, and likewise bring it about that people should love their Creator who knows and recognises them as his brothers and has saved them ;and that, with a mutual charity they should love one another for the love of God who has so loved them as to deliver his own Son to death.....(XII, 262 - 263). Quite definitely the whole mission consists in that: relationships based on love!*

b *Other challenges* By way of exemplifying the work of converting the day-to-day living of people which takes place during missions let's briefly mention: concubinage and irregular unions. They are frequent more or less everywhere and damage the constitution of true christian families. This subject was dealt with in preaching. The missionaries would try to bring those whose situation was amenable into a true religious marriage and would try to persuade others to separate. Other moral disorders ought to be mentioned which the missionaries tried to remedy: blasphemies, excesses of the carnival, drunkenness, etc.

Let's conclude this point by saying that the mission wished to offer a way towards a practical turning of their lives back to the gospel. As well as the "Catechism Lessons" which deal with the principal aspects of the faith, the missionaries each day gave what they called a "preaching", that is to say a sermon with a moral purpose, envisaging the different concrete areas of the lives of the people so as to lead them to renounce sin and embrace the corresponding virtues of their state. The results would often be impressive, securing astonishing reformations of life: reconciliations between enemies, mutual forgiveness, restitution of property, regularisation of unions, etc.

### 3 The Challenge of Material Poverty

a. Saint Vincent took up in Châtillon the challenge of *permanent material poverty*, involving principally the sick poor who lived in the village and he gave it a first response by setting up a Confraternity of Charity which would be followed by numerous others. He would also discover other permanent poverties : the sick in hospitals, abandoned children, old people, unemployed adults, orphans, prisoners, slaves in Barbary, and others besides. His various foundations would adapt themselves to respond to these needs.

In villages where missions had been given, in order to reply to daily and permanent misery especially among the sick poor he wished that after each mission a Confraternity of Charity should be set up composed of christian parishioners (generally women in fact), to take care of the poor in that place. Indeed, to establish the Confraternity of Charity (C.R. 2) was one of the aims of the missions mentioned by the Common Rules. Many mission accounts state that the Confraternity had been set up at the end of the mission, sometimes thanks to a Daughter of Charity who had been sent expressly for that (SV I, 457).

b. In addition to this permanent daily misery, already bad enough, there was *an exceptional misery* provoked by "extraordinary" phenomena which settled in and lasted several years : the wars with their train of murders, brigandage and famines, epidemics like the plague, etc. We find a very evocative picture of this in his letter of 16 August 1652 to Pope Innocent X whom he asks to intervene in favour of peace. *The royal house is divided by dissensions; the people are split into various factions; cities and provinces are ruined by civil wars; farms, cantons and towns are destroyed, ruined and burned. The farmers cannot harvest what they have sown and no longer plant anything for the coming years. Soldiers do as they please; the people are exposed not only to their thefts and pillaging, but also to murder and all kinds of torture. Most of the country people are perishing of starvation if not by the sword....(IV, 458)*

Saint Vincent would launch the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity and the missionaries into efforts to remedy all these miseries. He would send them into Champagne, Lorraine, Picardy, and the war-stricken Paris region. He got food distributed, nourishing tens of thousands of poor in Paris and the provinces. He provided agricultural implements and seeds to enable people to return to work and themselves take care of their needs. He always linked evangelisation to the giving of material aid, asking the missionaries to preach missions while they were organising relief aid.

Let's cite another great challenge which anyway is closely linked to the mission's:

### 4 Challenge of Poor Quality Clergy

Saint Vincent saw clearly that the clergy of his day, often lacking a true vocation, badly formed and with lax morals were incapable of looking after the ordinary spiritual needs of the people, especially in the country, as well as assuring a follow-up to the missions. A bishop, in a letter to Saint Vincent, complained of *the large and inexplicable number of ignorant and lax priests who compose my clergy and who can't be corrected either by word or by example. I'm horrified when I think that in my diocese there are almost seven thousand drunk or unchaste priests who daily mount the altar steps and who have no*

*vocation* (II, 428-429). Saint Vincent knew the problem well for it is likely he was one of these priests who, without living a scandalous life, had progressed towards the priesthood without a vocation in order to ascend the social scale.

a. But Saint Vincent is also faced with *the problem of follow-up to the missions*. Often the deplorable state of the clergy ran the risk of compromising the fruit of the missions., since good priests are needed to ensure development after the missionaries have gone away. Saint Vincent explains : *Now working for the salvation of the poor country people is central to our vocation and all the rest is only accessory; for we would have never got involved in the ordinations, the ecclesiastical seminaries if we hadn't judged that that was necessary to maintain the people and preserve the fruit brought about by the missions when there are good ecclesiastics, imitating in that the great conquerors who leave garrisons in the places they capture, for fear of losing what they have acquired with such effort* (XI, 133).

Saint Vincent would, as we know, invent new structures for forming good priests: ordination retreats, Tuesday conferences, and seminaries. But parish missions would also make a specific contribution to remedying this problem.

b *Help given to the clergy through the missions*

1) It was the very fact of following *the mission itself* with their parishioners that helped them. Indeed it can be seen from mission reports that many priests were renewed in their personal lives and in their priestly ministry during the mission. Some were reconciled with their parishioners as we saw for example at Niolo. Others were renewed in their ministry as is recounted in the same mission report: *the priests firmly promised to teach the catechism lessons and to become more careful of their duties* (IV, 417).

2) It was the foundation, towards the end of the mission, of *a clergy conference* after the model of the Tuesday conferences initiated by Saint Vincent at Paris. *Saint Vincent*, Abelly says, *wished that his missionaries should be involved, as they are, throughout the mission in rendering all the services they could to the clergy of the places where they were working, especially by means of spiritual conferences in which they treated with them concerning the obligations of their state, the faults they should most avoid, the virtues they are obliged to practise and which are most proper and suitable, and other similar subjects* (Abelly I, 279).

The missionaries could also propose to the priests of the parishes in an area which had received missions to gather together and under their direction make *a retreat* in their house. Mission reports sometimes tell of spectacular cases of conversion of priests and more frequently of priests committing themselves to take zealous care of their parishes.

One could mention still other challenges which Saint Vincent had perceived and had taken up (unworthy bishops, Jansenism, etc.). We have seen those most directly connected with our theme of popular missions. And so we shall stop here. It is now time to conclude our remarks by analysing what one might call the "Vincentian procedures" which lay at the root of the rich fruitfulness of Saint Vincent's ministry.

## Conclusion

This brief presentation of the principal challenges which Saint Vincent picked up with great clear-sightedness and this glimpse of the responses which he brought through the parish missions are sufficient to enable us to understand how Saint Vincent truly got to grips with

the society and the Church of his time and why he had such a real impact that he had "almost changed the face of the Church".

His method of proceeding could be summed up thus:

- viewing reality with the eyes of an apostle and discerning the true needs of those who were poorest and most abandoned
- confronting this and seeking responses with inventiveness, courage and confidence in God
- diversifying, ceaselessly adapting and gearing down his action, seeking numerous collaborations: priests, consecrated women, and laity;
- simultaneously pushing forward evangelisation and assistance or promotion of the poor, giving priority now to one, now to the other, but always linking them closely;

A criticism which one sometimes hears about parish missions today is that they limit themselves to being a pious exercise or a nice celebration for Christians, but having no tomorrow. This is because in certain places the priests see them as such, even if this is incorrect, and they demand nothing more and missions are frozen out. It seems to me that if we want our present-day ministry of parish missions to really get to grips with our times we must draw inspiration from the Vincentian procedures which we have just focussed on. It would therefore be helpful for us to continue our reflexions concerning our way of a) perceiving the big challenges of today, discerning particularly the needs of the poorest and most abandoned of our times, b) facing these by seeking suitable and effective solutions with regard to assistance and evangelisation.

As missionaries we ought to be pioneers of evangelisation. We cannot remain satisfied with walking in the steps of our predecessors, for the world is changing (even if we cannot of course belittle the experiences of the past). If we were to fail to identify today's challenges and to face them with inventiveness and a spirit of faith, we would be staying at the edge of the real problems of the Church, and parish missions would be insignificant and without real impact.

However, if we are here, it's because we believe that parish missions are capable of being a response, albeit partial, but an effective and appropriate response to the true problems of the Church and of our present-day world. It is because we believe that in actualising the Vincentian charism of evangelisation and service of today's most abandoned people the parish mission can contribute effectively and in a concrete way to the new evangelisation which our world needs. This is also what is at stake concerning our reflexions here and the very reason for this Vincentian Month.

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