

11-1999

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Recommended Citation

Orcajo, Antonio C.M. (1999) "The Jubilee in St. Vincent's Thought," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 43 : No. 6 , Article 12. Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol43/iss6/12>

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THE JUBILEE IN ST. VINCENT'S THOUGHT

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There is no Christian, with a sincere desire for conversion to the Gospel, who does not experience a deep joy about the proximity of the Great Jubilee for the year 2000. Even the small communities, which have sprung up in this time for the service of the Church and the world, are taking pains to celebrate with yearning the passage from the second to the third millennium. All those with a sincere heart have received with gratitude, not only the Apostolic Letter *Millennio Adveniente* (TMA) of Pope John Paul II, published November 10, 1994, but many other instructions referring to the Holy Year, trying to make their lives better before such a relevant event.

News of the Vincentian Family have reached us from everywhere, from the farthest corners of the world, about the projects the Missionaries have programmed to commemorate the imminent Jubilee celebration. Not a few confreres have already picked up the teachings of St. Vincent de Paul to enrich themselves and the communities which they lead with the grace of the Holy Year according to the example of their founder. If we look through the literary work of St. Vincent, it is not difficult to extract his thoughts on the theme of the Jubilee, above all starting with works already finished about this theme and which, in part, we reproduce almost word for word in *Vincentiana*.¹

1. *I have known several jubilees*

Through the correspondence and conferences of St. Vincent we know about the jubilees celebrated in his time. The saint alludes to them to his correspondents in 1634, 1636, 1641, 1645, 1648, 1653, 1656. Of these, three principal jubilees merit our attention: those convoked in 1641, 1653, and 1656 by Urban VIII (1623-1644), Innocent X (1644-1655) and Alexander VII (1655-1667) respectively. On April 17, 1653 St. Vincent made this confession to the Daughters of Charity: "*I have known several jubilees, but perhaps I have never fulfilled them.*"² There's no doubt about the first part. What is not so evident is that he never fulfilled a jubilee. The *perhaps* of the saint obliges us to suspend judgment, although, given his great love of Jesus evangelizer of the poor, with whom he desired to identify himself, we are inclined to think that he fulfilled some of them. But only God knows and there's no reason to waste more ink in more speculations. In October of 1641 he wrote to St. Louise de Marillac: "*I have resolved to make a small retreat for the Jubilee, and I have begun it today. I commend myself to your prayers.*"³ That shows the care he placed in

¹ Cf. Orcajo, A., *El Gran Jubileo del año 2.000 y los Jubileos en tiempo de san Vicente*, Anales C.M., n° 3, mayo-junio 1997, pp. 232-244.

² SVP. IX, 610.

³ SVP. II, 191.

obtaining the remission of guilt and the temporal punishment merited for his sins.

Apart from his personal dispositions, the eagerness with which he desired that others -- the Missionaries, the Daughters of Charity and the simple people-- would prepare themselves to worthily receive the gifts of the Time of Grace or Holy Year is indisputable. There are many communications which he directed to his companions, by way of information, about the extraordinary acts, either in the community or outside it, for the Jubilees. In the letter just cited, he adds at the end: “*After the retreat we’ll speak about the way they (the sisters) and you yourself can fulfill the Jubilee too.*”⁴

Some of the news that he gives us are on the national level and agree with the history of France in the Seventeenth Century. He says, for example, in the conference to the Daughters of Charity on April 17, 1653: “*The king himself makes these stations on foot. The queen does what she can; she says: I am old. I cannot do it all on foot.*”⁵ This fact agrees with the information of some historians: *The jubilee indulgences particularly interested the masses of the people, headed by the sovereigns. Anne of Austria was very assiduous about the jubilees; and Louis XIV participated in them without delay or concealment, with regularity and fervor.*⁶

St. Vincent’s concern to catechize the faithful jumps out at us, as well as the excellent qualities with which he was blessed for instructing and animating the people. After explaining the conditions for fulfilling the Jubilee, he humorously asked a sister: “*You, sister, who are so young; let’s see what you know. How many evils are there in mortal sin?*”⁷ The sister answered correctly, also to the eleven questions which followed. At the end, St. Vincent could not contain his joy in confirming the good memory of that country girl who was ready to do everything to fulfill the Jubilee.

2. Many people talk about the Jubilee without knowing what it is

In the past, just as today, the term, Jubilee, is on the tongues of many, but there are few who know its true meaning and historic origin. As was to be expected, the doctrine expounded as much in the TMA as in the catechesis of St. Vincent coincide substantially; they are only different in small details, above all in the area of indulgences, which the passage of time has imposed. There exists, in effect, an uninterrupted doctrinal tradition concerning the Jubilees, from the first one in the year 1300, convoked by Boniface VIII, to the last in 1983 (an extraordinary Holy Year for the 1950th anniversary of the death and resurrection of Christ) convoked by John Paul II.

The saint’s declaration is still true: “*Many talk about the jubilee without knowing what it is.*”⁸ From that fact arose the concern for forming everyone well

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ SVP. IX, 621.

⁶ Feuillas, M.: *Jubilé*, en “Dictionnaire du Grand Siècle”, Fayard 1990.

⁷ SVP. IX, 618.

⁸ SVP. IX, 609.

about the jubilee celebrations. The conferences which best condense his thought about the jubilee were given to the Daughters of Charity (Conferences of October 15, 1641; April 17, 1653 and December 14, 1656). We refer the reader to these conferences if you want to know many of the details which are not commented on here.

St. Vincent begins, in his catechesis, with the meaning of the term, jubilee, and explains that: “*that word means joy and jubilation; and the Jubilee Year means a year of joyfulness.*”⁹ In reality Jubilee derives from the Hebrew word, *jobhel*, which means horn. That’s because the beginning of the Jubilee Year, which is repeated every fifty years, is announced by the sound of a ram’s horn, as the Old Testament indicates (Lv 25).

Perfectly understanding and explaining the vocabulary in question, St. Vincent proceeds, through questions and answers, to explain that the Jubilee is an extraordinary time of grace, forgiveness and blessing, a special moment for the conversion of all believers and, for us in particular, another reason for our *complete self-gift to God*, and an impetus to live consecrated to charity and the service of the poor. The saint did not lack skill in pointing out the differences between the Jubilees of the Old Testament and those convoked by the popes in Rome.

3. Have the intention of conversion during this Jubilee.

The theme of conversion and penance brings together all of the Vincentian teachings about the Jubilee celebrations. In effect, it’s about not committing sins in the future –the negative aspect of conversion– and putting on the spirit of Jesus Christ–the positive aspect. According to the Augustinian definition of sin, conversion consists in *returning to God and leaving behind creatures* which have separated us from him, with the true purpose of always remaining united to the Lord.¹⁰ In other words, it means that, on the occasion of the Jubilee, “*all Christians, from now on, will serve you, Savior of our souls, with fidelity, so that every community might live the perfection that you require of them*”.¹¹

When he treats the theme of the perfection required by God for a Missionary or Daughter of Charity, St. Vincent quickly moves to the urgency of renewing oneself in the *proper spirit* of the community formed by the particular virtues. On June 14, 1656, he writes to a priest of his Congregation, exhorting him to speak with simplicity in view of the good results that the simple preaching of the Jesuits about the Jubilee had produced: “*I hope that this example will confirm us in the practice of never speaking in public or in private without simplicity, humility and charity.*”¹² This advice is like a drop of water which gets lost in the immense ocean of exhortations on the virtues which constitute the spirit of the missionary community.

In Vincent’s judgment, it’s not enough to bear the name of Missionaries or

⁹ SVP. IX, 47. 610-611; X, 229.

¹⁰ Cf. SVP. IX, 46-52.

¹¹ SVP. X, 242.

¹² SVP. V, 632.

Daughters of Charity, but rather, convincing signs of life are required. *“Have the intention during this jubilee, he said to the sisters, of converting yourselves into true Daughters of Charity; because it’s not enough to be Daughters of Charity in name. It’s necessary to truly be so.”*¹³ Later, returning to the theme of the spirit of the Company: *“During this time, the Daughters of Charity have to ask the Lord for those three beautiful virtues: charity, humility and charity.”*¹⁴

According to the saint, the process of conversion necessarily carries with it a strengthening of the theological virtues and the practice of prayer. *What does it mean when we are invited to allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit, to enjoy the freedom of the children of God, “living those beautiful virtues which are the treasures of Christians and are like the suns which warm our souls?”*¹⁵ In particular, charity towards God and humanity is the indispensable condition for fulfilling the Jubilee. Returning again to the spirit of the community, St. Vincent points out that nothing is as contrary to God’s plan as sins against charity whether by murmuring, selfishness or animosity of some against others.¹⁶ Charity also has a penitential dimension which is fulfilled by almsgiving. *“It is said that it’s necessary to give alms... The Company will give alms for everyone since you are all poor... In our house (St. Lazare) we do it like that.”*¹⁷

If we pass to the area of prayer, the exhortations of St. Vincent to be faithful to the encounter with the Lord during the time of Jubilee are repeated at every step. Whatever the reason were for moving the Roman pontiff to call the Jubilee, it’s necessary to ask in prayer *“for his intentions, for the conversion of sinners, for the sanctification of the clergy, for the purification of so many heresies which have afflicted the Church for the last three hundred years, for peace, for the king and queen and all the people, and above all that the scourge of the plague might pass.”*¹⁸ There is no good or evil in the civil or ecclesial society which does not call forth a prayer of thanksgiving or mercy from the Lord.

Finally, St. Vincent stopped to explain the conditions for fulfilling the Jubilee, such as going to confession and communion, visiting the stations, giving alms and asking for the needs of the Church and the intentions of the Holy Father. If the conditions are fulfilled in a spirit of true conversion, forgiveness of guilt and remission of temporal punishment are obtained. Such extraordinary grace is given by virtue of the communion of saints, whose treasures of merit deposited in the Church, are applied to the faithful: merits from the life, death and resurrection of Christ; those of the Virgin Mary and of all the saints. In that faith lies the concession of indulgences.

4. The opening of the Jubilee will give our priests a lot to do

¹³ SVP. IX, 49.

¹⁴ SVP. IX, 621.

¹⁵ SVP. IX, 611.

¹⁶ Cf. SVP. X, 238.

¹⁷ SVP. X, 237.

¹⁸ SVP. X, 234. 237.

Perhaps what is most surprising in St. Vincent, in reference to the Jubilees, is the insistent joy with which he communicated to his companions the labor of preaching missions which they had to take on during this *time of grace* and how they had to take advantage of them to evangelize the poor. This joy came from the satisfaction of fulfilling the end for which the Congregation of the Mission had been born. To cite a few of the many examples, the following are worth mention.

The first, very meaningful because it affects his own person, is directed to the Duchess d'Aiguillon, who was concerned about the health of Monsieur Vincent, who was ready to go on a mission to Sevrans, despite his seventy-two years and his delicate health. In the letter, dated May 14, 1653, he implores the duchess to present his excuses to the assembly which they were about to hold, and which he could not attend, because "*it seemed to me that it would offend God if everything possible was not done for the poor people of the countryside during this Jubilee.*"¹⁹

Louis Abelly, the first biographer of Monsieur Vincent, referring to this mission, commented: "*He even went on the missions during the Jubilee, and worked in them with great results, and a wonderful edification for all who saw this elderly saint, at such an advanced age and with so many aches and pains, zealously dedicating himself to catechizing, preaching, hearing confessions and consecrating himself to other similar acts.*"²⁰

Abelly notes, on the occasion of the national Jubilee granted to France in 1648, that the first missionaries sent to Madagascar, Nacuart and Gondree, devoted themselves during the voyage "*to preparing those who were on the ship, around 120 persons, through general confessions to participate in the graces and indulgences of the Jubilee.*" Arriving at the island, "*one of their first works was to obtain the spiritual well-being of the French and prepare them to fulfill the Jubilee which had been sent to them from France.*"²¹

Several years later, on March 17, 1656, on the occasion of another Jubilee, he wrote to Fr. Ozenne, superior of the priests of the Mission in Warsaw: "*The Jubilee will open soon in Paris. God has given us a means for attracting people to our missions.*"²² We should say in passing that Warsaw was ahead of Paris in the Jubilee called by Alexander VII in 1656, just after assuming the papacy. In Tunis also, before the archbishop had done it in Paris, Jean Le Vacher had promulgated the same Jubilee so that the captive slaves could participate in it.²³

A little later than the letter sent to Ozenne, the founder of the Mission wrote to Fr. Jean Martin, on April 14 of the same year 1656: "*Our priests have not stopped going to three missions at the same time and preparing themselves to go to other places for the Jubilee.*"²⁴ When the year 1656 ended, he wrote to Fr. Get, superior of

¹⁹ SVP. IV, 586-587

²⁰ Abelly, L., *Vida del Venerable Siervo de Dios Vicente de Paul*, Edit. CEME, Salamanca 1994, p. 616.

²¹ Id., p. 335. 338.

²² SVP. V, 571.

²³ Cf. SVP. XI, 321.

²⁴ SVP. V, 595; cf. VI, 150. 152.

Marseille, on February 9, 1657: *“The Jubilee which will be celebrated in Toulon is creating work for Fr. Huguier, and he offers you a chance to go there or to send someone to help the galley slaves to fulfill the Jubilee, as he asked you.”*²⁵ In the end the predictions the saint made to Fr. Crowley, at the beginning of the year 1656, were accomplished: *The opening of the Jubilee is about to happen this diocese, which will give our priests a lot to do, since they will have to go the countryside to prepare the poor people.”*²⁶

Saint Vincent was so conscious of the Jubilee celebrations that he had no qualms in granting exceptions from the general rule of not preaching in the cities where there is a Bishopric, as provided for by the Contract of Foundation of the Mission and the Bull of pontifical approval of the C.M. On the third of May 1656, he wrote to Father Dupont: *“You can preach in Treguier, since the Bishop commands it and it is for only eight days and on the occasion of the Jubilee, which is something extraordinary. These circumstances are too important no to grant some exceptions to the general rule.”*²⁷

In all of these declarations lies the conviction which explains the charism of the founder and his Congregation, highlighted during the time of the Jubilee celebrations: the evangelization of the poor according to the example of Jesus of Nazareth, sent by the Father and anointed by the Spirit for the salvific mission to the world. Completely in agreement with what the TMA of John Paul II would highlight three centuries later, the saint could have said with the pope: *“Every Jubilee makes reference to the time of grace and the messianic mission of Christ... He is the one who announces the good news to the poor. He is the one who brings liberty to captives, frees the oppressed and returns sight to the blind (Mt 11: 4-5; Lk 7: 22) In this way he brings about a year of the Lord’s grace, which he announces not only in words, but above all by works. The Jubilee, a year of the Lord’s grace, is a characteristic of Jesus’ activity and not only the chronological definition of a certain anniversary.”*²⁸

If the Jubilee year is a time of joy, as St. Vincent points out, *“we cannot better insure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of Providence and in a real renunciation of ourselves in order to follow Jesus.”*²⁹ These words written to Jean Barreau, French consul in Algiers, in the specific circumstances of a Jubilee, are a synopsis of St. Vincent’s thoughts on the joy which is experienced in carrying out the missionary vocation, which has as its operating principle popular missions and missions ad gentes.

Certainly the areas for evangelization by the missionaries are vast and varied, although the missions continue to be their preferred parcel today. The remembrance of the Areopagus of Athens, where St. Paul preached, calls to mind new areopagi where the missionaries can live out channel their zeal. In effect, as the TMA says: *“Today there are many and diverse areopogi; they are the vast fields of modern civilization*

²⁵ SVP. VI, 179.

²⁶ SVP. V, 574.

²⁷ SVP. V, 605.

²⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 11.

²⁹ SVP. III, 392.

*and culture, of politics and the economy. The more the West strays from its Christian roots, the more it becomes a mission field, in the form of different areopagi.”*³⁰

5. Blessed Virgin...help us obtain this grace

The Vincentian references to Mary, on the occasion of the Jubilee, are both implicit and explicit. Except for the conference of December 14, 1656, the memory of Mary passes by almost silently. Differing from the other teachings of the saint in which the Mother of God and our Mother is presented as an admirable example of Christ’s disciple, here she is only contemplated in two moments. The first, while explaining the obstacles that make obtaining the graces of the Jubilee difficult, he points out that the desire to be comfortable does not permit us “*to experience the poverty of the Lord and the Blessed Virgin.*”³¹ This reference to the Virgin is a bit irrelevant.

On the other hand, the invocation of the Virgin, at the end of the same conference, is somewhat more significant because it highlights the intercessory power of the Mother of God, besides declaring her the Mother of the Company: “*Blessed Virgin, you who are the Mother of the Company, obtain for us the grace of your Son and peace for the Church.*”³² On this occasion, our speaker did not have to give any other explanations. The whole room knew that the graces asked for were none other than those of the Jubilee, grace which the Virgin Mary, mediatrix and Queen of peace, obtains for everyone through the omnipotence of her Son.

What we have written up until here, although short, is sufficiently indicative of St.Vincent’s behavior during the Jubilee. In particular his teachings on the necessity of revitalizing the spirit and the ministries proper to the community are completely up to date. I like to think that today he would not counsel his friends to fulfill the Jubilee in a different way.

(JOHN P. PRAGER, C.M., translator)

³⁰ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 57.

³¹ SVP. X, 239.

³² SVP. X, 242.