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St. Vincent and the Bishops

*by Bernard Koch, C.M.
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Pierre Blet has dealt with this subject in exhaustive fashion, also availing of non-Vincentian sources like the correspondence of the nuncios; yet he was not aware of the notes of the Chancellor, Séguier.

Here, I will touch on this subject from another point of view, closer to the life of St. Vincent and his theology of the episcopate, which he touches on without developing it.

At the doctrinal level, the theology of the degrees of the Sacrament of Orders and of the specific nature of the Episcopate is succinct; episcopacy alone confers the fullness of the sacrament of orders, adding to the power to consecrate the Eucharistic Body of Jesus Christ that of sanctifying and directing his Mystical Body (which priests possess only by delegation) and that of ordaining to sacred orders. The Council of Trent defined this in its 23rd session in 1563, in chapter 4, paragraph 3, and in Canon 7. Despite this, as has been the case since the end of the fourth century, some people maintain the equality of priests and bishops, episcopacy being only an honorific and juridical distinction.

In M. Vincent's time, in 1611, the theologian, Edmond Richer (1559-1631), of the Sorbonne, maintained not only that the Church of France should rely more on its assemblies and on the King than on the Pope (Gallicanism), but also that priests were the equals of bishops. While this was condemned and revoked, it did not stop these ideas spreading into the 18th century. M. Vincent was to be resolutely attached to the bishops and to the Pope.

At the practical level, the power of the bishops was limited – on the one hand by the large number of abbeys ‘nullius,’ each with its parishes free of the bishop of the place; – on the other hand, by the right of patronage, which gave certain rights over a church or chapter to someone (ecclesiastic or lay) who had given funds to that church or chapter; – and, finally, in France, by the ‘commende’ (the gift of a ‘living’ or ecclesiastical office) which diverted the revenue and temporal power of dioceses or abbeys to lay-people granted this gift by the king in gratitude for services rendered; they needed only to receive the tonsure. In these cases, the bishop could hardly do anything but ratify the candidates presented to him. Vincent himself had to accept, from 1643, to be Vicar General to the grandnephew of Richelieu, who was the titular abbot of three large abbeys, which governed more than 150 parishes in all. I have been able to receive photocopies of six presentations, all signed in Vincent's hand, to the Bishops of Rouen and Rennes, with regard to parish priests. Moreover, since

the time of Charles VII and the 'Pragmatic Sanction' of Bourges, the King of France played a role in the appointment of bishops.

However, the frequency of nomination of unworthy candidates has been exaggerated; the Assemblies of Clergy at the end of the 16th century show that there was a majority of good bishops and even before the participation of St. Vincent, Louis XIII surrounded himself with good advisers, such as the Cardinals de la Rochefoucauld and de Gondi. Above all, approval and signing of bulls of consecration always came back to the Pope, who refused them more than once.

It is in this context that Vincent de Paul lived, completely faithful to the Council of Trent, loyal both to the Pope and the bishops, and, therefore, neither Gallicanist or 'Richérist.'

His ideas and action are manifest throughout his life, which we are going to follow.

Vincent always called himself a son of poor country people but various texts and archival documents reveal a much broader situation, which gave him the rare facility of enjoying easy relationships with all ranks of society.

His father was a farmer, but a landowner and one of the notables of the village, poor because the region had been ravaged by the Protestant armies; moreover, agriculture was subject to the vagaries of bad weather and there were also six children to be fed. We see in Vincent a mastery of agricultural matters.

Canon Etienne Depaul, of Dax, prior of the nearby small hospice, may have been a brother of Vincent's father; if we accept this, we see Vincent in relationship with the ecclesiastical world.

His mother was the daughter of a 'cavier' (cellarer), a kind of 'knightly' landowner of a noble property, given control of the security (nothing to do with a cellar) some 20 kilometres south of Dax, and the sister of the succeeding cellarer and of a lawyer in Dax. This situation of minor local nobility meant that the family was in direct contact with their overlords, the noble family of De Gramont, Counts of Bidache, a little further south, the last parish in the diocese of Dax.

Here we see the first meeting of Vincent with a bishop: one of the brothers of the Count of Bidache, had been the honorary bishop of Tarbes, the consecrated bishop being a subject of the De Gramonts, Salvat Diharse, became titular on the death of Théophile in 1594. We understand why Vincent was not tonsured at Dax, whose bishop had not received his bulls from Rome, but at Bidache, and not by the Bishop of Aire, but by Salvat, even though Tarbes was further from Dax

than Aire. Here we see him thrown into the world of the nobility and the episcopacy.

If he was ordained priest only on 23 September 1600, even though he had had his dimissorial letters for a year, it was because his new bishop, Jean-Jacques Dusault, having come to Dax in January 1600, had convoked a synod from March to April and settled upon a strict reform, which set the chapter in revolt on the grounds of ‘abuse of power,’ refusing any participation in his services at the cathedral. The bishop could not celebrate pontifically and the entire process lasted three years. As for being ordained at 19 years of age instead of 24, that was not uncommon in those times.

Vincent waited, then looked for another bishop, seeing that the affair was dragging on. His choice of François de Bourdeilles at Périgueux can only be explained in terms of the complexity of relationships. But why not the bishop of Toulouse? Or of Tarbes? We lack any documentation.

In October 1604, he gained his bachelor’s degree in theology and the license to teach the second Book of the Sentences of Peter Lombard and began teaching in Toulouse.

The Barbary Captivity, from July 1605 to June 1607, changed the course of events,¹ plunging him into the experience of the distress of slaves, which was to obsess him all his life, without diminishing his other works.

¹Since Antoine Rédier, *La Vraie Vie de St Vincent de Paul* (Grasset, Paris, 1927) it has become fashionable to deny Vincent’s captivity. Rédier’s only argument is that it is unbelievable; later, he wrote how a Vincentian had asked Grandchamp, attaché at the French Embassy in Tunis, to seek out arguments in order to root the negation more strongly, arguments which were completely dismantled by the specialist, Turbet-Deloff, director of Maghreb Studies at the University of Bordeaux, and by several archival recent publications, confirming that Vincent’s account is strongly plausible. Moreover, nobody has ever analysed the beginning and end of the two famous letters, and certainly not the two signed manuscripts; the focus has been on the central account and on the account only in the printed version. Yet the two letters, from Avignon and Rome, are not written rapidly, like the other letters of Vincent, but very carefully, and, something Pierre Coste did not indicate, the two are ‘flourished,’ that is to say that the signature is followed by the arabesques proper to each participant in a notary or judicial act. Vincent never uses his flourish in letters to friends but always in such notary or judicial acts. What is more, the two are addressed to M. de Comet, a lawyer, and copies are sent, the first to M. D’Arnaudin, a notary who was working at the bishopric, and the second to M. De Lalande, police lieutenant of Dax! Finally, their purpose is not the account but a very official act: a recognition of the debt, with an explanation of the reason for the delay in paying (i.e. the captivity) and a promise to do so as soon as possible, in conformity with acts set down in law by notaries. One can find references to these legal acts in my article “Saint Vincent; expert en procédure,” published in the *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France*, no. 168, April 1999. In short, even if the style is lively and somewhat novel-like, these letters are official acts, addressed to people who could easily have had them verified by the Consulate of France in Tunis. As for the ‘novel’ style, it is a frequent one with Vincent, expert in dynamic accounts and lively scenes. On the other hand, we know his obsession with aiding the slaves of the Muslims, and his undertakings in Rome in order to be granted missions in Salé in Morocco, Babylon in the Near East, although only Tunis and Algiers came to fruition; no other French spiritual master had this preoccupation.

His escape with the renegade, generally ingenious people (flights of renegades are numerous) led him to Avignon in July 1607. He quickly became associated with the nuncio, who took him with him to Rome, in the hope of forming useful relationships. There, besides his visit to the sick poor in the charity hospital, he moved in the world of the cardinals, while awaiting some worthwhile nomination. He was sadly mistaken, as he wrote several times afterwards; the Romans do not like people who are in a hurry.

This constitutes the first phrase of his vision: the bishops as purveyors of desirable positions!

Why did he arrive, at the end of 1608, in Paris and not in Dax as he had promised in his second letter? We can only offer some hypotheses...

Vincent was quickly named among the distributors of alms for Queen Marguerite, the repudiated wife of Henri IV. This was probably at the intervention of his Bishop in Dax, Jean-Jacques Dusault, who had good relations with Henri IV and was the first almoner of this queen.

At the same time, his concern about the spiritual life urged him to frequent the spiritual circle of Mme. Acarie and her nephew, Pierre de Bérulle, where he opened himself little by little to the pastoral dimensions.

This did not stop him continuing to seek financial resources, in order to return close to his mother and to support his family. We do not know how he came to link himself with the Archbishop of Aix-en-Provence, Paul Hurault de l'Hôpital, Councillor to the King in his Council of State, who held the honor of the abbey of St Leonard de Chaumes, near La Rochelle since 1609. In May 1610, Paul terminated this in his favour, which gave Vincent the hope of being able finally to return close to his mother, as he had written to her on 17 February 1610.

On Saturday 16 October 1610, in taking possession of St Leonard de Chaumes, he presented the bull of nomination of Pope Paul V, of 27 August 1610, and the official letters expedited by his bishop, Jean-Jacques Dusault of Dax, dated 20 September 1610.²

His stock of relations with bishops was thus greatly increased but, up to this point, it was with the hope of gaining favours, financial if possible. As for St Leonard, he was involved in a long legal process from 1611 and at times had to go to La Rochelle.

²Departmental Archives of Charente Maritime, Series 3E 1203, Folio 229. Minutes of Maître Combault, notary of La Rochelle, Register 1608-1610, bundle of 1610. Archives of the Mission, photocopy.

In Paris, he continued his meetings with Bérulle's circle. He became so apt at parochial ministry that, when Bérulle founded the Oratory on 10-11 November 1611 with some priests, including Bourgoing, parish priest of Clichy, it was Vincent whom he judged capable of succeeding Bourgoing in Clichy.

He did not take possession of it until May 1612, having stayed, at least for some periods of time, at the Oratory, which he would continue to visit. There, he was to discover a major element in his pastoral spirituality and his vision of relations with the bishops was to change completely; this would mark the 'second phase.'

Bérulle, preparing the foundation of the Oratory, sought to mark its difference with regard to religious, especially to the Jesuits, by showing that he did not wish to found a religious institute exempt from the bishops, but to remain linked to them by pastoral and missionary obedience. He had written this in his Project for the Congregation of the Oratory of Jesus, at the end of 1610³:

And, since all must be ordered in the Church and since God has joined with the Holy See in our time a Society which is that of the Jesuit Fathers, this 'The Oratory' will be joined to the prelates by the vow of obedience, as for the exercise and use of ecclesiastical functions (apart from those which are matters of honour or of jurisdiction); and by this means we will renew the use of the vow which is made at the consecration of priests and which seems to be essential to the state of priesthood.

Vincent was to have the same attitude with regard to bishops in the *Contract of Foundation* and in the *Common Rules* of his Congregation, going so far as to say that we are "of the Religion, 'that is to say Congregation,' of St. Peter or, even more, of Jesus Christ ... Oh! What a great source of consolation to be in the Order of St Peter."⁴

This is an enormous turn-about: the bishops seen as animators, pastors, of the body of Christ. This is spiritual, pastoral and ecclesial progress!

He was even to be drawn into friendship, within the year, with one of the great bishops of his time, Francis de Sales, for whom he gave a long testimony, at the process for his beatification.⁵

This did not, however, lessen his financial needs and Bérulle sought to find him some supplementary subsidies by enabling him to enter as tutor into the

³Jean Dagens, *Correspondance du Cardinal de Bérulle*, p. 118.

⁴To the Missioners, On the Vows, 7 November 1659, SV XII, 376.

⁵SV XIII, 66-84.

family of the General of the Galleys, Phillipe-Emmanuel de Gondi, bearer of a number of important lordships, baronies and the 'Countship' of Joigny, received as a wedding present from his uncle Pierre, the Bishop of Paris from 1568 to 1616. Apart from his service in the family and the care of Clichy, Vincent took on the ministry to the villages of the de Gondis when the family was in residence there.

Pierre was succeeded in the Bishopric of Paris by a brother of Phillipe-Emmanuel, Henri, who died in 1622, and then by another brother, Jean-François, from 1622 to 1654, with whom Vincent was to have a great many dealings.

Vincent's pastoral zeal continued at Clichy, either through himself or his curate, and in the villages of the Gondis. There he instituted a practice of the Jesuits; a general confession of one's whole past life, which was to put him in contact with various bishops, as he sought to obtain the power to absolve cases reserved to the bishops. We still have such a request to the Vicar General of Sens, dated 20 June 1616.⁶

We do know the following: a case arose on the lands of Madame de Gondi, near Folleville, at Gannes, when a peasant told this lady about his spiritual liberation and she, discovering this wretchedness, urged Vincent to preach on this subject, which led to a great flood of penitents and required Vincent to call on a team of priests, a practice from which he never desisted: missions were always to be given as a team.

In the meantime, the Archbishop of Lyons, Msgr. de Marquemont, in order set up a centre for missions,⁷ had asked Bérulle to found the Oratory at Châtillon-les-Dombes, in Bresse, northeast of Lyons, a town right at the heart of a region ravaged by the French campaigns of Henri IV between 1594 and 1600. Bérulle, who founded the Oratory in some other towns, suggested that Vincent go there. We still have the requests in the Archives of Lyons, but, it was with the Vicar General that Vincent had dealings, since Msgr. de Marquemont was absent from Lyons from the 18 or 19 June.⁸

Recalled to Paris to be with the Gondis, he began to preach more intensively on their lands, always as a team of priests and initiating everywhere the Confraternities of Charity, of women and, occasionally, men. The necessity of having these approved again put him in contact with many other bishops; Sens

⁶SV I, 20-21.

⁷Copy in the 1686 dossier in the Departmental Archives of the Rhone, Historical Section (19 H 1), 2 Chemin de Montauban, 69005, Lyons.

⁸Indications coming from the registers of 'Provisions' (Departmental Archives of the Rhone, Historical Archives, 1 G 87 = register 8) and 'Insinuations' (1 G 120 = register 79); on these dates, the acts are signed by the Vicar General.

and Soissons in 1618, Amiens in 1620 etc.⁹ The foundation of houses of the Mission and of the Daughters of Charity would also see him in contact with a number of bishops.

He remained as parish priest at Clichy until 1626 and, doubtless, it was there that he gave his sermon preparing for the visit of the bishop: Jean-François de Gondy paid a visit there on 9 October 1624. We have very few doctrinal texts from Vincent: here is one, neglected because it is simply an outline, but in five short points he expresses his vision of the Church and the primary pastoral, not simply juridical, but spiritual role of the bishops.¹⁰

Here we see Vincent thrown into ministerial contact with the bishops and that was only to increase with the beginning of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission. The *Contract of Foundation* was submitted to a notary on 17 April 1625 and, on 24 April of the following year, Jean-François de Gondy, Archbishop of Paris, signed his approval.¹¹

This contract of foundation shows us afresh this new stage, which is also in fidelity to Bérulle; it stipulates, exactly as Bérulle's 'project' and Rule had done, that the missionaries were to "renounce all benefices, offices and Church dignities" in order that "at the good pleasure of the prelates, each with respect to his own diocese, to give themselves entirely and purely to the salvation of the poor people."

Here is the central point, throughout his life, of his position with regard to the episcopate, which was to be that of the Missioners up to our time. In the *Common Rules* disseminated in 1658, we no longer find the interdiction against Church dignities and honours but we continue to find, in chapters V, § I and XI, § 5 reference to union and obedience in everything which refers to the ministry; and to that we have remained faithful.

Let us anticipate, following this line; when the time came for establishing the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and stability in service of the poor, Vincent, seeking ways to ensure that these would not turn into religious vows, considered, among other things, a fifth vow, as he wrote to Jane de Chantal on 14 July 1639: "obedience to our lordships the bishops in the dioceses in which we are established, with regard to the above-named functions."¹²

He remained firm, however, that the governance of the temporal goods of the Congregation and the nomination of superiors remained in the hands of the Superior General. He made a distinction between the ministry, the role of the

⁹SV XIII, 442 and 456, 463, 482 and the bottom of 419, a note on document 125.

¹⁰SV XIII, 57-60, and Pierre Coste, *Le Grand du Grand Siècle* I, p.77.

¹¹SV XIII, 202 and 203.

¹²SV I, 563.

Missioners in the Church and the internal life of the Congregation, which is another 'cell' of the Church, independent of the bishops, approved by the Pope on 12 January 1633.

Many works had taken form in the meantime, apart from the country missions, its first end. One was, from 1628, the formation of future priests.

The Bishop of Beauvais, Augustin Potier, who had already been in contact with Bourdoise, who did not have formators to send to him, knew Vincent through Jerome Duchesne, one of his principal vicars, who had given a mission with Vincent in 1621 at Montmirail.¹³

On 16 July 1628, during a journey with Vincent,¹⁴ Potier revealed to him his idea for retreats or sessions, lasting 10 to 15 days, before ordination, giving an elementary doctrinal and especially pastoral formation. Vincent took it up, looked for collaborators, and, from that September, the Exercises for Ordinands began, first at Beauvais and then soon in Paris and elsewhere, as we know.

Here then is a third stage: Vincent goes further than obedience to the bishops, now he enters into collaboration, sometimes even friendship, with them.

Certain people, who had benefited from these retreats, finding this format somewhat insufficient, even if they had also pursued courses in theology, suggested that these be continued after ordination. This was the origin of the Tuesday Conferences in 1633. Participants contributed to Vincent's missions in the villages and assured the missions in the large towns, where the Congregation of the Mission had excluded itself from going.

Friendships with the bishops increased with the foundation of the Major Seminaries, starting in 1641 at Annecy. The Bishop of Cahors, Alain de Solminihac, reformer of his diocese and his abbey at Chancelade, was one of the first.

Vincent was to follow other avenues, probably as a result of his position as General Chaplain to the Galleys, which was to put him in contact with royalty. On the other hand, in 1638, the Tuesday Priests gave the important mission at St Germain en Laye, where Louis XIII and Anne of Austria were staying, who, along with Richelieu, had the task of finding good bishops for nomination. In fact, one of the Tuesday Priests, Nicolas Pavillon, was its major animator.¹⁵ It is hardly astonishing that, later, he was to be named Bishop of Alet!

¹³SV I, 66, note 6.

¹⁴Delettre, *Histoire du diocèse de Beauvais*, cited by Fernand Potier de la Morandière, *Augustin Potier, Évêque et comte de Beauvais, Pair de France*, Paris, undated, p. 33.

¹⁵Pierre Collet, *Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*, I, 28a, 281. Coste, *op. cit.*, II, 317. SV I, 421, 450; XI, 282.

From that time, Vincent was part of the group of people that Richelieu consulted in order to obtain lists of bishops.¹⁶ Moreover, Louis XIII, just before his death, had said this to him on 21 October 1643¹⁷: *The late king, a little before his death, did me the honour of telling me that, were he to be returned to health, he would not allow anyone to be made bishop who had not spent three years in the Mission.*

As is evident, this did not come about, but more than one bishop was chosen from the advice of Vincent, the retreats for Ordinands and the Tuesday Conferences.

We know that after Richelieu's death at the end of 1642, and of Louis XIII in 1643, the Regent, Anne of Austria, formed a Council of Conscience, a simple consultative body, which she loved to listen to, even if Mazarin did not always follow its counsel. To join the Chancellor Séguier, Jacques Charton, the official of Paris, and Augustin Potier, she called on M. Vincent. This marks the fourth step in his links with the bishops; an official responsibility for the choice of candidates for bishoprics.

The Council had to deal with the nomination of bishops and coadjutors, which involved questions of revenue also. Several Tuesday Priests, friends of Vincent, were thus nominated: Antoine Godeau to Vence, François Perrochel to Boulogne etc. It also dealt with litigation and suchlike cases.

Vincent objected to the nomination to Le Mans of Beaumanoir de Lavardin, whose faith was doubtful. And he knew it!¹⁸ Then, at the end of January 1649, as the Fronde was beginning, Vincent had to flee Paris by horse with Br. Ducournau, going to St Germain-en-Laye to ask the Regent and Mazarin for the latter give up power, at least for a time. He was turned away and could not return to a Paris in revolt, risking being accused of machinations with royalty. They fled to the town of Richelieu, stopping for a time with the confreres in the seminary at Le Mans. Vincent could not neglect to pay his respects to the Bishop, to whom he sent the superior of the house. Beaumanoir was very honoured and, in friendly fashion, had it said to Vincent, who was unable to go and thank him, the Bishop having already set off elsewhere.

Independently of the Council of Conscience, from 1643 on, he was in contact with a new bishop, his former pupil, Jean-François-Paul de Gondi, who became coadjutor of his uncle in the See of Paris and then, on the latter's death, succeeded in 1654, becoming Cardinal de Retz. It was he who, on 20 November 1646, signed the document which erected the autonomous society of the

¹⁶SV II, 387-388.

¹⁷SV XI, 132.

¹⁸SV III, 491, note 1. Also Abelly III, 257-258.

Daughters of Charity, and, on 18 January 1655, signed their approbation.¹⁹ It was his uncle who had approved the *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, but Vincent, who wanted to alter them, waited until after his death! It was Retz who signed them, in 1657.²⁰

Several bishops liked to lean on Vincent, or he did not hesitate to advise them. On 14 January 1640, he advised the Vicar General of Bayonne, Louis Abelly, and as a result to the bishop, François Fouquet, to be patient and gentle, and not authoritarian, in the reform of the diocese and the religious. On 29 August 1659 he was to invite the latter, transferred to the See of Narbonne, to stay with him.²¹

Alain de Solminihac, Bishop of Cahors, whose diocese was divided by certain ardent Jansenist parish priests, asked Vincent to join the petitions addressed to Rome with a view to having the Five Propositions condemned; these were taken, by Nicolas Cornet, from a student's thesis in theology. Vincent wrote in 1651 to a large number of bishops, asking them to sign.²² Some refused, including Pavillon of Alet, who distanced himself somewhat from Vincent although the latter did not fall out with him.

In the same year, 1651, there was a revolt in Cahors by some of the clergy against Alain de Solminihac and Vincent was to be his confidant and support until the situation calmed down in 1653.²³ It is true that Alain de Solminihac did not have an easy character. When he invited the Vincentians to come to his seminary in 1643, he went through three superiors in the first three years until he found one who suited him, Gilbert Cuissot, whom he kept for 29 years.²⁴ As a result, Vincent did not hesitate to warn two sisters whom he was sending to Cahors²⁵:

You will have need of mortification, if the Bishop of Cahors should find that you do not acquit yourselves well in your work of administration of the hospital, in order to receive humbly his advice and corrections; because the great austerity which he exercises on himself may make him seem somewhat severe.

From 1652 on, after the end of the Fronde and the return to Paris of Anne of Austria, the young Louis XIV, and Mazarin, and although he had participated in the negotiations in order for this to happen, Vincent, as well as Augustin

¹⁹SV XIII, 557-565 and 569-572.

²⁰SV V, 319, 323 and VI, 440.

²¹SV II, 4; cf also VIII, 95.

²²SV IV, 148, 149, 172, 175, 204; other references are in SV XIV, on 'Jansenism,' p. 279-280.

²³SV IV, in several letters throughout this volume.

²⁴Christian Dumoulin, *Alain de Solminihac, Au service de Dieu et de sa gloire*, Téqui, 1981, pp. 157-158. Coste, *op. cit.*, II, p. 109.

²⁵SV X, 579-580.

Potier, was practically excluded from the Council of Conscience, which Mazarin, moreover, hardly ever convened again. Shut out from official interventions, Vincent could now only rely on private action, still consulted more than once by various bishops and doing 'his little bit.'

What can we deduce from this? In this arena as in others, Vincent shows himself to have great faith, a lively charity and a strong hope in the midst of all the obstacles and resistance of others, a strong sense of what was real and possible, with, besides humility and simplicity, two qualities which sum up his charity in a simple phrase: "cordial respect." Respect without cordiality becomes distant; cordiality without respect risks humiliating the other. We might also recall: be "firm of purpose, flexible about the means." All of this wrapped in a great love for Jesus Christ and his Church and a great desire to imitate the Trinity; unity in diversity of persons.

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See also the biographies of several of the bishops who had contact with St Vincent.

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)