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Thomas Davitt C.M.

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Repetitions of Prayer in Saint Lazare

BY
THOMAS DAVITT, C.M.*

During a conference to the community in Saint Lazare on 5 August 1659 Vincent said:

We'll postpone repetition of prayer till some other time. As you know, it's one of the most essential means we have for encouraging one another towards holiness. We've reason to thank God for giving the Company this grace, and we can say that it was never in any community other than ours.¹

Volumes 11 and 12 of the Coste set contain 224 talks given by Vincent to the community in Saint Lazare. The bulk of this material is in the form of reconstructions of what he said at the weekly Friday night conference, but there are also "extracts from conferences" taken from Abelly's biography, and fifty-five items headed "Repetition of Prayer."

Some time ago I had occasion to read these fifty-five in sequence. The most interesting fact to emerge from this reading was that, in spite of what Vincent said on 5 August 1659, I never even once found any reference to how he himself had prayed. It is unlikely, I think, that the confrere(s) who made notes of what Vincent said on these occasions would have omitted such material had Vincent spoken about it.

Most interesting, though, are the glimpses we are given into everyday life in Saint Lazare. Vincent, after some other confrere(s) had made repetition, frequently took up some point mentioned and gave a sort of mini-conference on it, but he also very often used this time to give news of community interest or to comment on community life in

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¹*Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 12: 288.

Saint Lazare itself. It is this latter material which gives us a fascinating insight into day to day life in Saint Lazare.

In spite of the more rational side of our nature we may all, perhaps, have some lurking feeling that because Vincent de Paul, later declared to be a saint, was at the head of Saint Lazare the affairs of that house ran smoothly or even ideally. These repetitions of prayer are a healthy corrective to such a feeling and make us realize that the fact that Vincent was later declared to be a saint does not mean that his superiorship in Saint Lazare was free of problems or that his handling of them was ideal.

It does not appear that Repetition of Prayer was held on a regular basis, in the way that the weekly conference was always on Friday night. Vincent seems to have called for it on a random basis. On 15 November 1656 he said that there would not be Repetition because they had had it on the previous two days, so he was just going to give some community news. Vincent used to invite the community to come closer and gather around his stall.²

It also, apparently, was the custom for various confreres to leave the chapel either before or during Repetition, because on 12 March 1656 Vincent forbade anyone to leave until the end, even though some priests asked permission to go to attend to their duties with the ordinands and some brothers asked to go to their work; and the note-taker added that this was the only occasion Vincent ever insisted on this.³

On 17 October 1655 a brother admitted that he often missed morning prayer and other community exercises because of pressure of work. Vincent contented himself with merely telling him that his work would not suffer by his attending community exercises.⁴

That was a very mild admonition, and there are several instances reported where Vincent was far more severe. Public admonitions on these occasions seem to have stemmed from either what someone had confessed at chapter or from what someone said during Repetition. Vincent gave admonitions with varying degrees of severity; his knowledge of the individual concerned obviously influenced what he said.

At the end of Repetition on 13 June 1655 he told a brother to kneel down. He then said to him that in spite of many previous admonitions

²Ibid., 11:372.

³Ibid., 326.

⁴Ibid., 316.

he was making no effort to correct his faults, which Vincent then enumerated for the benefit of the community. The note-taker added that these faults were very great but that he did not wish to specify them, one of the many tantalizing allusions in this collection. Vincent forbade the brother to receive the Eucharist until further notice, and he told the priests to refuse to administer it to him if he approached them. He was also forbidden to have any wine for a week and the brothers in charge of catering were to see that he did not get any.⁵

On 20 July 1655 another brother, when called by Vincent for repetition, went down on his knees and asked to be excused. Vincent said, "Now that you're on your knees I'm going to refer to a fault you committed yesterday." Someone had called to see the brother and he had taken him out into the garden without permission. Apparently even senior confreres never did that, something which used to edify Father René Alméras. Vincent then used this as a stepping-off point for an admonition to the students, launching into the sort of speech he obviously enjoyed:

Instead of taking recreation in the garden on days which are not free days they take it out in the estate; I'm talking of what I've seen; I recently went out into the estate, for the third time this year, and was surprised to see them there. Is this garden not enough for us? Is it not big enough, top and bottom? Very few gardens in Paris are as big as ours; go to all the houses, those of merchants, financiers, legal people and you'll hardly ever see them in their garden; they've almost all got to work day and night; having spent the whole morning in court they have barely finished dinner before they see fresh items to take them on into the after-dinner period. And we, we are not satisfied with large gardens; we must have the estate. Do we have to lead a life—I don't know how to say it—*lautior*; if one could find a French word for this Latin, more comfortable: that does not go far enough, more voluptuous, more delicate, to excess, the easy life, spreading ourselves, in comparison with lay people? And the ordinands, looking out their windows and seeing us at all

⁵Ibid., 190.

hours walking around the estate, in the gardens, with no restriction; and the poor mentally handicapped and those in charge of them who are walking there, and the others who work there, won't they all say to themselves: "There's a crowd who certainly live well and have nothing to do!"⁶

The Saint Lazare estate was about 100 acres.⁷

On 12 March 1656 something similar happened. A seminarist, after his repetition, knelt down to confess a fault. Vincent immediately took the opportunity to point out that he should have confessed a much more serious one from earlier in the week, which Vincent then made public. The seminarist had asked permission from his director to go in to listen to a conference which was to be given to the ordinands. This was refused, as it was most unusual. The seminarist, however, went to the conference. Vincent labels this as formal disobedience and exercises his usual fluency in elaborating on this. At the end the seminarist was told he would have to spend an extra six months in the seminaire [novitiate]. Someone later on wrote in the margin of the manuscript that the man in question left the community after ordination.⁸

On 17 November 1658 Vincent called a senior priest for repetition, but the priest asked to be excused. Vincent then said that this was not the first time this had happened but rather was normal for this man. He then pointed out that this exercise was important, that the brothers, students, and seminarists all responded when called. At that stage Vincent noticed that the man was still on his feet and not on his knees, so he said, "Are you ready to receive the admonition you're about to get?" At that, the priest knelt down. On the previous Friday he had missed the conference, even though he had been explicitly told to be there; formal disobedience again. At this the priest said he had understood that he had been given permission to be absent. Vincent said that was not true, that he himself had told him to go in, and later on when the brother who had been making his rounds during the conference reported that the priest was up in his room, Vincent was very surprised. He told him also that he should not make excuses when admonished. He then went on to say that the priest often took a sleep

⁶Ibid., 197.

⁷It is thus described by Vincent in a letter to the Duchess d'Aiguillon, 13 April 1653, *ibid.*, 4: 573.

⁸Ibid., 11: 324-26.

in the morning and missed prayer. And finally, this priest “being out in the estate did a certain action which was very uncouth for a priest and which would have greatly disedified anyone from outside if they had seen it.” He would not name the two others who were there. This priest used to be so good, even when he was a little boy, when he was ministering in Le Mans and even in Saint Lazare; it was only in the past two years that he had slackened off. Vincent then went off on a tangent explaining how useful admonitions are, and eventually came back to the man in question and forbade him to celebrate mass that day and the next.⁹

On occasion Vincent would interrupt the speaker. We have already seen this in the form of “now that you’re on your knees. . .”, but he also interrupted to give an admonition if the speaker had said something Vincent did not like, as when a priest referred to the community as “the holy company,”¹⁰ or if the speaker had voiced some thought that appealed to Vincent: repeating verses of the psalms,¹¹ not just doing things but doing them well.¹²

On 16 August 1655 a student started his repetition by saying he had tried to place himself in the presence of God and then began to wonder whether the presence of our Lord in the blessed sacrament might be only *une bagatelle*; perhaps “a gimmick” would be today’s equivalent. At once Vincent interrupted.¹³ I have often wondered whether this student did it deliberately, knowing that this was precisely the sort of bait that Vincent would rise to and that the interruption would mean he did not have to continue with his repetition. I have sometimes wondered whether the man in question might have been Nicholas Arthur, from Cork, the only Irishman in formation in Saint Lazare at the time.

On the same occasion Vincent also said that he had got the impression that some confreres did not have the right approach to this exercise; their mentality appeared to be, “I must think up something to say in case I’m called.”

Liturgical ceremonies were sometimes mentioned on these mornings. The velvet pall was to be removed from Brother Eloi Le Boeuf’s coffin, as that was worldly pomp.¹⁴ He asked Father Charles Admirault,

⁹Ibid., 12: 70-72.

¹⁰Ibid., 11:439.

¹¹Ibid., 196.

¹²Ibid., 435.

¹³Ibid., 252-53.

¹⁴Ibid., 114.

the prefect of the church, whether there was any ceremonies practice and on being told there was not he said that there should be, and visitors were always to be celebrants on feast days.¹⁵ In processions, Vincent said, there is a genuflexion followed by a bow. Father Portail interrupted and said, "No bow," and Vincent said that showed that ceremonies practice was needed.¹⁶

On 28 July 1655 the question of genuflections came up again. Vincent said that the previous day during the hour's prayer he had been keeping an eye on how the confreres genuflected, a rather odd admission of how he had spent his time at prayer. He had noted this on previous occasions and had always meant to say something about it but kept forgetting. This time he had made a written note to remind himself, and this morning he had noted the same careless genuflecting again. He admitted that he himself found it difficult to genuflect because of the trouble in his legs, and that old men ("of sixty-five or sixty-six"; he was a decade older) usually found it hard to get up from a genuflexion.¹⁷

In 1655 Vincent had been told there was no ceremonies practice in the house and the following year he asked one morning at prayer whether the seminarists and students were taught singing. On hearing that they were not, his reaction was typical and, as printed, has plenty of exclamation marks: the embarrassment at being unable to sing when the country people sing so well! The account he'll have to render to God for such a state of affairs! Priests sent to teach in seminaries and unable to sing!¹⁸

Reading also did not come up to the mark, either in chapel or at meals. This matter arose on one occasion when the confrere called for repetition asked to be excused as he had been unable to hear clearly the points for meditation when they were read. Vincent interrupted, and agreed, and the confrere was "let off the hook." Vincent told the reader that he read too quickly and in too low a voice. He had told the reader the previous week to read more deliberately. From reading in the chapel he went on, on the same lines, to speak about reading in the refectory.¹⁹

¹⁵Ibid., 186.

¹⁶Ibid., 187.

¹⁷Ibid., 205-08.

¹⁸Ibid., 362-63.

¹⁹Ibid., 150-52.

Inability to hear the reading in the refectory was not always the fault of the reader, though. The brother in charge of the pantry made so much noise there that the reader in the refectory could not be heard. In spite of being admonished the brother did not improve, so he was admonished in public at prayer one morning, and Vincent added that when somebody knocked to attract the attention of this brother he let on to be deaf.²⁰ Noisy washing-up also came in for comment, as well as banging doors.²¹ Leaving doors open was also a failing in the house, with Vincent excessively generalizing, "I always find all the doors open."²²

In July 1655, after dealing with the students who went out into the estate, Vincent passed on to the priests, "Yes, priests; not many, thank God, but there is always one to be seen at that door keeping an eye on who is going out and coming in and who is passing in the street." This man asks the brother on duty at the door. "Are there no letters for me? There should be some. Was no one looking for me?" The brothers on this duty were told to report any such priests to Vincent.²³

There was another priest who did only what he liked, turned up at prayer only when he wanted to. He snooped around everywhere, rummaged in other people's rooms, went through their papers. He even did this in the room of a counselor who was on retreat in the house.²⁴

Perhaps it was the same priest to whom Vincent referred eighteen months later, or perhaps there were two with somewhat similar inclinations. On the later occasion Vincent mentioned that the man in question came to prayer only when he felt like it, especially recently. He spent the day wandering around, in the cloister, through the sleeping quarters. If confreres missed anything from their rooms it would be found later in this man's room.²⁵

Then there was the brother who confessed at chapter that he tore up a garment which did not appeal to him. Vincent accepted that this was a serious fault but pointed out that perhaps it stemmed from a more serious one: the previous day the brother had been drunk and had fallen asleep in the kitchen. Vincent dealt with him in his usual

²⁰Ibid., 210.

²¹Ibid., 125.

²²Ibid., 198.

²³Ibid., 198.

²⁴Ibid., 325.

²⁵Ibid., 424.

way with such men, with plenty of rhetorical questions about what would people think, and so on.²⁶

An interesting fact about the brothers' life in Saint Lazare emerges when Vincent says they do not need recreation after meals like the priests, students, and seminarists because they do not engage in intellectual work. This was occasioned by Brother Alexandre Veronne, the infirmarian and second in seniority among the brothers, confessing that he and some others had got together for a bit of a chat after the mid-day and evening meals.²⁷

When confreres of my time were students in Glenart we used to hear a lot from Father Joe Cullen about the sacrosanct custom of "three free days" for missionaries on returning from a mission. On 16 March 1656 Vincent mentioned that he had recently heard of what went on in Saint Lazare when a missionary returned.

When someone returns from the country he is brought either to the infirmary or to another room. Dinner or supper is brought up to him, and there are some who have had this treatment for two or three days running. This is an abuse and the source of much evil, because there is talking and laughing, and people being encouraged to drink. One will say: "Drink to my health!" and the other does so. There is no limit to the wine brought along, and for that reason much evil can arise. There's cackling and gossip. It's lamentable. Now I ask those in charge to be firm and see that this does not happen again and that those returning from the country are brought to the refectory for the evening meal, where they can be given something extra. If they have come a long distance and on foot and are very worn out and tired, if they need to change their clothes because of being too hot, well and good; they can be given a rest and have their dinner or supper in the infirmary or in some other room set aside for that. But apart from that I ask each one in the company to go to the refectory where he will be given what he needs.²⁸

²⁶Ibid., 299-300.

²⁷Ibid., 368.

²⁸Ibid., 327-28.

All this led him on to generalize about fastidiousness about clothes, food, and so on. There were confreres who did not sufficiently water their wine. There were confreres who wanted to bring friends or relatives into the refectory; such confreres were not to get even their own meal! And if his listeners were surprised at such a prohibition, he said he made it because the matter was so serious; if it were tolerated "our refectory would become a *cabaret*." All this, however, did not mean that poorly prepared meals would be tolerated.

Vincent's response to each of these situations shows us some aspect of the man himself. Some other insights into his character may also be noted, without going into the details of the occasion. In July 1655, having interrupted the speaker, he got around to suggesting that there might be lax confreres saying, "There'll be great changes when Father Vincent is dead." Such men, he said, are Antichrists.²⁹

He was not above a bit of name-dropping. "There used to be great silence in the late Cardinal Richelieu's house, where I was many times . . ." ³⁰ He was also in Michel de Marillac's study; this was Louise's uncle, the Keeper of the Seals. This reference comes in an anecdote which he must have told with his tongue in his cheek. He noticed that there was a cobweb on the crucifix on the prie-dieu and went over to inspect it closely, presuming that it had been spun during the night. This closer inspection showed that it had been there for some time, and he deduced from this that Marillac was so recollected when praying before the crucifix that he never noticed the cobweb.³¹ Seven months later, as already noted, he would comment adversely on confreres who go snooping around other men's rooms!

Twice during 1658 he referred to the need to learn foreign languages, as the Jesuits do.³² The interesting thing about this is the example he gives to illustrate the need: the Hurons do not speak the same language as the Iroquois and therefore they cannot understand each other.

On 20 July 1642 he asked the brothers in charge of the lavatories to see to it that none of the paper used there had any printing on it which referred to God or the Blessed Virgin as this would be a disre-

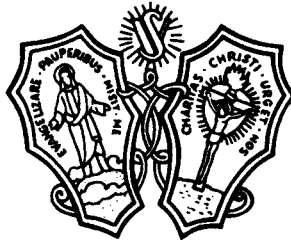
²⁹Ibid., 194.

³⁰Ibid., 213.

³¹Ibid., 253.

³²Ibid., 12:26-29, 64-67.

spectful use of such material.³³ Joseph Leonard fudged his translation of this: “. . . always and everywhere to treat respectfully papers . . .”³⁴ In this he was following a tradition going back through many writers, including Coste, to Abelly in omitting or altering certain things which Vincent said or wrote, having decided subjectively that they were “disedifying.” The real Vincent, however, is far more interesting than their sanitized portrait of him.



³³*Ibid.*, 11: 125.

³⁴*Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul* (Philadelphia, 1963), 128.