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Barry W. Moriarty C.M.

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Virtues of the Congregation of the Mission

BY

W. BARRY MORIARTY, C.M.

In December of 1627 Vincent de Paul received a letter whose authorship is unknown, but Bishop Louis Abelly referred to the writer as a very well-known priest.¹ In the single paragraph extant, the author related to Vincent his impression of the works and the character of the men of the mission.

I am back from a long journey through four provinces. I have already told you about the good reputation being spread, through the provinces where I have been, by the implantation of your holy Company which is working for the instruction and improvement of the rural poor. Truly, I do not believe that there is anything in the Church of God more edifying or more worthy of those who bear the mark and order of Jesus Christ. We must beg God to infuse His spirit of perseverance into a project which is so advantageous for the good of souls, to which so few of those who are dedicated to service of God apply themselves as they ought.²

The correspondent described the Congregation two years after its foundation. He was struck by the virtue, spirit, and the holiness of the men of the Congregation of the Mission. What was it about this young community that made it different? When Vincent spoke of the genesis of the Congregation, he emphatically stated that the establishment of the organization was not a project he consciously undertook. He truly believed that the development of the little company was God's work and not his. However, since he had been entrusted with its leadership, he responded wholeheartedly to form the men called to this holy work with great care.

¹*Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. I Correspondence*, vol. 1 (1607-1639), newly translated, edited, and annotated from the 1920 edition of Pierre Coste, C.M., ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., trans. Helen Marie Law, D.C., John Marie Poole, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., annotated John W. Carven, C.M., (Brooklyn: 1985), (hereinafter cited as *Correspondence I*), 33, n. 1.

²*Ibid.*, 33.

The formation of the men of the Congregation of the Mission was twofold. First of all, Vincent de Paul was a man of exceptional organizational skills, and he guided the Congregation by means of strong institutional underpinnings. Clarity in leadership, dedication to prayer, and an orderly community life were essential elements of life in the Congregation. But more importantly Vincent de Paul directed his confreres by his own example, and in his letters and conferences he continually emphasized the characteristics that the men of the mission must strive to possess. He was a strong believer in the old adage: plant an act, reap a habit; plant a habit, reap a virtue; plant a virtue, reap a character; plant a character, reap a destiny. Identity emerged, he believed, from a network of five virtues. He spoke about this network of virtues in the rule of life which he gave to his burgeoning Congregation in 1658 just two years before his death.

We should follow, as far as possible, all the gospel teachings already mentioned, since it is so holy and very practical. But some of it, in fact, has more application to us, particularly when it emphasizes simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal for souls. The Congregation should pay special attention to developing and living up to these five virtues so that they may be, as it were, the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation, and that everything each one of us does may always be inspired by them.³

Vincent specified that these are the virtues that need to be acquired by the men of the Congregation because they are the powers that are essential or inherent to a missionary if the work of the Lord is to be accomplished. Humility, simplicity, meekness, mortification, and zeal are the spirit of the mission. "We should be armed with them to the fullest possible extent when the time comes for us to minister to the country people. At that time we should look on them as the five smooth stones with which, even at the first assault, we will defeat the Goliath."⁴ The virtues are the five smooth stones which in the story of David are so insignificant and powerless, but paradoxically they conquer the giants of the world. As Vincent said in a letter to Father Étienne Blatiron, "The exact practice of these things will finally make us good missionaries according to the heart of God."⁵

³*Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission* (Philadelphia: 1989), #14,114.

⁴*Ibid.*, #12, 158.

⁵*Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. II Correspondence*, vol. 2 (January 1640-July 1646), eds. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., trans. Marie Poole, D.C., Esther Cavanagh, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., annotated John W. Carven, C.M. (Brooklyn: 1989), 146, (hereinafter cited as *Correspondence* 2).

Vincent's correspondence is filled with references to the five virtues and examples of them. His intention in prescribing their practice was that he saw these strengths as a means to an end. He described them as missionary virtues which were to be inculcated in order that the word might be preached more effectively. Again, they were a means to an end, and the end was not personal holiness *per se*. The acquisition of these attitudes, however, enabled the men of the mission to become more Christlike in their proclamation of the good news to the poor. His thoughts on each of these virtues are still applicable today as one reads his advice to the men working in various missions to which the Congregation had committed itself.

Time and again, Vincent called his men to be grounded first in humility. He believed that the mystery of the Incarnation is a manifestation not only of God's love but also an action of humility. It is in such terms that Vincent wrote to a confrere involved in a mission in Montagne-sur-Gironde.

These past few days, I have had as the subject of my talk the ordinary life Our Lord wished to lead on earth. I realized that He had so loved this ordinary and abject life of other men that, in order to adapt Himself to it, He had humbled Himself as much as He could, even to the point (O marvelous act which surpasses the whole capacity of human understanding!) that although He was the Uncreated Wisdom of the Eternal Father, He had wished, nevertheless, to preach His doctrine in a much simpler and more humble style than that of his Apostles. . . . This has certainly given me more enlightenment and knowledge, so it seems to me, about the great and marvelous humility of the Son of God than any other thought I have ever had on the subject.⁶

Humility had to be the cornerstone virtue for a man of the mission because in Vincent's eyes the Congregation of the Mission was always the little company doing the works that others left behind.

The missionary was a man committed to following Jesus whose humble life was grounded in simplicity. When Vincent spoke of simplicity, he called his men to a life without ostentation. They were following Jesus who preached the word through concrete examples and practical methods. In a world driven by duplicity and intrigue, they were to be simple men. He wrote to Father François du Coudray in Rome concerning some confusion about negotiations regarding the

⁶*Correspondence*, 1: 83.

Congregation and after some explanation on Vincent's part, he commented to du Coudray:

You know that the goodness of your heart has given me, thank God, the freedom to speak to you with full confidence, without concealing or disguising anything. I think you have been aware of that up to now from my way of acting toward you.

Jésus, mon Dieu! could I be reduced to the misfortune of having to do or say something in your regard against holy simplicity! Oh! may God preserve me from that, Monsieur, with regard to anyone whomsoever! Simplicity is the virtue I love the most and to which, I think, I pay the most attention in my actions; and, if it is permissible for me to say so, I would say that I am practicing it with some progress by the mercy of God.⁷

Vincent insisted that if the men of the little company were to attract others to God, such a task could only be accomplished through gentleness and compassion. If a missionary was meek, he would be approachable. Therefore, all must be done with compassion. When the confreres were working in northeast France in Sedan, he wrote to Father Guillaume Gallais encouraging meekness in their dealings with people.

When the King sent you to Sedan, it was on condition that there never be any disputing against heretics, neither in the pulpit nor in private, knowing that this is of little use and very often produces more noise than fruit. Good living and the good odor of the Christian virtues put into practice draw the black sheep to the right path and confirm Catholics on it. That is how the Company should be of advantage to the town of Sedan, adding to good example the exercise of our works, such as instructing the people in our ordinary manner, preaching against vice and bad morals, establishing and encouraging the virtues, showing their necessity, their beauty, their practice and the means of acquiring them. It is at this that you should principally be working.⁸

In a letter to Father Antoine Portail, Vincent addressed his concern about the need of the virtue of mortification as his confreres began an important mission at Joigny. "Let them be aware of two notable faults remarked during the preceding mission, namely, sensuality, not to say intemperance, and an exaggerated love of self, not to say gross vanity in sermons and discourses on this subject. . . . What will become of a company so important and nonetheless composed of

⁷Ibid., 264-65.

⁸Correspondence, 2: 441-42.

sensual, effeminate, and immortalized men?"⁹ Mortification called the missionary to be willing to sacrifice and put up with hardships.

Finally, Vincent pleaded with his men to be zealous. Their vocation was the call to be inflamed with the love of God. In speaking of the poor country people who had been deprived of hearing the good news, Vincent wrote to Father du Coudray pleading for zeal. "Who will excuse us before God for the loss of such a great number of people, who could be saved by the slight assistance we could give them? Would to God that so many good ecclesiastics who could assist them in the midst of the world might do so! Beg God, Monsieur, to grant us the grace of redoubling our zeal for the salvation of these poor souls."¹⁰

The five missionary virtues of humility, simplicity, meekness, mortification and zeal would enable the men to become Christlike evangelizers. Even in the initial years of the existence of the Congregation, people like the unknown writer of 1627 perceived that there was something distinctive about the men of the mission. These men were distinctive because their spiritual leader, Vincent de Paul, constantly held up to them the uniqueness of their calling. Again and again he would remind them that the five missionary virtues were to be inculcated in order to live out their calling to follow Christ, evangelizer of the poor. When one reads the du Coudray letters, the Portail letters, the Robert de Sergis letters in a series, they provide a great insight to the way in which Vincent dealt with human frailty, success, pettiness, heroic action, human frustration, and excess. He called his confreres to the practice of virtue, however, in his wisdom he would also remind them of the dangers of excess. With some his advice succeeded; with others, it failed.

The Pierre Escart letters and references reproduced in II *Correspondence* relate a story of the tragic failure of a promising and talented young missionary with whom Vincent corresponded but could not reach. Escart was Swiss and an early member of the Congregation. He was born in 1612 and entered the Congregation of the Mission on 6 March 1637, and was ordained a priest in the following year.¹¹ He was stationed at Annecy where he was in contact with Vincent's dear friend, Saint Jane Frances de Chantal. In a letter of 1640 to Vincent, Chantal wrote about Escart. She spoke of him in glowing terms. He

⁹*Correspondence*, 1: 179.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 119.

¹¹*Correspondence*, 2: 32, n. 6.

was a man of virtue, especially zeal. In a word, she said, "M. Escart is a saint".¹² At one time Vincent himself spoke of Escart as a man "filled with the spirit of God but harsh in his zeal."¹³ Later he wrote to him, "I still love you dearly"¹⁴ but he told him to temper his zeal with meekness and humility.¹⁵ Escart was enraged because he thought one of his sisters may have apostatized. And on another occasion Vincent said to Escart, "zeal like other virtues becomes a vice through excess."¹⁶

Vincent forthrightly told Escart that he was a man who did not sin by defect but rather by excess of a virtue. In Vincent's last letter to him, he continued to hold up the example of Christ.¹⁷ He pleaded with him to reflect on the model of Christ that the Gospel places before him in order to see how misguided his zeal had become. His words fell on deaf ears because the Escart story ended in great tragedy. A footnote on his life reveals the following: "In a fit of temper he killed one of his friends and, sometime before 1659, died in Rome where he had gone to beg absolution for this murder."¹⁸

Vincent de Paul believed strongly in the axiom that virtue was always in the middle. His thoughts addressed not only the need to attain a virtue, but he also warned his confreres about the danger of excess. Zeal needed gentleness just as surely as humility was linked to mortification. The virtues looked to each other, complemented each other. In the Escart case, a man of great promise was blinded by excessive zeal, and it led to a tragic end. Vincent wanted his men to be discerningly open to the model of Christ, evangelizer of the poor. The means to attain that openness was the practice in moderation of humility, simplicity, meekness, mortification, and zeal.

¹²*Ibid.*, 32.

¹³*Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 32, n. 6.