
Fall 1995

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John Prager C.M.

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Recommended Citation

Prager, John C.M. (1995) "The Shadow Side of the Vincentian Mission," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol16/iss2/4>

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The Shadow Side of the Vincentian Mission

BY
JOHN PRAGER, C.M.

The Vincentian vocation is missionary by nature.¹ The truth of this statement does not reside in the fact that some of us preach parish missions or travel to foreign lands. Those specific ministries arise out of the missionary spirit that Vincent de Paul lived and breathed and shared with his family. Something more fundamental is at work here. We are missionaries because the call to follow Jesus, evangelizing the poor, always demands a missionary response.

Our tradition has valued the missionary ideal for more than three centuries. It has been canonized in our rules and documents. The community saints and heroes, who have been proposed to us as our models, have been missionaries. Nonetheless, maintaining the missionary spirit of Saint Vincent has often been a struggle. That constant tension points to a reality which is frequently mentioned in passing, but rarely explored in any depth—the missionary vocation is difficult. Perhaps we idealize the goal and forget the innate problems involved in the process of becoming missionaries? Is it possible that we presume that the goodwill of those who come to serve the poor is enough to produce good missionaries?

Unless we address the realities of the missionary experience that element of the charism recedes into the background. In this article I want to offer a few simple reflections on the Vincentian mission and specifically its shadow side.

1. The Vincentian Missionary Vocation: Following Jesus among the Outcasts

When Jesus says “come and see” to members of the Vincentian family he does it from the periphery of society. He invites us to accompany him into the world of the poor and the wretched of the

¹While only the Daughters of Charity, paraphrasing Vatican II's *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, no.2, in no. 2:10 of their Constitutions, explicitly make this statement, the idea is applicable to other branches of the Vincentian family.

earth. He presents us with the challenge to become brothers and sisters to those who have been chewed up by the system and discarded in modernity's march toward progress.

Following Jesus is missionary because it means leaving our place in the center of society and entering another place with the economic and social outcasts.² It is the free choice of making the world of the poor our world. We cross the boundaries of race, class, culture, and status in order to live the gospel with the most abandoned. The missionary seeks to love in unfamiliar territory by being a herald of God's mercy among those who have been shown no mercy.³

What is envisioned here is more than an intellectual exercise which enables us to think of ourselves as missionaries while keeping our distance from the poor. Nor is it some work we do for the indigent while retreating back to another world at night. Rather it is the radical crossing over which makes the poor our life and not our job.

Three things characterize the missionary vocation.⁴

*Insertion*⁵

Saint Louise once criticized a group of sisters for refusing to accept the hardships which the poor endure every day.⁶ She knew that we risk becoming tourists in the land of the poor if we don't assume something of their lifestyle.

²J. M. Ibáñez, "Identidad de la Misión Vicenciana," in *Misión vicenciana y evangelización de los hombres de hoy* (Salamanca: CEME, 1987), 181-212; A. Bastiaensen, "Breves apuntes en torno al carisma y la espiritualidad vicencianos y nuestra conciencia misionera," CLAPVI, no. 68 (1990), 229-237.

³J. Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994).

⁴Much of the following section has been inspired by recent works in missiology. Although these studies are directed to foreign missionaries, many of the concepts seem to me to be applicable in the Vincentian mission to the poor: A. Bellagamba, *Mission and Ministry in the Global Church* (New York: Orbis books, 1992); D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Mission Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991); W. Burrows, *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading "Redemptoris Missio" and "Dialogue and Proclamation"* (New York: Orbis, 1993); J. Comblin, *The Meaning of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1977); P. Flanagan, ed., *A New Missionary Era* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979); W. Jenkinson and H. O'Sullivan, eds., *Trends in Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991); A. Santos, *Teología sistemática de la misión* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 1991); J. Scherer and S. Bevans, eds, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2: Theological Foundations* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994); D. C. Senior, D. and C. Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984).

⁵For more on insertion see: J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence a Western Missionary Problem* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991); A. Cussianovich, A., *Religious Life and the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979); C. Maccise, *Espiritualidad de la nueva evangelización* (Mexico: CRT, 1991).

⁶L. Sullivan, ed. and trans., *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac* (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 391.

Entering the world of the poor means leaving behind many of the things we have known in our world of abundance. It means freely choosing to live within the limits which the poor have not chosen. Can we create islands of relative luxury and still speak a credible word about standing with the poor?

More importantly, what happens to a missionary who refuses to give up comfort? Saint Vincent pointed out that if we do not live simply we can say good-bye to the poor.⁷ He means that if we let attachment to our accustomed fashion of living insulate us from the needs and concerns of the poor we will never become missionaries.

It is probably true that we will never be poor like the poor. However, it does not follow that we have to be middle-class like the middle-class. If we honestly want to pitch our tents with the victims, we have to be willing to discard some of our security.

Inculturation ⁸

Even when a missionary travels only a few blocks geographically, the journey to the poor is a leap across a great divide. Different realities predominate and other values hold sway. The language may or not be the same, but the new context changes the meaning of the words. In short the missionary enters a new culture.⁹

We come to the poor with our own experiences, values and concerns. However, the world looks different from the underside of history. Being missionary means entering this new environment with an attitude of openness and respect. Judgment has to be suspended until one has the capacity to penetrate the real meanings hidden in people's expressions. Inculturation indicates a sensitivity to an unfamiliar world-view and a willingness to dialogue with it in order to learn.

The history of the foreign missions is filled with examples of pastoral agents who attempted to impose their truth. The false assumption that we know what is best or have the *only* true way to God

⁷*Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 11: 79. (Hereinafter cited as CED).

⁸For more information on inculturation see: A. Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel: An Inculturation Handbook for Pastoral Workers* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990); A. Shorter, *Evangelization and Culture* (London: Chapman, 1994); ———, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992).

⁹Culture here means "a set of symbols, stories, myths and norms for conduct that orient a society or group cognitively, affectively and behaviorally to the world in which it lives." Cited in Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 4.

can still be present in our mission to the poor. It is still heard in phrases like "bringing Christ to the Poor." Saint Vincent, on the other hand, reminded his followers that true religion is found among the poor.¹⁰ He wanted his missionaries to be aware that God speaks and acts in a different context there.

*New Evangelization*¹¹

Jesus, the missionary of the Father, came to evangelize the poor. He knew first hand the "bad news" that destroyed people's lives. In word and deed he sought ways to proclaim God's love in the face of great evil.

If the mission to the poor is truly to be "Good News" the concept of evangelization has to include but move beyond catechetics. Evangelization is not so much the passing on of doctrine as much as it is openness to the presence of God's kingdom. It is the process by which one becomes sensitive to and capable of cooperating with God's liberating love.¹²

New evangelization is not simply updated pastoral techniques. It is a constitutive shift which seeks to encounter new possibilities for evangelization in the changed situation of the modern world. It is not new in the sense of rejecting the old. New evangelization preserves the tradition of the Christian community and the mission of Jesus. It begins, however, within the present context.

This is not the place to develop all the implications for our ministry. However, some of the elements that might be included in the new evangelization would be: a ministry that is more one of accompanying and less one of directing¹³; a pastoral style that facilitates the

¹⁰CED, 12: 170-71 and 200-01.

¹¹L. Boff, *New Evangelization* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992); C. Bravo, "Las tentaciones de la nueva evangelización," *Christus* (Mexico), no. 643 (1991):24-33; P. Trigo, "Criterios de la nueva evangelización," *Christus* (Mexico), no. 643 (1991):14-23.

¹²It seems to me that this is the broader sense of evangelization contained in Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

¹³For more about ministry as accompanying see: C. Boff, *Cómo Trabajar con el Pueblo* (Bogotá: Codecal, 1992); L. Sofield, L. and C. Julianio, *Collaborative Ministry* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1987).

participation of the laity¹⁴; an option for the poor¹⁵; attention to the social, political and economic realities¹⁶; the development of small Christian communities¹⁷; learning to do theology and listen to God's Word from the perspective of the people.¹⁸

2. The Shadow Side of Mission

Following the missionary Jesus is a great risk. Insertion, inculturation, and new evangelization entail jettisoning much that is familiar in order to set out into the unknown. This experience, while it may be the road to salvation, is also a path of painful vulnerability. A psychologist could probably explain the inner dynamic involved in all of these transitions. I prefer simply to describe the experience.¹⁹

As disengagement from accustomed patterns of living occurs and the trusted landmarks which gave stability fade away, insecurity becomes the familiar companion of the missionary. The demand to let go of the past and the simultaneous desire to cling to it produces an ongoing struggle. The old categories no longer seem quite suitable, and yet the new situation appears impenetrable. There is a disturbing sense of being out of harmony with the surrounding environment.

Doubts and confusion usually join insecurity as part of the missionary experience. Some of this has to do with uncertainty about the

¹⁴For more about lay participation see: L. Doohan, *The Lay-Centered Church* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1984); F. R. Kinsler, *Ministry by the People* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983); W. Rademacher, *Lay Ministry: A Theological, Spiritual and Pastoral Handbook* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); J. D. and E. E. Whitehead, *The Emerging Laity: Returning Leadership to the Community of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

¹⁵For more about the option for the poor see: G. Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981); L. González-Carvajal L., *Con los pobres contra la pobreza* (Madrid: 1994); J. O'Brien, *Theology and the Option for the Poor* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992); S. Pope, "Proper and Improper Partiality and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* (1993):242-71; J. Sobrino, J., *The True Church and the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books; 1984).

¹⁶For more about basic Christian Communities see: M. Azevedo, *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil* (New York: Orbis Books, 1987); J. Nickoloff, "Church of the Poor: The Ecclesiology of Gustavo Gutiérrez," *Theological Studies* (1993):512-35; S. Torres and J. Eagleson, eds., *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981).

¹⁷For more about the social dimensions of the faith: P. Casaldáliga and J. M. Vigil, *Political Holiness: A Spirituality of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994); D. Dorr, *Option for the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988); J. Haughey, *The Faith That Does Justice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977); J. Holland, J. and P. Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986); J. Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (New York: Orbis Books, 1987).

¹⁸For more about popular reading of the bible and theology see: S. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991); L. Boff, and C. Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986); C. Mesters, *Defenceless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984); R. Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988).

¹⁹A useful introduction to this theme is W. Bridges, W., *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* (Reading: Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1980).

new world one has entered. What is going on here? What do things mean? Why are things done this way? These are all common questions.

On another level, and in a much more pressing way, personal doubts and bafflement come into play. Self-confidence can be seriously shaken as cherished ways of thinking and acting are called into question. Can I really minister here? Am I capable of doing this? Should I be dedicating my life to these people? Is it all worthwhile? Sometimes these queries surface more basic questions like: who am I? How do I relate to other people and God? Lots of questions come to the fore and very few immediate answers present themselves.

Fear, anger and loneliness are three feelings that the missionary knows well. Disorientation and insecurity generate strong reactions. Then the internal and external structures which have defined life in the past change discomfort and pain are usually present.

Sometimes there is a general anxiety about entering the sphere of the unknown. At other times the fear is more localized around concrete experiences and situations. The impact of loss creates a sense of vulnerability. Leaving behind the places, things, persons, or ways of thinking and acting which provided an anchor in the past places the missionary in the precarious position of confronting the world without many resources.

Frequently anger enters the picture together with the fear. A thousand minor irritations and the constant frustration of not really understanding can be maddening. Large or small confrontations centering on the right or wrong way to do things provoke an angry response. Sometimes it is projected outwards toward the people. It can also be turned inward as one becomes exasperated with a constant stream of unwanted experiences. Even God now and then receives an angry blast for having placed us in the situation.

As the missionary exits one world and begins the process of entering another loneliness comes on the scene. Although he may be surrounded by people, their presence does not alleviate the sense of isolation. In fact, they may increase the feeling that one is an outsider. Old friends are not in a position to provide much support because they are far away or do not quite understand the experience. Even God seems to be absent or not listening.

The dark side of mission provokes many reactions. No one enjoys having to confront it. A quick retreat to safety and security is always a strong temptation. Some abandon the project completely. Others try

to live in two worlds at the same time, never really letting go of the past. A few take refuge in denial. Most raise their defenses, at least for a time. Unfortunately none of these responses are particularly helpful ways of entering into mission. They may provide an escape from the experience and protection from the disagreeable feelings. However, they eventually lead us back to where we began.

There are ways of moving through the darkness into the light. In the next section I would like to mention a few of those ways.

3. Conversion: Moving from the Darkness to the Light

Saint Vincent's conversion is the paradigmatic experience of the Vincentian vocation. He found salvation by leaving his own world and entering the world of the poor.²⁰ He offers the hope that the missionary experience is the path to holiness, joy, and peace. If we focus on his process rather than the final result, Vincent's conversion is even more enlightening. Like us he had to struggle with the dark side of the mission to the poor. He hesitated before the demands. This constant temptation was to seek his own comfort and security. It took him more than ten years to finally opt for the poor.²¹

Eventually Saint Vincent discovered that there is no way to follow Jesus in the service of the poor and escape the difficult demands of that vocation. He had to find his way through the shadows. That continues to be the challenge for missionaries to the poor today. Like our founder we have to look for practical measures which will enable us to maneuver through difficulties of mission. I would like to suggest a few possible attitudes and actions that might be helpful.

4. General Advice

Self Knowledge

Everyone brings a personal history, weaknesses, and strengths to mission. In the course of our lives we develop a basic psychological

²⁰I would disagree with Brémond and those who maintain that Saint Vincent went to the poor because he was a saint. It seems to me that just the opposite is true.

²¹Some studies of the conversion are: J. Corera, "La noche oscura de Vicente de Paúl," in *Diez Estudios Vicencianos* (Salamanca: CEME, 1983), 13-40; J. M. Ibáñez, *Vicente de Paúl y los pobres de su tiempo* (Salamanca: CEME 1976), 207-28; J. Renouard, and others, "La experiencia espiritual del Señor Vicente y la nuestra," in *Vicente de Paúl y la evangelización rural* (Salamanca: CEME, 1976), 125-68.

structure which orients the way we relate to life's experiences and other people. A consciousness of who I am and how I react, especially to stressful situations, is indispensable for entering the mission to the poor. A clear notion of one's defenses, tendencies, and inner resources enables one to keep one's bearings and take positive steps while avoiding serious pitfalls.

Besides a general self-knowledge, there is a need to be aware of how one is reacting to this particular situation. No one likes to look at disturbing feelings, weaknesses, or pain. However, it becomes impossible to take positive steps without honestly admitting and confronting that part of the experience.

Having a guide

Speaking about the spiritual life, Thomas Merton says that it is foolish to enter the dark alone.²² That would also apply to the missionary life. There is an incalculable value in being able to count on the wisdom and experience of a mentor or spiritual director. The simple fact of having someone accompany and listen to us is often enough to enable us to clarify the situation. Moreover, the objective opinion of an experienced guide can affirm positive directions as well as point out blind alleys and resistances.

Community

The community exists for the mission. That turns out to be more than an often repeated axiom as one becomes immersed in the world of the poor. The shared vision, the example and the presence of others who have dedicated themselves to the same mission becomes a key support. The formal structures of community give stability in the midst of change. More importantly, the myriad simple ways that members of a community communicate care, concern and trust in the informal situations of daily living are tangible signs that one is not alone in this new world.

²²T. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Press, 1961), 194-96; also *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1969), 36-37; 92-93.

Friends

It may be stating the obvious to remember that friendship is an irreplaceable human experience. Everyone needs to love and be loved. The missionary is not exempt from this. In the midst of transition, letting-go and loneliness, one needs to know that there are people who are concerned and care about us. One has to trust that friends love us enough to listen and try to understand our experiences.

It is important to stay in contact with friends who will be supportive. The ideal would be to take time out for a visit. But if distance or the demands of ministry make that impractical letters or phone calls are another way to be with friends.

Creating Personal Space

The constant tension of adapting trying to understand and making changes requires a considerable inversion of time and energy. After awhile the stress saps one's capacities. A sensible step is taking personal time to relax. Hobbies, exercise, short trips, keeping a diary, reading, or any other activity one uses for recreation helps keep a balance.

5. Advice from the Vincentian Tradition

All of the above suggestions are pretty well accepted means for dealing with any transition. The call to mission is also a Christian vocation that has theological and spiritual ramifications. The Vincentian tradition offers a wealth of resources in this area. Vincentian spirituality is a spirituality for mission and the apostolate.²³ Most of Saint Vincent's conferences and letters were directed to men and women

²³For more about Vincentian Spirituality see: G. Coluccia, *Espiritualidad vicentiana: Espiritualidad de la Acción* (Salamanca, CEME, 1979); J. M. Ibáñez, *La fe verificada en el amor* (Madrid: Paulinas, 1993); ———, *Vicente de Paul: Realismo y encarnación* (Salamanca: Sigueme, 1982); R. Maloney, *The Way of Vincent de Paul: A Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor* (New York: New City Press, 1992); T. McKenna, *Praying with Vincent de Paul* (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary's Press, 1994); J. P. Prager, "Reflections on the Renewal of Vincentian Spirituality," *Vicentiana* (1981), 366-83.

either about to enter or trying to sustain a mission to the poor.²⁴ Here I would just like to point out a few insights culled from our tradition.

An Attitude of Humility and Openness

Openness and humility make missionary insertion and inculturation possible. Unless there is a readiness to accept new ways of thinking and acting there is no access to the world of the poor. It takes some effort to maintain an open mind and be willing to learn. That is why humility goes hand in hand with openness. Those who feel that they already have the answers and that their way is the correct way never accompany the poor. Humility allows one to listen to the people and their experience because it creates an attitude of valuing the other.

An Attitude of Mortification and Flexibility

Some people never become missionaries because they are unwilling to let go of anything. They set so many conditions before they are able to leave or bring so much baggage when they go that for all practical purposes they are immovable. Missionary mortification is the willingness to let go of security in order to follow Jesus. It is the spirit of sacrifice which enables one to be flexible in order to stand with the poor.

Simplicity and Clarity of Motives

The principal motivation for the Vincentian mission is the following of Jesus evangelizing the poor. As one encounters the reality of that mission, especially its darker elements, other alternatives spring to mind. Simplicity in terms of single-mindedness keeps the original reason for mission in focus. When unpleasant feelings and negative

²⁴This indicates the difficulty with making Vincentian spirituality a study of the history of ideas. Although it may be convenient for purposes of study, it does not do justice to the Vincentian experience. The Vincentian vocation and the Vincentian spirituality that supports it did not spring from an idea which Saint Vincent received from others and then modified. It seems more correct to say that Vincent experienced God in the poor and used other people's ideas to understand and articulate the experience.

In terms of contemporary Vincentian spirituality, I think that means that updating the founder's themes is not enough. The task is rather to develop ways of finding God in the poor today and maintaining the mission.

experiences augment the attractiveness of taking another route, simple transparency or honesty helps us make choices which are in keeping with the missionary option.²⁵

Gentleness

The poor carry heavy burdens. Every day they come into contact with cold institutions and hard-hearted people. Only gentleness unlocks the door to their world. Unless the missionary acts with sensitivity, the door remains tightly closed. Gentleness is the attitude which translates into such actions as: the effort to understand the concerns of the poor; a willingness to accompany the people without demands and conditions acceptance of the unfamiliar; compassion for weakness.

Even the meekest missionary experiences conflict and anger. The spirit of gentleness moves one to find healthy ways to deal with the anger.

Evangelical Zeal

Although the missionary needs to attend to personal reactions and needs support, the goal of evangelization also has to be kept in mind. One enters the mission to place all of one's talents, energy, creativity, and time at the service of the poor and the Kingdom of God. The missionary who does not move the focus from personal needs to the needs of the poor will eventually become disheartened.

Zeal enables one to accept the challenges of living the gospel in new situations. It animates the missionary to look for ways to overcome obstacles and set-backs. It creates a desire to evangelize and be evangelized by the poor.

Prayer

The primary inspiration for the Vincentian mission is a profound relationship with the missionary Christ, who is encountered among the most poor and abandoned. Since Jesus's presence is not self-evident

²⁵The vows, especially the vow of stability, have the same rationale in the Vincentian tradition. They are a way to maintain fidelity to the mission. By means of the vows one has to keep in mind the fundamental Vincentian option of service of the poor.

and has a sacramental quality about it, only faith permits one to see beyond the ugliness which is so much a part of the lives of the poor. That faith can really be put to the test by the unpleasant side of mission. That is especially true if we expect to find God in beauty, power, or warm, peace-filled experiences. Where is Jesus present in the midst of all this poverty and suffering is not an uncommon question. This is one of the reasons why prayer is so important. It makes us sensitive to the presence of God in the poor.

The call to mission is an invitation to share Christ's life with the poor. Prayer is the means for listening to the concrete demands of that vocation. In prayer Christ questions or affirms our missionary response. He also gives us an opportunity to pour out hearts about the day to day experiences of mission. Without prayer the mission loses its center in Jesus and the missionary winds up reacting to events with only personal lights as a guide. That is a recipe for disaster for oneself and for the poor.

6. Conclusion

Saint Vincent's fundamental insight might be rephrased as the conviction that if you open your life to the poor God steps into the space and will lead you to salvation. No one, certainly not the saint, would say that this vocation is an easy path to joy and happiness. The dark side of the mission is an inescapable fact. But that should not cause disenchantment with the mission or reluctance to accept the burdens of opening one's life to the poor. These are the cost of discipleship. They are the Vincentian participation in the dying and rising of the Lord. That is a message of hope, which has enabled members of the Vincentian family to deal with the dark side of the mission and come to great happiness in the service of the poor.